

Woodland

YOUR CONNECTION TO AMERICA'S FORESTS



A Publication of the



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Contact Nate Meehan with any suggestions at nmeehan@forestfoundation.org.

Also, you can access a complimentary, shareable online version of *Woodland* at forestfoundation.org/why-we-do-it/woodland-magazine if you know someone interested in learning about our work.



Contents

Summer 2024

- 4 Overstory
Rita Hite

- 6 AFF Policy Team Update
Sarah Jewell

- 7 Staff Spotlights
Ethan Ragan & Jill Levine

- 7 Understanding the Changing Landscape of the Voluntary Carbon Market
Calvin Tran

- 12 Dynamic Baselines
Lynn Riley



A Georgia forester describes how Field to Forest can generate income for landowners who grow loblolly pines.

- 15 Metrics

- 16 AFF's 2024 National Leadership Conference Merges Legacy and the Future to Organize a Conservation Movement
Angela Wells

- 18 A Walk in the Woods
Tom Gresham

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BY RITA HITE
PRESIDENT & CEO
AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

How You Create Meaningful Impact for Our Planet

As we cross the halfway mark of 2024, here at the American Forest Foundation we're spending time in nature and in community, reflecting our progress to date as we look forward to our upcoming plans. A theme in this edition is the exciting momentum we are seeing and driving to create real, meaningful impact for our planet and people.

Our first feature is an update from our Policy team on the legislative front (p. 6). The much-anticipated Farm Bill, which encompasses a range of programs including national agriculture, conservation, and forestry, is resuming momentum

after last fall's extensions to bill negotiation deadlines. It includes important improvements to conservation funding programs and critical opportunities for unlocking significant investment in family forests, such as the Rural Forests Market Act, which would support forest landowners of all sizes being able to benefit from carbon markets. Thanks to your support of AFF, we are working to advance these critical pieces of legislation to expand opportunities for our forests and the families that care for them.

Continued On Next Page

“A central aspect of our work at AFF is our commitment to innovation and the best available science.”

A central aspect of our work at AFF is our commitment to innovation and the best available science. As the voluntary carbon market continues to grow and evolve, transparent standards and accurate accounting of impact are essential for upholding the integrity and credibility of carbon claims. One important way we’re contributing to this is through the development and use of dynamic baselines in forest carbon accounting, which allows us to more accurately account for the impact of a carbon project over time. You can learn about how dynamic baselines work for advancing integrity and our learnings from our four years of developing and implementing this approach on p. 12. In a related vein, as we continue to monitor the latest market trends in the carbon market, we’re seeing signs that the market is moving in the right direction as it continues to grow toward increased quality and integrity, even as trends are shifting and evolving as expected in the context of an emerging market landscape. Calvin Tran, our Manager of Environmental Markets, dives into what we’re seeing and provides insights into these market shifts in the context of this overall growth on p. 7.

Additionally, in this edition, we’re excited to include an at-a-glance metrics overview on FFCP’s progress to date on p. 15. This page shares statistics on acres and contracts enrolled, total funding that we have committed to pay landowners, and our expected climate impact as a result. This page is a celebration of the impact you have helped to make possible, and your ongoing support of AFF is what is enabling us to continue making a measurable difference with this work.

Earlier in the year, we gathered in Vancouver, Washington for our 2024 National Leadership Conference under the theme of “Rooted in Community” (p. 16). Co-hosted by the Washington and Oregon Tree Farm programs, the event explored grassroots community organizing as a path to raising the collective voice of family forest owners and building lasting community and change. During this time together, we had the opportunity to deepen relationships, share learnings, and celebrate the accomplishments of this network of leaders. This shared time was an inspiring point of connection and energized all of us who attended to continue engaging our communities on the importance of stewardship to sustain healthy forests.

Our Walk in the Woods feature (p. 18) highlights the stories of family forest owners, illustrating the diverse ways in which they contribute to the health and resilience of our nation’s forests through their committed and innovative stewardship. We are also excited to share staff profiles introducing two of our FFCP outreach foresters. As I reflect on these stories and updates, I’m appreciating how whether through legislative advocacy, innovative practices, or fostering leadership throughout the community, each of these shared efforts brings us closer to our goal of realizing the full conservation and climate mitigation potential of America’s family forests. Thank you for your continued support for this vital cause! 🌲



AFF Policy Team Update

BY SARAH JEWELL
POLICY MANAGER,
AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

After over a year of delays, the farm bill is finally showing signs of life! The farm bill is a massive piece of legislation that sets national agriculture, nutrition, conservation, and forestry programs. There are 12 titles in the farm bill covering issues related to agricultural conservation, research, rural development, domestic food assistance, and forestry.

The farm bill is typically renewed every five years. The most recent farm bill was enacted into law in December 2018. And usually, Congress would have passed the newest farm bill last September in 2023. However, in November 2023, Congress enacted a one-year extension, making the new farm bill deadline the end of September 2024. This extension gave lawmakers ten more months to negotiate and finalize a farm bill without a gap in funding. Meaning, the extension solidified funding for existing programs, such as farm net safety and conservation programs.

Since this extension, Congress has been preoccupied with federal funding battles. As a result, lawmakers put the farm bill debate on the back burner. However, at the time of this writing, the past couple of weeks, the talks have energized the halls of Congress. Senate Ag Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, a prominent farm bill champion, retiring this year, released the Senate's bill summary in early May. The summary included key improvements to the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Conservation Stewardship Program. Most importantly, support for critical climate mitigation tools like Rural Forest Markets Act (RFMA).

RFMA is a bipartisan bill that is the key to scaling the voluntary carbon market. RFMA would unlock significant amounts of investment to allow forest owners of all sizes to participate in and benefit financially from carbon markets. By creating a low-cost federal guarantee program within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this legislation, at no cost to taxpayers, can mitigate the risk associated with investments in carbon sequestration and facilitate new revenue streams for forest landowners in rural America.

