

# Woodland

YOUR CONNECTION TO AMERICA'S FORESTS



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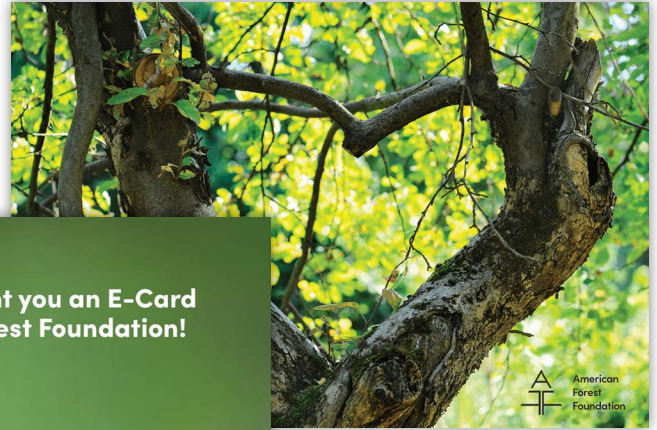


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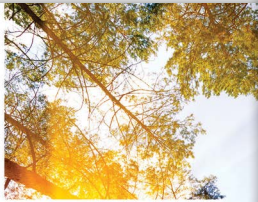




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## YOUR INVITATION TO JOIN US IN UPLIFTING FAMILY FOREST OWNERS



BY RITA HITE  
PRESIDENT & CEO  
AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

**A**t the American Forest Foundation, we know that family forest owners have long made vital contributions to our nation's conservation efforts and that we can do even more for our environment and our economy—all while helping family forest owners increase land stewardship. In this issue of *Woodland*, you'll have the opportunity to learn more about some of the excellent stewardship work being done by our nation's family forest owners as we introduce you to Tree Farmers from across the nation, including the National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year, Mary LaHood and Bob Burns (page 13).

While there are many issues today—from wild-fire mitigation to biodiversity protection to rural economic issues—that family forest owners can have an outsized impact on, there's one that speaks louder than the others: climate change. **Our planet is hungry for action to mitigate the effects of climate change and family forest owners—who care for the largest portion of America's forests—are a key part of that solution.** On page 10, we introduce you to the Jackson family who recently enrolled in the Family Forest Carbon Program, a program developed by the American Forest Foundation and The Nature Conservancy to help family forest owners increase the health and value of their woods while addressing climate change.

Many organizations are working diligently toward important conservation goals from many angles, but what AFF brings to the table is a unique ability to help family forest owners take

stewardship actions to unlock the conservation benefits of their land. With your support and through innovative solutions and partnerships, we're tackling climate change, and other issues, and producing measurable value in ways that actively support America's family forest owners. After 20 plus years in this arena, I am privileged to continue to work with and learn from people like you and a diverse group of colleagues, partners and friends that are getting all of the great work done. I invite you to learn more about my background and experiences on page 6.

In the previous issue of *Woodland* magazine, we shared with you that we recently conducted a strategic branding exercise that helped us to learn more about the ways we can continue to improve and innovate ways we can tell the story of our nation's family-owned forests. As part of that work, we refreshed *Woodland* magazine with refreshed language and dynamic visuals that tell a holistic story of we are, highlight the importance of family-owned forests and emphasize the unique value we bring to tackling today's most pressing conservation issues. We hope you will appreciate many of the changes and updates that we have made with *Woodland* and welcome your feedback. You can email Beth Riley, our Director of Philanthropy, with any of your thoughts about this publication at [briley@forestfoundation.org](mailto:briley@forestfoundation.org).

We're excited to share with you in this issue about the life and legacy of Dianne Komminsk, AFF's newest member of The Seedling Society, our planned giving society. Dianne is an example of another woman who shares a passion for what our forests can do and her legacy lives on in white oak and carbon programs. I hope you'll take the time to learn more about her by reading on page 15.

Your input, passion, expertise and dedication to the mission have brought us to this moment in time, and I'm inspired to continue our work in the coming months and years. The current contribution and the added potential in America's family-owned forests to make a measurable impact on the planet is huge. I invite you to join me and the American Forest Foundation as we unlock that potential, continue to scale our efforts and support American family forest owners from all walks of life. 🌲





# AFF Federal Policy Update

BY ROBERT SHERMAN

POLICY MANAGER, AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

With the second session of the 117th Congress already well underway, forests continue to be central to significant conservation policy discussions on Capitol Hill. Fortunately for family forest owners, the American Forest Foundation's Policy team and Advocacy Leaders network are helping to lead the way on several of the issues most critical to conserving private forests.

AFF has been involved in advocacy around two of the biggest bills of this Congress. Since the passage of the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act late last year, we have been working with the U.S. Forest Service to ensure that federal dollars are used to achieve the best possible forest resiliency outcomes on all types of forest lands. And while the Build Back Better Act's \$27 billion for public and private forests is stalled as of writing, we are working to make sure that Congress can make this historic investment via an alternative piece of legislation.