Although the Senate's farm bill summary includes RFMA, the House summary, which has not been released yet, will most likely exclude RFMA. This is where we can use your help! Congressional members are more responsive to their constituents. So, you are the key to helping us get this bill locked into the baseline text of the farm bill. If you are interested in helping, or would like more information, please scan the QR below or email Sarah Jewell at sjewell@forestfoundation.org. ▲





Meet Jill Levine...

One our newest foresters with the Family Forest Carbon Program. Jill lives in Vermont and works as one of the Northeast Outreach Foresters. She went to school at the University of Vermont and graduated with bachelor's degrees in forestry and biology. Jill went into undergrad with dreams of getting into medical school, but within her first year at UVM, she realized there was so much more to the field of biology. She wanted to make sure she was learning about all the different areas of biology before committing to a specific career path. Forestry became Jill's second major to learn more about conservation, forestry, and plant biology.

During college, Jill got involved in a research project studying how anglers and seafood workers were impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. Dr. Ali Kosiba offered Jill an intern position at the VT Department of Forest, Parks, and Recreation, working with aerial imagery. The combination of her internship and the research project became the steppingstones for Jill's current career path in forestry. She has worked as a forestry technician in the field for Bird Friendly Maple research with the Northeast Silviculture Library.

"I love getting to work every day and knowing that I'm participating in something that not only helps families financially, but also improves forests to combat climate change." More than 80% of forests in Vermont are privately owned, and Jill is proud to help these landowners value the importance of their forestry efforts.

"I love getting to work every day and knowing that I'm participating in something that not only helps families financially, but also improves forests to combat climate change."



Meet Ethan Ragan...

Ethan grew up in Rochester, Minnesota where he took as many opportunities as he could to get out of town and explore what Minnesota and Wisconsin had to offer. Many weekends were spent on Minnesota's Northshore exploring the Superior Hiking Trail and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. This time led to the pursuit of a Wildlife Biology degree from the University of Minnesota.

After graduation, Ethan joined the Utah Conservation Corps doing Russian Olive and Tamarisk removal along Utah's rural riverways. Following two seasons spent in Utah, Ethan moved back to Minnesota and worked as an Outdoor Guide taking folks paddling around the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and the Apostle Island. Inspiration led Ethan to Edinburgh, Scotland to pursue a MS degree in Outdoor Education. Once he finished in Scotland, Ethan moved to central Oregon to work at the Hancock Field Station as an Outdoor Science Teacher working with students.

Ethan has also worked as a Field Coordinator with the Montana Conservation Corps. In this role he taught and worked with crews to build backcountry trails, learn how to operate crosscuts and chainsaws, and how to collect forest data for the USFS. While not in the backcountry, he was assisting crews in building Beaver Dam Analogs to help restore the local water tables and riparian habitats. Ethan came to AFF to help people engage with their woodland in an environmentally sustainable way that gives back to the planet. His favorite part about being an Outreach Forester with AFF is the opportunity teach landowners about their woodland while also learning about the history and memories landowners have of their forested areas. 🌲

Understanding the Changing Landscape of the Voluntary Carbon Market

BY CALVIN TRAN, MANAGER OF ENVIRONMENTAL MARKETS

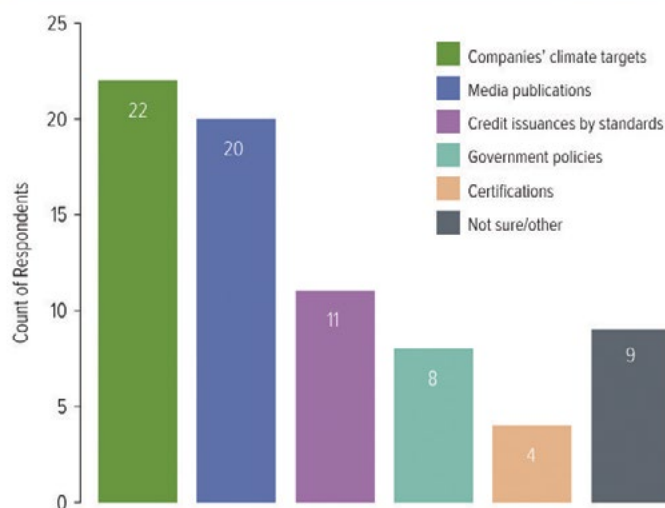
Recently, Ecosystem Marketplace released their report, “State of the Voluntary Carbon Market 2024: On the Path to Maturity,” which details the latest trends within the market. The report detailed a significant downturn in the market last year, but details an increasingly complex landscape, with some market segments showing growth as others fell. AFF’s Manager of Environmental Markets, Calvin Tran, breaks down the news and what it means for the future of the market.

As it goes with any emerging market, trends continue to shift and evolve within the voluntary carbon market (VCM). This emergence takes time, and the VCM is showing the right signs that it is on its upwards “flight to quality.” In my view, the VCM is between growth phases; volatility and larger contractions are part of this growth. Reminiscent of the dotcom bubble before the advent and growth of the internet, it makes sense that buyers in the VCM are “derisking” from—that is, not participating in—the market as they wait for volatility to settle.

The problem is this: being so close to midnight on the climate catastrophe clock, there’s no time to waste.

A key takeaway from this report is that retirement of credits have remained steady. This is the most fundamental metric to assess the health of demand for voluntary carbon credits. Retiring a carbon credit is the process of permanently removing it from circulation after it has been used to offset emissions. This action confirms that the emissions have been reduced or removed, and prevents the same reduction from being claimed by multiple parties.

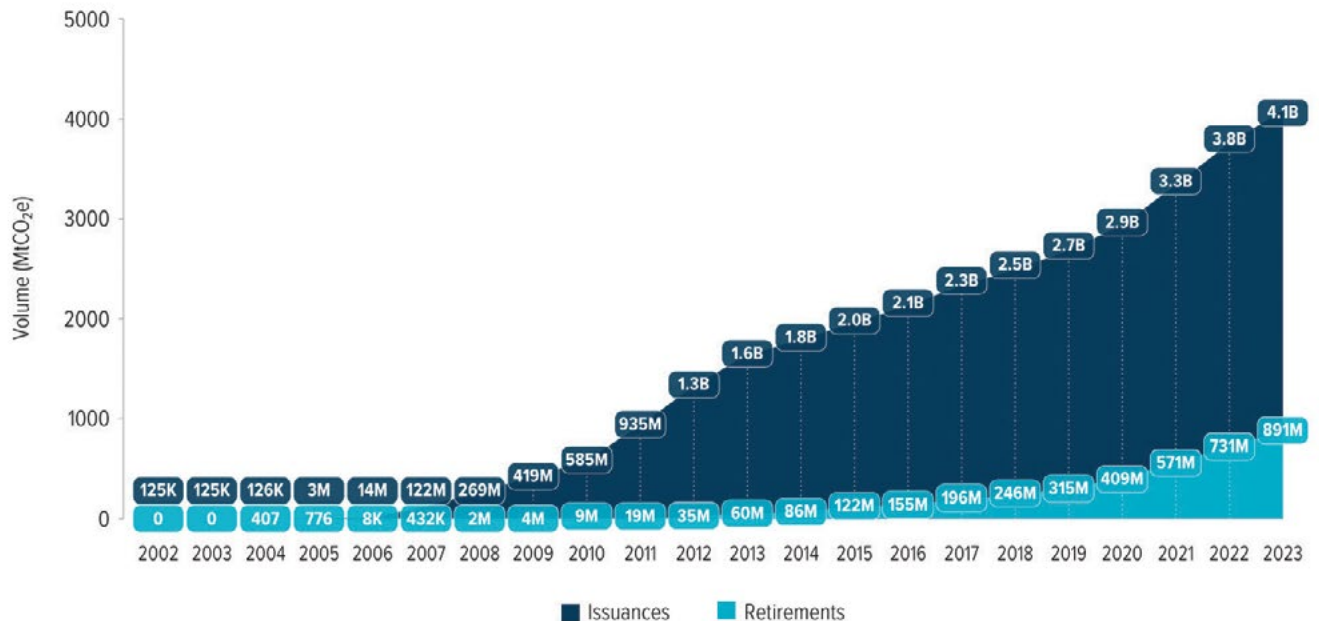
The rate of credit retirement shows that end users are consistently using carbon credits that have been generated. Most of the decline in sales stems from a drop in speculative buying. In short, people have stopped believing in the upside of the current version of the voluntary market and are demanding higher quality, integrity, and durability. The call for high integrity, along with general demand hesitancy, indicates a need to build an updated iteration of the market that incentivizes capital investments in carbon projects and accelerates participation in high-quality projects.



Note: Respondents could select multiple factors as among the most important.

External Factors Influencing Credit Sales, 2023.

Courtesy of Ecosystem Marketplace



Cumulative VCM Issuances & Retirements 2003–2023. Courtesy of Ecosystem Marketplace

REDD+ RECEIPTS

The REDD+ controversy was an unfortunate but necessary bump in the road which led to questions about how developers calculate the impact of their projects. The reality is if we want the VCM to be successful, we need stronger, more certain guardrails around the quality of supply. Now, we are seeing new ideas emerge around higher scientific integrity principles that can increase the quality of carbon credit supply, with everything from the End-to-End Framework to dynamic baselines in carbon accounting methodologies. This highlights the strength and unity in the market, showcasing its responsiveness along with its ability to adjust course.

The good news is that now a new generation of supply is beginning to enter the market. The EM report found that some project types—notably, improved forest management (IFM) and afforestation, reforestation, and revegetation (ARR)—experienced increases in price. This is good for anyone working on these project types, but it also shows promise for the market overall. The carbon price increase reflects a “flight to quality” that will eventually occur across all project types. Ultimately, buyers are willing to pay much more for “safe” projects.

For this market to evolve successfully, it will need to address structural supply constraints, which could limit growth, rather than just the current issue of insufficient demand. The market knows where it needs to go and is already building up and making progress; we just need the finance to get it done. In the meantime, volumes and valuations of existing credits will drop, as the report duly shows.

UP NEXT: A DEMAND RECKONING

In my view, the same reckoning that the VCM experienced across the supply side will eventually be faced on the demand side. We need stronger incentives for climate risk reporting and corporate transparency so that the public knows if and how companies are falling short on their decarbonization objectives. With clearer and stronger mandates will come clearer and stronger incentives for the proper use of carbon credits.

Governments have a major role to play here. Those who have focused more efforts into refining their domestic policies on carbon markets indeed have stronger carbon markets in their regions as a result. The U.S. Government’s recently announced their “Principles for the Responsible Participation in VCMs” which is an indication that this is still happening at varying paces.

Buyers and suppliers are only just beginning to understand the nuances of building a global



Tristan Kinnison, FFCP Outreach Forester. Photo by Ema Johnson.



interconnected market from the ground up. We're now seeing more sophistication across different regions—not just in type of credits but the type of credit demand. Businesses across different regions and industries are just beginning to understand how to parse through the intricacies of this. A company based in Singapore will have different demand drivers compared to a company based in the EU, the US, and so on and so forth.

The same is true for companies from different sectors—some industries will have geographic or credit type preferences. Others have distinct mandates such as CORSIA, a collective effort to reduce emissions from international aviation. It creates division of the VCM, and it is the job of the supply side to remain as interoperable as possible across these similar-but-distinct markets. It is also the job of policy makers to make sure demand is sufficiently consistent across domains.

FUTURE MARKET LOADING...

Although this report may appear to criticize a volatile market, it provides valuable insights for market participants, essential for developing a voluntary carbon market that benefits both people and the planet. 2023 was a year of reckoning for those working to transform the quality, integrity, and viability of carbon projects. In 2024, we need companies and governments to step up to the plate and invest to bring this promising market to scale. Governments and standards bodies can continue to provide clearer guidance for participation, and companies can invest in high-quality projects to scale climate solutions to maximize their impact on our atmosphere. This is an inflection point, one that will determine the path we take to either shrink away from a work in progress or to strengthen a critical element of our fight against climate change. 🌲

The Family Forest Carbon Program helps landowners **care for their woods while helping the planet.**

Family forests provide a wide array of ecosystem benefits, including wildlife habitat, clean air, and natural water filtration. They also help protect the planet by sequestering and storing carbon. The Family Forest Carbon Program creates a marketplace for landowners to sell carbon credits to environmentally conscious companies working to reduce their carbon footprint. Landowners can earn extra income to help achieve their goals for their land.