Climate change and carbon market access also continue to be AFF's top policy priorities as we work to support the Family Forest Carbon Program. We are working with agriculture policy leaders in the House and Senate to pass the Rural Forest Markets Act, which has bipartisan support and would help unlock carbon market opportunities for family and individual forest owners. AFF is also resuming our leadership of the Forests in the Farm Bill coalition, which will be crucial to advancing the growing role of forests in climate mitigation and conservation as the next Farm Bill is developed over the course of this year and next.

The Policy team has also been busy working on AFF's other top conservation priorities. We are working with AFF's Biodiversity team to develop a policy platform that can supplement their critical work, and we continue to work with AFF's Wildfire team on policy at both the federal and state levels that will help family forest owners complete more wildfire mitigation projects on their acres.

Lastly, we are fortunate to have added another key member to the Policy team in the early months of 2022. In February, James McKittrick joined AFF as a senior policy manager. James was most recently the Legislative Director for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, and before that, he has held staff roles with the Maryland State Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, where he worked on a wide range of budget, taxation, and other issues.

On top of the conservation policy areas already mentioned, Congress and the Administration will be dealing with appropriations, foreign policy, and a Supreme Court appointment this Spring. With the August Recess and the midterm campaign season approaching quickly, Washington will be as busy as ever with Members of Congress being pulled in multiple directions at once. As always, it remains essential to have not just our Policy team, but our Advocacy Leaders as well, working to ensure that family forest owners are a priority for policymakers. ▲



## FEATURE

# Embracing Diversity, Collaboration and Growth

Rita Hite, AFF's new president and CEO, sees unprecedented opportunities for the organization in the coming years.

BY MARY LOU JAY

These are exciting times for the American Forest Foundation and forest owners. As the world searches for viable solutions to climate change, political leaders, corporations and even the general public are beginning to recognize the crucial role that U.S. forests can play in mitigating its effects. Over the last few years, AFF has been expanding its work to test and implement new innovative programs in this area but its efforts are just beginning. AFF's new president and CEO, Rita Hite, is uniquely qualified to lead the organization through this rapid period of growth.

When AFF's long-time CEO Tom Martin retired at the end of 2021, "AFF was incredibly lucky to have somebody inside the organization who was ready and completely capable of taking on the job," said Jameson French, president and CEO of Northland Forest Products Inc. and AFF Board chair. "Rita has the experience and the engagement on all the different aspects of the organization, and the excitement and the skill to take on these new and innovative businesses that we are creating."

"Rita has been able to put AFF's vision into a working plan. She has gathered people around her to think and to do and to take that vision and find ways to make it come to fruition," added Salem Saloom, president of Saloom Properties and AFF Board vice-chair.

## BECOMING A WOODLANDS ADVOCATE

Hite's affinity for forests stems from her childhood on her family's beef cattle farm in upstate New York. "I loved being outdoors, and as I started to delve into this world during my early years in school, I found that I loved learning about the ecosystem and its interconnectedness," she said. She also developed an understanding of how people can live off the land and benefit from it while caring for it.

While studying for a B.S. degree in environmental studies at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Hite worked with a professor who encouraged her to explore environmental





policy work. She interned at the Society of American Foresters (SAF) and then worked there for five years after graduation, eventually becoming the organization's director of policy.

"My time at SAF helped build my knowledge about forests from those who work so hard on the ground level, and helped me build my network of experts that I rely on to this day. I don't have a forestry degree, but I do have 15,000 forestry professionals that are part of SAF that I can turn to and call on," she said.

After learning at SAF about influencing forestry policy from outside the government, Hite accepted a position as professional staff on forestry issues for the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Agriculture. "It gave me an understanding of the politics of forestry from behind the curtain. Being part of that machine, being part of how policy is made and seeing how people influenced that policy gave me a really different view of how I could be a more effective advocate," she explained.

But Hite missed the day-to-day conversations with landowners that helped her understand their issues and challenges. So when AFF offered her the position as vice president of public affairs, which included policy development and implementation, Hite saw it as her opportunity to work with and on behalf of family forest owners.

"I knew that AFF and the American Tree Farm System had been around for a long time, but there was this gap on Capitol Hill. The voice of the family forest owners was there, but it wasn't a very big voice and it certainly wasn't the loudest voice," she said. "When I look at forests, family-owned lands play such a critical role. But forest owners are under represented and undervalued. So that was a missing piece, and that's what brought me to AFF—the opportunity to help build that voice, to be that advocate and to use the skills that I had built from working on the committee to understand how we can be most effective at influencing change there—change that has an impact on forests and our environment and on the people that own and care for them."





Rita meets with lawmakers, partners & landowners in Spring 2019

## PREPARING FOR LEADERSHIP

After Hite had been working at AFF for a few years, Martin challenged her to take on new responsibilities. The goal was to broaden her understanding of the various aspects of AFF's business and ultimately to prepare her to step into the CEO role.