The Family Forest Carbon Program is uniquely designed to help forest owners adopt long-term sustainable management that improves carbon sequestration and storage while balancing other essential forest benefits. The program provides expert guidance from a forest professional, creating a forest management plan, and annual payments to implement practices.

Now available in Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Learn more at www.familyforestcarbon.org



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The Nature
Conservancy 
Protecting nature. Preserving life.

Dynamic Baselines: The Necessary Future of Forest Carbon Accounting

BY LYNN RILEY, SENIOR MANAGER, CLIMATE SCIENCE,
AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

The voluntary carbon market has emerged as one of the most promising ways for family forest owners to access technical and financial assistance. As the voluntary carbon continuously evolves, transparent standards become increasingly important. Regulatory bodies and carbon project developers dedicated to upholding the credibility of carbon credit claims have made significant progress on these standards. With advancements in scientific understanding, pioneers in natural climate solutions are taking the next groundbreaking step to ensure the accuracy of forest-based carbon credits: dynamic baselines.

Traditionally, baselines are established by carbon project developers. The developers use models to predict what would happen in their project's absence, then compare that scenario to what will happen because of their project. The developers then attribute the difference between the two scenarios as the climate mitigation created by the project (also known as additionality). Although there is nothing inherently wrong in this approach, it does require human judgement—and the developers making the judgements sell carbon credits, so they typically stand to benefit from high carbon estimates. This exposes projects to the risk of over-crediting.

On the other hand, dynamic baselines are established using independent, transparently available, frequently updated datasets in which statistical matching methods identify similar unenrolled areas to the project they are matched with.

“Dynamic baselines are established using independent, transparently available, frequently updated datasets in which statistical matching methods identify similar unenrolled areas to the project they are matched with.”

“Those who have developed dynamic baseline approaches are standing on the shoulders of giants and are seeking to make a good thing even better.”

Adopters of the dynamic baseline are applauding the merits of this methodology to improve the credibility of nature-based carbon projects and carbon markets in general.

To be clear: traditional modeled baselines have helped carbon projects accomplish incredible things over the past two decades, driving hundreds of millions of dollars to jumpstarting natural climate solutions and supporting rural and indigenous communities. Those who have developed dynamic baseline approaches are standing on the shoulders of giants and are seeking to make a good thing even better.

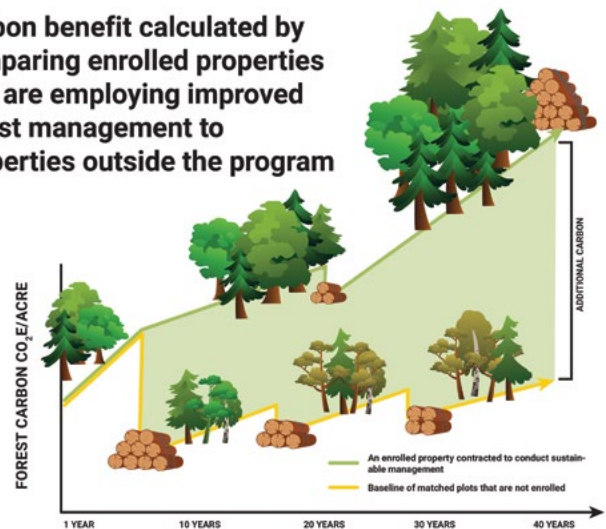
So, how do dynamic baselines represent an improvement over the status quo, and who uses them?

We at the American Forest Foundation (AFF) are proud to have co-developed the first dynamic baseline methodology for improved forest management with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and TerraCarbon, which was approved in 2022. The first dynamic baseline methodology for afforestation, reforestation, and regeneration was approved in 2023.

AFF and TNC implement both methodologies through the Family Forest Carbon Program (FFCP), one of the first carbon projects to deploy dynamic baselines, with the first issuance of carbon credits on track for later this year. FFCP brings together family forest owners and companies to address climate change, improve forest health, and support American communities.

In its more than four years implementing the dynamic baseline approach through FFCP, AFF has learned what sets a dynamic baseline's integrity apart from other approaches. Below we outline six key learnings to meet the market's—and the world's—need for credible climate mitigation. In brief, dynamic baselines utilize the best data, science, and statistical methods to take subjective judgment out of the equation and more accurately measure what **did** happen versus what *could have* happened because of the carbon project, giving us a closer estimation of true climate mitigation impact.

Carbon benefit calculated by comparing enrolled properties that are employing improved forest management to properties outside the program



1. Dynamic baselines must be derived from standardized, independent, third-party, transparent datasets to limit bias that leads to over-crediting.
 - Ensuring third-party data transparency enables ratings agencies and others to reproduce results, compare them to alternative datasets, and continue to drive toward even better baseline data.
2. Dynamic baselines must be matched to projects using all variables relevant to the project activity and check for unobservable variables, to minimize the risk of adverse selection.
 - The key is to determine and use the factors that make a good match for properties with similar forest management behavior like influences on harvest operability, distance to roads; timber merchantability, geographic relation to mill capacity; and history of harvesting, like stand age.

“The more we can promote understanding of these key elements, their purpose, and what makes them trustworthy, the more we can meet the needs of those who have yet to engage in the voluntary carbon market.”

3. Dynamic baselines must standardize and safeguard match quality, so we compare like with like and use the best matches. This must be defined by a standardized process for evaluating match quality, and setting a threshold under which matches are deemed insufficient for applying the methodology.

- Methodologies must select baselines that are reasonable and the most plausible to the project.

4. Dynamic baselines must be frequently updated on a scale relevant to the project activity and its drivers, so that it picks up on events and trends that matter.