"I've worked intimately with every department in the organization, I know the programs inside and out. I know the stakeholders, I know the landowners. That really helped me understand where the opportunities are, and where the challenges are going to be for us as an organization," Hite explained. "I know our strengths, our weaknesses, what we've learned over the last few years, where we've failed and where we've succeeded. That has given me a jumpstart leading the organization."

"Having been part of the vision and strategy setting for this organization as it's evolved has been a huge advantage," she added.

French said Hite has the management skills and the clear-headed and organized approach necessary to manage the implementation of AFF's vision around climate change, wildfire mitigation, and protecting biodiversity. "She's calm, cool, collected and practical and is deeply engaged with the staff. She is empowering managers at different levels."

"Rita is an innovator, and inventor, which you can tell by the programs she's helped create at AFF, like the Family Forest Carbon Program," added Jad Daley, president and CEO of American Forests. "She's the kind of person who is always seeing the next big idea when everyone else is back on the last big idea. I think that visionary quality, that innovator is absolutely essential to being a successful leader. She's also really pragmatic; she can think strategy and big picture, but she's unusually good at coming from the big idea and going into the details about how you need to make it happen."

Wanda Barrs, co-owner of Gully Branch Tree Farm in Georgia, got to know Hite while serving as co-chair of AFF's Woodlands Operating Committee. She said that Hite always anticipated people's level of understanding at the committee's meetings and was prepared with the background information that would support her advocacy. "She could look at issues from different perspectives and give feedback based on those different perspectives. She's also a very strong partnership and collaboration builder," said Barr.

Hite said she challenges the status quo and pushes hard so that AFF's efforts have the greatest possible impact. "I try to do that in a way that creates opportunities for others to lead, to share their views, to be inclusive and supportive of the variety of talents and expertise that we have," she explained. "This organization has been around for 80-plus years, but the stuff we're doing today is new and hard. So as a leader, I have to create a space where we can get different perspectives, get those differing views, challenge ourselves and learn and fail and grow together."

## FORMING PARTNERSHIPS

Hite has taken that kind of collaborative approach to problem solving throughout her career. One example is her work with the Forest Climate Working Group, which she co-founded with Daley 14 years ago. "We saw this as an opportunity to lift the voice of the forest sector in this climate conversation and to demonstrate that we can be part of the solution," Hite explained. "The group has an incredibly diverse membership, everyone from traditional forest landowners and industry foresters to people who might not necessarily think of themselves as part of the forest sector but who do have an interest in forests as a solution to climate change."

"One of the things that I learned from day one in my policy work is that going it alone never works for a variety of reasons," she added. "If the various pieces of the forest sector approach Congress as a united group, it makes us more powerful and Congress has to pay attention." Under her leadership, AFF will continue to make and strengthen its partnerships with other groups who share its interest in protecting and preserving forest lands.

"Rita is the most collaborative person I've ever worked with. She has absolutely zero ego in the work; she's all about whatever the team has to do to succeed. She also has a way of making everyone feel valued; she just welcomes lots of different points of view," said Daley.

She's also welcomed and mentored others in the industry. Terry Baker, CEO of SAF, met Hite when he was a diversity scholar at that organization. "She was someone who was very approachable. I had an interest in policy and she was always willing to provide her insights for me related to what opportunities there were, what paths I may take career wise," he said. "She is a very thoughtful leader and very supportive, looking at the profession as a whole and at where there are opportunities for folks to engage and do meaningful work."

## **INCREASING DIVERSITY, MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS**

Hite recognizes that for AFF to be successful long term it must become a more diverse, equitable and inclusive organization.

"Our commitment to DEI starts inside; we have to create a culture at AFF that allows our people to be their best selves and their whole selves. That's the way that people are going to be able to dedicate themselves and their talents to the organization," she said.

Equity and inclusion also require connecting with a more diverse group of family forest owners. "We're not going to achieve the impact that we want to achieve unless we ensure that we're reaching landowners who have been underserved and who have been left out of the programs in the past," Hite said. "We're just starting to learn what it takes to get there. We have to find different partnerships and relationships, such as our partnership with the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program and learn from them in terms of how we can create programs that are more inclusive and equitable.

"If we want to unlock the power of family lands to tackle climate change, we have to be operating at a much different scale than we are today, and that means being inclusive of landowners from all walks of life," she added.

## **TAKING ADVANTAGE OF UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY**

Hite said that the need around climate change has provided AFF with a unique opportunity to contribute to our most pressing conservation challenge while supporting family forest landowners.

"We are at an unprecedented moment with respect to forests," Hite said. "Never before have forests been talked about the way they are being talked about now. Never before have they been seen as the solution to some of the critical issues that people are talking about: climate change, wildfire, all the challenges that we're facing as a nation and as a society. This is AFF's and family owned forests moment to be the solution to some of these critical issues.

"We're trying to create a movement where family landowners are positioned as a critical solution in ways that create value and benefit for them," Hite said. "How do we help them make a measurable impact on climate change to help stem the tide of the devastating wildfires out West? How do we help landowners stop the loss of forest-dependent species?"

Supporting landowners in addressing climate change will require more funding avenues to help owners overcome cost barriers. "We see this as an opportunity for family landowners to continue growing timber while also and for some, diversifying their income streams from their woods. For others new and different income streams may inspire them to act," she said. With AFF's new Family Forest Carbon Program, for example, family forest owners can get paid for growing a healthier forest that captures more carbon, growing higher quality timber, and contributes to climate change.

Hite encourages family forest landowners to be part of AFF's efforts, to learn about its programs and be part of them. While she will be advocating for family forest owners in her role as AFF president and CEO, she recognizes that the voice of the landowner is key to the success of all its new endeavors.

"Landowners that have worked with AFF for years, who are part of the Tree Farm System, are some of the best ambassadors for our work to other landowners, to policymakers and to corporate America," she said. "We need them to use their voice, to be an advocate and a peer supporter to other landowners as we grow these programs and they will benefit as well." ▲



## FORESTS & FAMILIES

# Working to Address Climate Change

A new era combating climate change in close collaboration with landowners

BY TOM GRESHAM

Laura and Mike Jackson have observed clear signs of climate change at Mountain Meadows, their 113-acre, mostly forested farm in Everett, Pennsylvania. Intense amounts of rainfall have become a more frequent occurrence, leading to runoff and erosion concerns, while late summer and early fall have been drier than ever. The Jacksons, who have owned the property since 1985, also have seen the bird counts dropping sharply as climate change leads to habitat loss. The shorter, warmer winters have created fertile conditions for an invasive species named hemlock woolly adelgid, an insect, to prosper and prove ruinous to the Jacksons' hemlock trees.

In search of help, the Jacksons discovered the Family Forest Carbon Program, which pays small forest holders upfront to implement climate-smart forestry practices that go above and beyond what is otherwise common practice. The program, which was developed by the American Forest Foundation and The Nature Conservancy, also provides landowners with professional expertise and guidance to help them transition to long-term sustainable management of their forests.



Laura and Mike Jackson

In the spring of 2021, the Jacksons enrolled 80 acres in the Growing Mature Forests practice of the program, which required them to engage in sustainable forest management and work to grow quality trees for a 20-year time period. It was exactly what they needed.

"We're certainly concerned about climate change, and we're also trying to manage our property for wildlife and sustainable forestry," Laura said. "So, it seemed like a great fit. We think it's a win-win for landowners."

The Family Forest Carbon Program represents a crucial step forward for AFF on the path to create meaningful climate mitigation through the activation of family-owned lands. Rampant changes promise to be devastating for the health and viability of family-owned forests, and evidence of the threat is apparent to landowners such as the Jacksons.

"Landowners have been aware of climate change for longer and in a deeper way than the general public because they see it so clearly on their land," said Nathan Truitt, senior vice-president of business development for AFF.

Through the Family Forest Carbon Program, AFF will collaborate with landowners on an unprecedented scale to devise plans that are unique to their needs, goals and objectives, while helping to position their forestland to mitigate climate change in ways that will benefit the world well beyond their properties.

"Landowners get involved with us because they care about the health and the value of their woods," said Jasmine Brown, AFF's customer success manager. "That naturally aligns with the health of the climate. This program works in both areas."

## EXTENDING THE PLANNING WINDOW

Truitt said the typical approach today of considering forest management in terms of a 10-to-15-year window can be improved upon – for both the climate and for individual landowners.

"There is a different method that could produce better outcomes for a variety of goals and objectives," Truitt said. "It could store more carbon—sequestering additional carbon to suck more carbon out of the atmosphere—but it would also be good for wildlife habitat, and it would be good for timber supplies in the long term. It would help increase the value of these properties. It might be good for the aesthetic of those properties. It might help the recreational value. And the shift is pretty simple—it's just trying to slightly extend the planning window that we consider when we consider forest management."

Truitt said much more could be accomplished if planning looked 20 to 25 years ahead.

For instance, he said, "you're able to take into account the growth of trees that happens in years 16 to 25, which maybe you weren't taking into



Jasmine Brown, Engagement Steward Manager at the American Forest Foundation

account earlier. And that opens up a whole range of options. If you're allowing trees that are growing and healthy to continue to grow, you're going to be adding a lot more biomass to the forest. And when you do that, that means more carbon. And it also in the long term means more timber products, which means more income for landowners, which means more income for rural communities that produce those timber products."

The tradeoff, of course, is that means fewer resources in the short term for landowners.

"If we're going to keep that tree for an additional 10 years, it means that we're not getting money today for harvesting it," Truitt said. "That is where climate carbon finance comes in. If we can find a value for keeping that carbon on the landscape, for that extra period of time, that is what can bridge the gap for landowners and for others who are dependent upon that resource."

## MEETING LANDOWNERS WHERE THEY ARE

Jackson said she and her husband, who are both retired schoolteachers, are always on the lookout for financing to help them contend with two major challenges on their land – invasive species and developing and maintaining a sustainable management plan that will ensure a bright future for the property. The Jacksons have a conservation easement with Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and remain focused on managing their forest in a sustainable way.