- Having enough geographic resolution is also critical to ensuring enough similar areas for matching exist. Too few, and a dynamic baseline cannot be used.

5. Dynamic baselines must be utilized retrospectively, so that we do not take credit for an unproven hypothesis.

- Proactively forecasting potential carbon credits is critical for determining the viability of a carbon project. However, carbon predicting is akin to forecasting the weather—valuable, but sometimes wrong.

6. Our dynamic baseline only counts carbon impact after measurements have occurred. This ensures that the carbon credit yield and the baseline that it relies on are both based on fact. Carbon projects should not use baselines that rely on “what-ifs.”

- Dynamic baselines must not be limited by today’s models, they should have the flexibility to grow. The methods by which the baseline is calculated must be able to change and grow as we learn more about the most relevant drivers of climate outcomes.

In short, as our understanding of carbon accounting grows, our dynamic models should become more accurate. This allows us to acknowledge that we don’t yet know the unknowns in increasingly complex ecosystems—and we do not have to. We can still create real, relevant accounting via matched dynamic baselines.

TRULY DYNAMIC

A baseline is truly dynamic when it incorporates each of these six pieces; anything less leaves room for inaccurate crediting.

We encourage credit purchasers to ask about these six elements when performing due diligence of credit suppliers’ approaches.

Dynamic baselines are not without challenges. The most notable of which are: accessibility of data sources that meet the above criteria in all geographies; the continued need to test for and minimize adverse selection; the reduced predictability of baseline estimates and credit production relative to modeled baselines and all the uncertainty that introduces into a project; As a result, dynamic baselines are not currently accessible to all project activities and locations.

The more we can promote understanding of these key elements, their purpose, and what makes them trustworthy, the more we can meet the needs of those who have yet to engage in the voluntary carbon market.

The small landowners who have raised their hand to participate in FFCP’s implementation of the dynamic baseline approach are creating verified climate mitigation toward our remaining global carbon budget.

The more we minimize the risk of over-crediting and learn and iterate upon dynamic baselines and other methodological innovations, the greater impact we can make for people and the planet. We must align accounting with the way people, nature, and their contexts exist: dynamically. 🌱

METRICS*

ALL TIME:



82,181

Acres enrolled

605

Individual
contracts enrolled



\$19.6M

Committed to pay landowners
over the next 20 years

Enrolled enough acreage to
generate an expected

1.5M



Verified Carbon Units (VCUs)
over the next 20 years

(the equivalent of taking 355,000 gas-powered
cars off the road for one year)

AFF's 2024 National Leadership Conference Merges Legacy and the Future to Organize a Conservation Movement

BY ANGELA WELLS, SENIOR DIRECTOR, AMERICAN TREE FARM SYSTEM

“Who here can name first name, last name, home state, home forest, of everyone at your table?” This was the challenge by speaker Ryan Rauzon during a plenary session at the 2024 American Forest Foundation National Leadership Conference (NLC). Within the conference theme of “Rooted in Community,” this session invited participants to consider the difference between advocacy and mobilizing—two approaches in which the voice of regular family forest owners receives minimal exposure—and grassroots community organizing, which centers and elevates the voices of a majority of family forest owners to make their stories heard and create lasting change.

Organizing is inherently relationship-based, and 2024 NLC—cohosted by the Washington and Oregon Tree Farm programs in Vancouver, Washington—featured many opportunities for participants to get to know one another, starting with a pre-conference tour to Pomeroy Farms (pomeroyfarm.org) a multi-use, multi-generational enterprise dedicated to preserving history, providing educational opportunities, and sharing farm life with the community. In addition to sustainable management of their forest land, the family operates an event venue and, much to the delight of those on the tour, a winery and wine-tasting room.



Leaders from Vermont, Idaho, Florida, Illinois, Montana, and Washington discuss methods of recruiting new volunteers at a “Hot Topics” table on Day 2 of NLC.

Friendly conversations continued at the wine bar continued during a speed networking session during the Day 1 facilitated by ATFS Senior Community Manager Kayti Wilson, where interchangeable pairs of participants answered a lightning round of questions like, “What is your hidden talent?” “Would you rather write 25 management plans in 1 month or plant 10,000 trees in one day?” and “What is your favorite state to visit?” Following Ryan Rauzon’s lecture on identifying, recruiting, empowering and organizing leaders and volunteers, attendees rounded out the first day with a welcome reception where they enjoyed Pacific Northwest fare and conversation overlooking downtown Vancouver’s public square.

A large contingent of Georgia Tree Farm was on-hand to celebrate Heather Brasell's receipt of the National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year award, along with AFF President and CEO Rita Hite and ATFS Director Angela Wells.

Day 2 was dedicated to the core purpose of NLC: to share learnings with and among AFF's network of leaders and celebrate their accomplishments. For some local flair, Washington State University Extension Forester Patrick Shults, Washington Tree Farm Chair Dave New, and Oregon Tree Farm co-chair Wylda Cafferata led a session on non-timber forest products, including big leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*) syrup and truffles. Samples were enjoyed! Several sessions were geared toward information and feedback on AFF's Family Forest Carbon Program. At the same time, ATFS Certification Manager Steve Lloyd facilitated a morning open forum on third-party assessment and an afternoon session on changes to the ATFS Standards and Eligibility Requirements. Meanwhile, it was standing room only in 2024 National Outstanding Inspector of the Year Ethan Tapper's talk on communicating forestry to the public, which included a brief discussion on his upcoming book, *How to Love a Forest: the Bittersweet Work of Tending a Changing World* (due out in September, available for pre-order now).

Mr. Tapper wasn't the only creative type among the ranks, as everyone soon learned during the awards luncheon where keynote speaker Ken Bevis merged prose and song to tell the story of the forest's inhabitants—both human and wildlife—and their stewardship of the land. Those wishing to sample Mr. Bevis's music can find him on YouTube by searching his name or visiting his website, *kenbevis.com*. Those in the audience agreed that they hope to find "True Bear" on the Billboard charts someday.



Following the meal, ATFS Director Angela Wells took to the stage to formally welcome and present the National Leadership Award, Regional and National Outstanding Inspectors of the Year, and National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year. Outstanding Tree Farmer Heather Brasell closed the luncheon with remarks on her unlikely journey to forest stewardship, which you can read more about in the Spring 2024 issue of *Woodland*.

American Forest Foundation President and CEO was on-hand just in time to snap photos with the awardees before taking the stage for a panel discussion with Tree Farmers and Family Forest Carbon Program landowners Tim Stout of Vermont and Susan Benedict of Pennsylvania. During an interactive Q&A, they touched on the integration of AFF's legacy program, the American Tree Farm System, and the newer FFCP that unlocks new revenue streams for family forest owners through participation in carbon markets. FFCP finances and brings to scale many of the same objectives that ATFS has held for decades: connecting landowners with one another and natural resource professionals, management planning help, and other technical and financial tools needed to sustain healthy forests and family legacy.

On the final day of the conference, plenary sessions focused on distilling and conveying key tools, takeaways, and locally focused messaging for leaders returning home. Participants were challenged to transition from advocacy to mobilization by engaging people in their communities and beyond the conservation sector in dialogue about the importance of forest stewardship. The central premise was emphasized: a forest that enjoys a relationship with human beings who care for it is better off than one that does not. 🌲

A Walk in the Woods

Family Forest Owner Perspectives

BY TOM GRESHAM

Harry and Karen Pelle

Tallow Creek Farm was initially intended to be a place for the Pelle family to hunt. In 1982, Ray Pelle bought the first 400-acre piece of the farm in Taylor County, Kentucky, so that he and his family could hunt deer. In subsequent years, Ray and his son, Harry, purchased adjoining acres. Ray, unfortunately, passed in 2003. Harry and his wife, Karen, then bought adjoining property until the farm reached its current size of 1,850 acres.

As the property grew, the Pelle family focused on improving the land, including constructing roads and ponds, and learning how to best care of.

“We wanted the property to get bigger, and I wanted it to stay in the family over time,” Harry said. “We decided our only shot that it was going to take care of itself is through the timber. So we started learning how to manage the timber and make it better.”

Pelle said it’s been “a long journey.” The family initially connected with Fish and Game to work on improving the habitat for deer and that led



In addition to being a long-time forest steward, Harry Pelle is also a certified master logger.

to exposure to other organizations—and their education resources—such as the Kentucky Woodland Owners Association, the Kentucky Division of Forestry, the University of Kentucky Extension, the National Resources Conservation Service and consulting forester Chris Will.

Pelle said the farm had been high graded for decades, but the family leaned into timber stand improvement, focusing on removing away mid-story, undesirable timber using machetes and applying herbicide on it with squirt bottles to allow the sunlight to reach the ground again and allow the oaks and hickories to thrive. Pelle said he has worked with his sons-in-law and grandchildren to complete more than 1,100 acres of timber stand improvement by hand.

“It’s very rewarding to turn that high-graded mess into a beautiful stand of timber,” Pelle said.

Pelle is a certified master logger and manages “the cleanup stuff,” such as the trees that fall in a big storm or the “standing deads,” while contracting out the planned timber harvests of up to 10 acres. Pelle has sold sustainable white oak to Jameson for its whiskey barrels. As part of the deal, Pelle is receiving a barrel that he will



The Pelle Family has been recognized for their active forest management many times over the years.

get filled by a local distillery. Then he will age the barrel on the farm in the woods where the trees grew that made the barrel.

Tallow Creek Farm has become a special place for the Pelles and their friends. The family built an open-air pavilion with a roof next to one of the largest ponds on the farm, which is also close to Harry and Karen's house. A zip line crosses the pond. The Pelles and their guests frequently sit around a campfire on Saturday nights.

"All my kids grew up on that farm," Pelle said. "We started in tents and eventually built the home. I never thought I'd get to retire there, but it turned out that I did. We have had generations of kids that have come to the farm. It's nothing on a holiday weekend for me to have 40 people there camping and riding the zip line, swimming in the ponds, riding four wheelers."

Pelle's daughters live on the farm now with their own families, and "the grandkids are all kind of eyeballing spots for when they get old enough to build a house," he said.

"We're blessed," Pelle said. "We don't take it for granted—not one single day."

Oonagh Wood

Oonagh Wood and her husband, Leonard, first purchased land in the southern Black Hills of South Dakota in 1966, but they didn't settle there until almost 40 years later. Leonard worked in the oil industry, and the couple spent much of their time in South America and Africa with trips back to South Dakota when possible until Leonard's retirement in 2004 brought them to the Black Hills and Wood Ranch permanently.



Oonagh Wood is a proud Tree Farmer and long-time steward of South Dakota's forest and ranch land.



Two of Oonagh Wood's grandchildren during one of their visits to Wood Ranch. Oonagh said her grandchildren love spending time at the ranch. *Photo courtesy of Oonagh Wood*

Today, Oonagh lives year-round close to the property, which has grown to more than 5,000 acres. The property features more than 2,000 acres of timber, and the rest is primarily pasture for cattle. Leonard died about a decade ago, but Oonagh said his efforts are visible throughout the land. The property grew almost organically over the years with neighbors frequently offering their land directly to the Woods for sale, knowing they would take good care of it.

"We've been working on this land a long time, and we have a very vibrant, very good piece of property now," Oonagh said.

Timber was not a point of emphasis for the Woods until a robust spring dried up on the ranch in the 1980s and an investigation revealed there were too many pine trees on a hillside above the spring that were slurping up all the water. That prompted a conversation with state foresters and the Woods began to see the value of managing and conserving their timber. They became avid about managing their forests, and the land became a certified Tree Farm in 1988. The Woods would eventually become two-time South Dakota Tree Farmers of the Year.

"I like to see the improvements and how much better it is than when we first got it," Oonagh said. "It took us a long time to get all these little pieces of land together and create this big place, and it's allowed us to do a lot. We need big places like this. It's been very rewarding for us."