**“A big key to working with landowners for us is making sure that our program goals align with their goals,” Brown said.**

In addition to the financial help of the Family Forest Carbon Program, Laura said the 20-year contract, the help developing a forest management plan, the data that will be collected on their property and the goal of growing a mature forest were all appealing.

Brown said landowners involved in the carbon portion of AFF's program increasingly are examining how climate change impacts their properties and how they can help, looking to AFF for guidance. Brown said AFF strives to meet landowners “where they are.”

“A big key to working with landowners for us is making sure that our program goals align with their goals,” Brown said. “When that happens, we are both going to be successful over the 20 years of our agreement.”

The better that AFF understands a landowner's objectives, the more its experts can help develop a plan to meet those objectives.

“We need to understand what is it that landowners want out of their woods today, five years from now, 10 years from now, 30 years from now—what are they trying to achieve?” Truitt said. “Because if we know, we can say, ‘Here's the plan for how to get that.’ More often than not, that plan is going to be strengthened by the ability to think over the long term.”

The Family Forest Carbon Program can help landowners who want high-quality timber, spacious forests with room for wildlife, and the kind of aesthetic that comes with an older, more mature forest, but who also have property taxes and other financial obligations they must manage.

“That's what we can help them figure out,” Truitt said.

Truitt said the Family Forest Carbon Program distinguishes itself from other programs by not being just about financial incentives to cover the gap between short-term and long-term resources but also being about providing on-the-ground technical assistance to landowners in the form of qualified professional foresters. These professionals work with landowners to craft forest management plans that align with both the Family Forest Carbon Program and the landowners' goals and objectives.

“We take a lot of pride in being that resource to help the landowner get what they really want out of their land,” Truitt said.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

With the Family Forest Carbon Program, Truitt said, AFF hopes to expand its reach to less-active landowners who lack the time or expertise to closely manage their forests but who are ready for some help. As part of that effort, AFF has built a system of account managers who will work closely with landowners to help them through the process, providing high-touch service to make participating in the Family Forest Carbon Program as simple and straightforward—and productive—as possible.

“The participants in this program have a huge range of opinions on climate change and what the right thing to do is,” Truitt said. “What they're unified by is a sense that they can do something better for their piece of forest, and they are interested in help to achieve that.”

Crucially, the questions of what's best for the landowner and what's best for the climate do not have diametrically opposed answers.

“You can't create climate benefits if you're not deeply interested in what motivates landowners because they're the ones who own and manage these woods,” Truitt said. “Similarly, you can't create and maintain healthy forests that benefit landowners and what they want to achieve if you aren't concerned about the climate, how it's changing and how those changes can affect so many people. They're synergistic with each other.”

Laura Jackson, for one, is excited about the direction forward that AFF's entry into carbon financing offers for family landowners.

“I think it's really a different perspective, a different paradigm than what people are used to thinking of,” Jackson said. “Before, a tree didn't help you if it was living. It only helped you if you could cut it and sell it. Now they're seeing a living tree as an important financial investment. That's really great.” 🌲

## FORESTS & FAMILIES

# Mary LaHood and Bob Burns

## 2021 National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year

BY MIKE RAY



In the mid 1870s, there were two ways to enter the Black Hills of South Dakota, on foot or on the back of a horse. By 1887, the effort to construct the first railroad into a piece of Lakota treaty land that settlers called the Piedmont Valley brought John Murray to the area. In July of that year, Murray purchased a large acreage, including the wooded slopes above the red dirt valley floor, for \$675.

One hundred and thirty-four years later, the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) has named Murray's descendants as the 2021 National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year. Mary LaHood and Bob Burns, who manage the LaHood-Burns Family Forest with their children, were selected by an independent selection committee made up of ATFS partners, landowners, and past Regional and Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year finalists.

"The National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year is selected from the top nominations from all over the country and the LaHood-Burns Family Forest selection is a true testament to the hard work and many accomplishments on the Tree Farm and their leadership in promoting sustainable forestry on private forest lands throughout the region," says Bob Bauer, chair of the Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year committee.

Burns and LaHood are being recognized for decades of conscientious, pro-active, hands-on stewardship of the land and for their dedication and advocacy for family forest landowners.

"I can't think of more deserving Tree Farmers," adds Bill Coburn, Chairman of the South Dakota Family Forests Association who informed the couple of the news of their selection. "When I called them, they were up on their forest working. That says a lot about their incredible dedication."

Bob Burns took over the property in 1969, following his father's death, and began timber management informed by his study of environmental science at Rutgers University. Burns built an excavation company which specialized in land and stream improvements on public land. He used down time in the early years to manage the family forest on his own, government cost-share programs later enabled him to hire timber contractors to help with the work.

In 1986, Bob married Mary LaHood and the subsequent birth of three of their four children ushered in a period of slowed conservation work on the property. That all changed on August 15, 1994, when the lightning-caused Stagebarn Fire blew up around midnight on National Forest land bordering the LaHood-Burns property. Mary was in her last month of pregnancy with their fourth child.