Oonagh said the primary forestry management objectives for Wood Ranch for decades have been timber production, wildlife habitat and wildfire risk reduction. Each year, Oonagh said, Wood Ranch undergoes thinning and brush management, and there have been two major timber harvests—the first in the 1990s and the second a few years ago.

“We do a combination of selective cuts and overstory removal and we’ve harvested a lot of timber off the ranch,” Oonagh said. “Every 25 to 30 years, we’re able to get a timber harvest off the place.”

Oonagh is particularly proud of the wildlife habitat that Wood Ranch provides, including the presence of a herd of elk. The land is made available for hunters through a program with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks.

“We have lots of wildlife, and the ranch is a very vital part of this area,” Oonagh said.

Oonagh said her four children and grandchildren visit in the summer and often help in various ways on the land, including helping to lop brush. Even though she has lived around the world, Oonagh, a native of Ireland, said Wood Ranch has always been her favorite spot.

“It’s just a wonderful, special place,” Oonagh said. “I’ve always considered it my home.”

A Woodland Home with Smiling Trees

After enjoying a weekend living at a cabin in the woodlands of Sullivan County Pennsylvania, Frank and Barb Weber knew they wanted their own forests. As their vacation came to a close, the Webers were determined to purchase secluded woodland so they could relive their trip every day. When a 90-acre property came up for sale near a friend’s land, they immediately jumped on the opportunity. The couple took pride in preserving their newly acquired forest, preventing deforestation, and stewarding their woodlands for their children through the Family Forest Carbon Program (FFCP).

When the Webers first started working on their property, they pitched tents and built campfires to form a makeshift homestead. It was during their many overnight stays under the stars when they got to know their wildlife neighbors. They heard coyote howls and saw porcupines, rabbits, bears, turkeys, phoebes, skunks, bobcats, chipmunks and rattlesnakes. Eventually, they built a cabin so that they could enjoy their serene getaway regardless of the weather or season. As they explored the property, they saw the land marked by tall prairie grasses, low hanging trees, and caves carved out of the stone.



AFF Outreach Forester, Brittney Hartzell, talks with the Weber family about the effects deadwood can have on a woodland. The Weber children explore the tree stump rooted on their property.

Frank’s commitment to the Family Forest Carbon Program preserves his slice of heaven as a habitat for the native wildlife. This also allows his family to experience the nature around them.

PRESERVING FORESTS FOR THE FUTURE

The Webers could not imagine their land being logged. Once they purchased the property, they began looking for programs to help them manage their woods. They wanted more than to just own their land, they wanted to earn money and secure their stewardship efforts. This way, they would not have to consider lumbering the land in the future. Frank was intrigued by FFCP because, compared to other forest programs, FFCP requires a 20-year commitment. The contract ensures that, regardless of the status of the carbon market, his land will be maintained via a forest management plan and preserved for his family.

Frank’s number one priority in maintaining his land is ensuring that he is “building a relationship, based on respect for the land, that will benefit the ecosystem and people in the future.”

Like most landowners, the Webers faced challenges while maintaining their woodlands, such as lacking the proper equipment to till the area or to remove

It was during their many nights spent under the stars, that the Weber family got to know their wildlife neighbors. They heard coyote howls and saw porcupines, rabbits, bears, turkeys, phoebes, skunks, bobcats, chipmunks and rattlesnakes.



The Family Forest Carbon Program is now enrolling landowners with 30 acres or more in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Vermont, as well as select counties in Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York and Wisconsin. Click here to check your eligibility today.

fallen trees. Periods of drought killed trees and other vegetation and when it finally rained, the earth flooded out the roads as fast as the family could repair them. The dry periods also drove out beneficial wildlife and increased invasive species such as gypsy moths and kudzu.

But what extreme weather events and invasive species takes from them, FFCP helps to get back. Frank worked closely with his forester to develop a plan to rewild the area while attracting wildlife. He also discovered maple trees on the property and tapped them for syrup.

THE TREES SMILE BACK AT YOU IN THE WEBER'S WOODS

As Frank tells it, the maples on his land held more than just sugar. Since they've bought the property, Frank's mother has hidden items that were special to her. Before Frank's father passed, he had lost his dentures. Not knowing where the dentures were, he was buried without them. Some time later, while taking a walk around the property, one of Frank's children decided to climb a particularly large oak tree. They found the teeth nestled in the trunk. It turns out Frank's mother had hidden the dentures in the oak and, once they had been discovered, the family decided to leave them there. The Webers enjoy knowing that someone will find those teeth in the oak one day. By then, the tree may grow over the dentures, leaving whoever finds them with an oak in the backwoods of Pennsylvania showing off its pearly whites.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Family Forest Carbon Program supported the Webers to turn their woodlands into their home-away-from-home. FFCP provided resources to help restore damage caused by gypsy moths and allowed the family to grow closer together through their investment in the land.

The Webers are thankful for the security provided by the 20-year agreement, ensuring they can maintain their forest for many years to come.

If you're looking for forestry programs that do not feel like pulling teeth, then check out how the American Forest Foundation can assist your forest stewardship efforts. With ongoing expansions into new regions across the United States, the Family Forest Carbon Program may be right for you.

Turning Farm to Forest: Growing Loblolly Pine with FFCP

Wade Rabun has been working his land for years: he has run cattle, grown peanuts, and, most recently, become the steward of a growing loblolly pine forest after enrolling in Field to Forest. Across his different businesses, he focuses on maintaining a healthy property to pass down within his family. The land "will go to my children and I think they will keep it for their lifetime. And I certainly hope their children will keep the land as well," Rabun said.

Rabun's land has a long rich history, and Rabun has lived just two miles south of the farming property in Warren County, Georgia his whole life. His property is split into two 100-acre halves with railroad tracks running down the middle. When he purchased the land in 1976, the backside of the property was all trees and he left it to continue growing as a forest. The other side was the perfect space to begin farming cattle. Wade purchased his first feeder cows and began running his herd.

Nearly 15 years ago, Wade cut back his cattle farming to diversify his efforts with a new revenue stream: peanuts and cotton. As with all his businesses, he prioritized long-term sustainability. Growing peanut plants can be very taxing on the soil. To prevent a loss in soil richness, Wade would grow cotton for two years after each year he grew peanuts. This rotation would give the land time to regenerate after providing the nutrients for the more demanding peanut plants.