Bob rushed to the emergency fire headquarters set up in the local elementary school to help. His connections with local US Forest Service personnel and his intimate knowledge of the area became instrumental in laying out a fire attack plan. He spent 14 hours working with crews to put in almost two miles of fire line through the length of the Tree Farm and onto the adjacent land. A one mile long, one-hundred-foot-wide fuel break established seven years prior was instrumental in slowing the fire. Eighty acres of the farm burned, but lines held, and all the homes in the area were saved.

The experience focused Bob and Mary on the importance of forest health and on the advice and help of local professional forester they joined the American Tree Farm System initiating stewardship and timber management plans. They soon realized that treating their own property while adjacent land remained untreated would not be enough to reduce the chances of future catastrophic fire. So, Bob and a local forester reached out to the homeowners in nearby subdivisions to explain the benefits of a well-managed, fire-resistant forest adjacent to their homes and convinced them to allow heavy logging trucks to pass local gravel roads. As a result of those dialogues, many neighbors not only welcomed forest management and fuel reduction, and one adjoining landowner added eighty acres to the treatment area. Their ongoing advocacy continues to inspire as a new neighbor is taking steps to enter the Tree Farm system this year.

The LaHood-Burns family focuses on multiple uses that protect the timber stands, reduce wildfire danger, promote water quality, reduce the threat of mountain pine beetles, reduce noxious weeds, and enhance wildlife habitats while improving recreation such as camping and hiking. They have also worked closely with the Forest Service on their properties bordering their farm and helped in the reduction of off-highway vehicles' impact on pristine riparian areas.



But it's not only about their efforts on their own forest. "They are doing a lot of impressive outreach and advocacy by giving back to their community to promote the values that Tree Farmers hold dear," says Dr. Salem Saloom the 2010 ATFS Tree Farmer of the Year who visited the LaHood-Burns' Family Forest as part of the selection process. "This really made them stand out."

Bob and Mary have repeatedly opened their Tree Farm to tours and workshops with local, national, and international political leaders, policy makers, and regulators. They have also repeatedly testified and advocated on behalf of Tree Farmers at the South Dakota state legislature. Mary is the Executive Director and Treasurer of the South Dakota Family Forests Association and Bob serves on the board as Vice Chair and is chair of the Advocacy Sub-committee. Bob is past president of the Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board (one of only two similar boards in the nation) and past president of the Norbeck Society (a local environmental conservation group.)

But the pair of Tree Farmers remain humble despite the recognition, they are quick to point out many others who added to their success over the years. "We're incredibly honored, but it needs to be said that this award is not just about us, it's for the people who have helped us and the people we have learned from over the years," says LaHood.

John Murray might be proud to know that despite forest fires, flash floods, a timber theft in the 1930s, and ever encroaching urban sprawl, more than one hundred years later a spirit of community, resourcefulness, and dedication continue to empower his descendants in their conservation of a rich forest of ponderosa pines, mixed conifers and deciduous trees perched above the Piedmont Valley in western South Dakota.

**About the Author:** Mike Ray runs a small Tree Farm with his family in the Black Hills of South Dakota on the land where he grew up. He holds a degree in geology from South Dakota Mines. He was a public radio journalist for 25 years prior to becoming a science communicator at his alma mater. 🌲



## FEATURE

# Leaving a Lasting Legacy

Dianne Komminsk's donation to The Seedling Society will help protect and preserve the natural environment she loved.

BY MARY LOU JAY

People who are passionate about giving back to their communities—who contribute their time, talents and money to make the world a better place—often want to ensure that they can continue to make a difference even after they are gone. That was the case with Dianne Komminsk, a lifelong resident of Ohio who died in 2019. Her estate's generous gift to the American Forest Foundation's legacy giving program The Seedling Society, will help fund critically important climate change and conservation work.

Although Komminsk had no relationship with AFF during her lifetime, she loved planting trees and caring for them on her property outside of New Bremen, Ohio, according to Bill Wenthe, a longtime friend and one of the executors of her estate. Komminsk enjoyed walking in the woods and watching the deer and other wildlife that lived in and around them. She was a staunch advocate for the environment, supporting the preservation of land and water resources and wildlife habitats. That commitment to nature was reflected in her will, which directed that her estate's executors make contributions to groups that work to support those causes.



Dianne Komminsk

In order to fulfill their responsibilities, Wenthe and the other executors began screening various conservation and environmental organizations as possible beneficiaries. They narrowed the search down by checking each group's ratings on Charity Navigator. AFF has earned a five-star, 96.4% overall rating and a "Give with Confidence" designation.





## How to Plant Your Own Seedling

**W**hether you want to put your donation to work throughout or beyond your lifetime, we will collaborate with you to design a meaningful gift opportunity to make a lasting impact in the work of the American Forest Foundation and fulfill your estate planning needs.

Dianne and Salem Saloom, who have been active in AFF for many years, were among the first members of The Seedling Society. When they die, part of their estate will go to support AFF's programs and services. The couple believe strongly in "the need to be stewards of the land, to take care of God's creation and to make things better for future generations."

"AFF is not the only organization that we give money to, but it is the second organization, after our church," said Salem Saloom. "AFF is probably the most respected conservation organization in the United States today and has partnered with 80,000 tree farmers. Tree Farmers who care about good stewardship of the land know there's a commonality between them and this organization."

### HISTORY OF THE SEEDLING SOCIETY:

In early 2019, a group of American Forest Foundation (AFF) supporters, board members and Tree Farm committee participants gathered together to begin crafting personal solutions for those landowners and conservationists who, like you, share a strong

belief in the stewardship of healthy forests for generations to come. When you join the Seedling Society by making a planned gift to AFF, your gift advances forest stewardship.

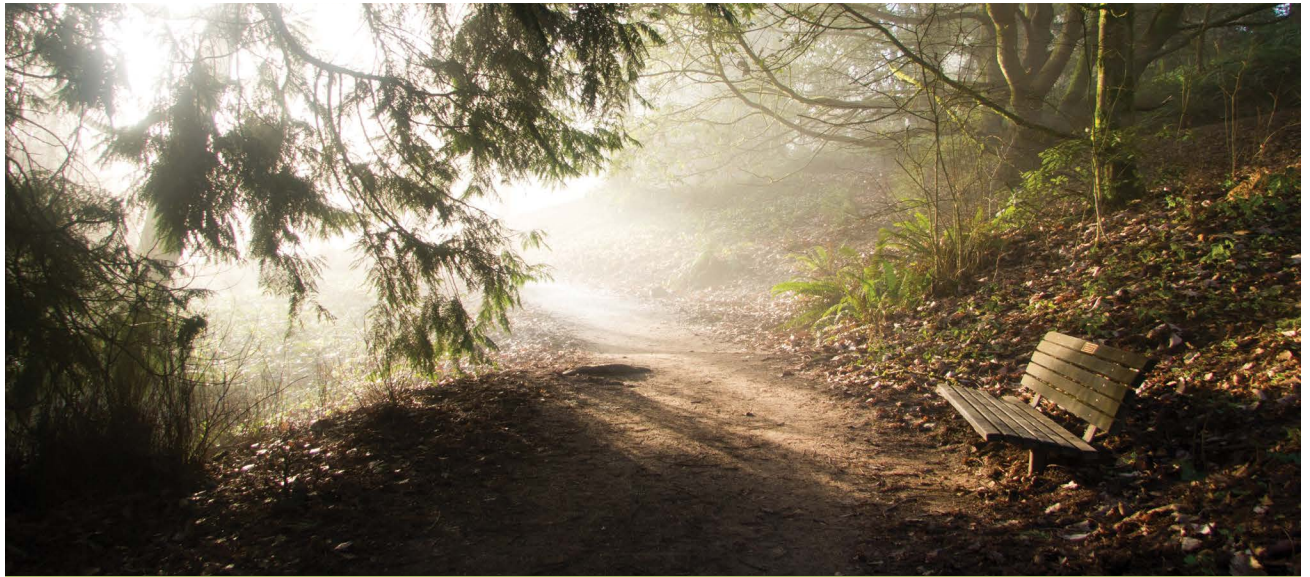
### BENEFITS OF JOINING THE SEEDLING SOCIETY:

As a member of the Seedling Society, you will receive the following opportunities to join in community with others who share your values, connect with AFF leadership and inspire others to give through these membership benefits:

- Help inspire others to give by sharing your story in an issue of Woodland magazine, on the AFF website or through social media channels
- Convene with other members and AFF leadership at the annual Seedling Society Gathering
- An annual conference call with the AFF President and Executive Staff to hear about emerging solutions for forest stewardship
- Consider displaying your member profile, an inspirational stewardship quote and photo at the AFF national office
- An invitation to a Seedling Society dinner in Washington, D.C. during AFF's biannual advocacy fly-in

To learn more about joining The Seedling Society, contact Beth Riley, AFF's Director of Philanthropy at [briley@forestfoundation.org](mailto:briley@forestfoundation.org).





**“Komminsk’s commitment to the environment and the natural world was evident during her lifetime and in her will. A significant portion of her estate was donated to charities that supported these causes, including the generous donation to the American Forest Foundation.”**

“We were then contacted by the trustees of her estate, who had a lot of questions about our programming and about the work that we would do with the donation,” explained Beth Riley, AFF’s director of philanthropy. “Then we began to hone in on some of our programming that would relate most closely to the things that Dianne was passionate about. We eventually landed on the white oak restoration work and our Family Forest Carbon Program as areas that would be the most closely aligned with Dianne’s wishes.”

Riley said the white oak work would have resonated with Komminsk because Ohio is an area where the tree grows very well. “The Family Forest Carbon Program is a really compelling vision for AFF’s climate work and for where we’re going in the future,” she added.