Throughout his four decades owning his land, Rabun always wanted to keep the land active and productive. He never wanted to take the land out of production, but he said that "you learn what your limits are when you get older." In 2019, Wade retired from raising cattle and began looking for manageable ways to support his property and set up the next generation for success. If he wasn't farming the land, he was determined to find the best alternative for the property. Not long after, his wife saw an ad for AFF's Field to Forest project and told Wade that "you'd probably want to call about this."

Field to Forest was a new project that worked with family landowners to grow and plant trees on their open fields, offering enrollees a low-maintenance income opportunity. The project coordinates and pays for each step of the planting and management process. Once the trees are



Wade Rabun's fields on a visit from the Field to Forest team.



A Georgia forester describes how Field to Forest can generate income for landowners who grow loblolly pines.

planted, landowners receive guaranteed annual payments of \$30 per acre enrolled and long-term technical support from local professionals.

The program was the perfect way for Rabun to continue profiting from his property while reducing the time he spent managing the land. After connecting with his forester, Rabun learned that Field to Forest was a good fit for his property and the land's future plans. With all the boxes checked, he enrolled.

Since converting his fields to forests with the support of local forestry professionals, Wade now receives guaranteed annual payments to steward loblolly pines on his property. The newly planted trees also require much less ongoing work to maintain than cattle and row crops. "The trees will take care of the land. Once you plant the trees, your maintenance problem is over with, and the trees are going to grow. To me, it was a win-win," he explained while looking back on the decision.

Since enrolling, Wade has spoken with two of his friends about joining the Field to Forest. Both are also in the process of retiring and learning about alternative ways to generate revenue from their properties. Many of Wade's neighbors thought the project was too good to be true. However, once they saw the tangible benefits and the trees being planted, they recognized the measurable impact Field to Forest would bring to their land. Wade is excited that others in his community are enrolling in the project "and once they get involved, they'll tell their friends. And I think you'll start seeing more participation." ▲

You Can Make an Even Greater Impact by Becoming A Monthly Donor Today!

“The American Forest Foundation came up as one of the organizations that is really proactive about protecting, maintaining and improving the quality of American forests.” - Janis Buffham, a founding member of The Giving Tree, is a conservation and climate enthusiast who found the AFF through a Google search.

Years have passed since Janis first discovered AFF. Over time, she has gained a deeper understanding of the significant climate impact her monthly gifts contribute to, particularly supporting AFF’s innovations. Janis expresses confidence in how AFF manages its funds. “AFF is being responsible with their money,” she comments. “So I feel good about that... and I’m learning more about the amazing efforts that they put forward to protect and improve the quality of America’s family forests. **Three years later, I still feel really good about contributing to this organization as a monthly donor.**”

Join **the Giving Tree**, our monthly giving group, today! With your monthly gift, you join a group dedicated to overcoming our most pressing conservation challenges. Members of the Giving Tree are critical to creating a steady, reliable source of funds that allows us to undertake the most crucial parts of our mission.

With your generous recurring donation, you will receive benefits* such as:

- Curated and customized communications.
- Member-only phone line for personal inquiries, concerns, or questions.
- Annual choice of American Forest Foundation gear such as hats, coffee mugs and more

Joining is an easy and convenient way to ensure you are making an even bigger, sustaining impact on our work we’re accomplishing! Visit <https://www.forestfoundation.org/givemonthly>

We are so grateful to the individuals who are currently making a sustaining monthly gift:

Clark Beebe	Andres Echeverry	Charles Johnson Jr	Jonathan Roberts
Robert Bousquet	Steven Eichten	Gary & Treva Kingston	Casey Rush
Marcus Bradley	Ruth Hinson	Mike & Christine Mallon	Joshua Traube
Kyle Brown	David Hofer	Will Martin	Nathan Truitt
Janis Buffham	David Hughes	David Mazariegos	Anonymous
Scott Deitz	Lacy Hunt	Vincent Nadalie	Anonymous
Steve Dosh	Matt Jagnow	Patrick O’Reilly	Anonymous

If you have any questions, please contact Bethany Mueller, Senior Manager, Climate Donor Relations, at (202) 852-7520.

**Must make four consecutive monthly gifts of at least \$35 or at least one \$140 gift in order to qualify.*

Seedling Society Spotlight

“We know our gift will help AFF fulfill its mission into the future. AFF is a great organization dedicated to helping private forest landowners become better stewards of America’s woodlands.”



Scott and Marge Hayes

Scott and Marge have given their time, talent, and treasures to the American Forest Foundation (AFF). They have gained an appreciation for AFF’s mission, serving in various roles, including Scott serving on the AFF Board of Directors. When they heard about the Seedling Society, AFF’s planned giving society, the couple decided it was a good way to provide long-term support.

The Seedling Society is a community of individuals like Scott and Marge, who—like you—have a deep-seated commitment to the mission of the American Forest Foundation. By designating AFF in your estate plans, you will ensure a path for its future and enjoy the benefits such as:

- Learning about how your gift empowers family forest owners to take action on their land.
- Discover how your gift honors your stewardship values and supports your legacy planning process.
- Join a community of donors who share goals similar to yours in their estate planning through invitations to exclusive events.

“We know our gift will help AFF fulfill its mission into the future,” said Hayes. “AFF is a great organization dedicated to helping private forest landowners become better stewards of America’s woodlands.”

“Donating to the Seedling Society went smoothly,” said Scott. The Hayes’ gift reflects their commitment to forest management and the mission of the American Forest Foundation.

We’d love to hear from you!

If you want to discuss your giving options, please call **Beth Riley, Senior Director of Philanthropy, at (202) 765-3644**. If you have already included the American Forest Foundation in your estate plans, please let us know so we can thank you for your generous commitment to supporting family forest owners. You can enjoy the benefits of recognizing your gift and joining others like you in the Seedling Society.



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The Seedling Society