“Because AFF had its planned giving program, The Seedling Society, already in place, we were able to have these offerings available to the executors and were able to talk to them about the work her gift would enable us to do,” Riley said.

## **A LIFETIME OF GIVING**

Dianne Komminsk was born and raised in New Bremen, Ohio, the only child of Paul Lewis and Betty Komminsk. She graduated from Duke University in 1966 with degrees in political science, economics and history.

Like her parents, Komminsk was successful in business and active in her community. She founded Micro Fotofile (a microfiche scanning company) and served as director of the American Budget Company for 27 years. From 1997 to 2000, she served as president of the First National Bank in New Bremen, which had been established by her family in 1932. She served on the Board of Directors at the bank for 30 years and was its chair for 20 years.

Komminsk loved art. She was active in the Dayton Art Institute, serving as a Board member and on many of its committees. She was deeply involved in her New Bremen community, and supported the library, schools, police department and life squad.

She took great pleasure in creating and building Komminsk Legacy Park, which she saw as a memorial to her family and the love they had for New Bremen.



# How Legacy Gifts Make a Difference in Family Forests

**T**he generous legacy gift from Dianne Komminsk to the Seedling Society will help fund the Family Forest Carbon Program and AFF's White Oak restoration efforts.

The innovative Family Forest Carbon Program was developed by the American Forest Foundation and the Nature Conservancy. It addresses climate change by providing family and individual forest owners with the guidance, support and funding they need to implement better forest management practices. The improvements they make will increase the carbon sequestered and stored on their land. The captured carbon is measured and verified using a new methodology that ensures the program is providing a true climate benefit. Companies that want to reduce their carbon footprint can purchase these carbon credits from the Family Forest Carbon Program.

The program, which launched in 2021, is open to qualified forest landowners. Participating forest owners can manage their land under Growing Mature Forests, which will focus on sustainable harvesting practices, or Enhancing Future Forests, which will improve new forest growth by controlling invasive species and undergrowth.

The Family Forest Carbon Program, currently open to forest owners in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and five counties in Western Maryland, will expand in 2022 to the Upper Midwest and the Northeast.

AFF's efforts toward White Oak restoration began in 2017 with AFF, the University of Kentucky, and the DendriFund as a way to restore the sustainability of the white oak. AFF works with a diverse group of universities, government agencies, conservation organizations, and industries committed to the long-term sustainability of America's white oak forests. This foundational tree species is found throughout the eastern and central U.S., including Komminsk's home state of Ohio.

White oak forests support extensive plant and animal diversity and provide a critical food source for a variety of wildlife species. They are also an important source of timber for the flooring, cabinetry and wine and spirits industries. But as older white oak trees mature and are harvested, they are not being replaced at a long-term, sustainable rate by new trees. Climate change, invasive insects, and shifts in land management practices have all contributed to the decline. It takes approximately 100 years for a white oak tree to grow to maturity.

Komminsk's commitment to the environment and the natural world was evident during her lifetime and in her will. A significant portion of her estate was donated to charities that supported these causes, including the generous donation to the American Forest Foundation.

## A LONG-LASTING IMPACT

Jameson French, president and CEO of Northland Forest Products Inc. and AFF's Board chair, appreciates the trustees' choice of the Seedling Society for Komminsk's legacy donation. "It's very validating to us that AFF's work, our messaging and our innovative projects around non-industrial and small land-owners, forests and ecosystem services have inspired this kind of support."

Komminsk's gift will make a difference now and in the future.

"Our forests yield benefits like clean air and water that are essential to life for us all. I am excited and grateful that more of us who are not forest owners recognize and support the vital contributions that well-managed forests make to our lives," added Tom Beall, who supported the establishment of the Seedling Society as AFF Board chair in 2019. "Donors like Dianne Komminsk help AFF and its partners deliver the environmental, health and economic benefits that forests provide. As donors, we can find satisfaction in choosing to invest in helping AFF expand efforts to address conservation challenges that impact all of us."

"Family forest owners have a critical opportunity right now—we are finally seeing recognition for the important role that they can play in addressing issues like climate change. To have donors like Dianne who believed in the value of our important climate and biodiversity work and want to ensure that future generations will have the important environment which family forest owners make possible for us everyday, is really humbling and inspiring to me," said Rita Hite.

AFF will recognize Komminsk and her gift at the annual Seedling Society gathering in April. She will also be listed among The Seedling Society donors at AFF's headquarters in Washington, D.C. 🌲

# A Walk in the Woods

## Family Forest Owner Perspectives

BY TOM GRESHAM



## A Special Message from Angela Wells, Director of the American Tree Farm System

In this issue of *Woodland*, we are launching a brand-new set of feature stories that will share more about family forest owners across the United States who are empowered to pursue conservation activities that matter to them. Going forward, each issue of *Woodland* will include 4 profiles of Certified Family Forests and Tree Farms. These stories will display the diversity of objectives, practices, and ecosystems represented within our community that are united by a common thread—the intent to care for land now and into the future. In this issue, you get to learn more about the landowners selected as Regional and National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year for 2021. For future issues, we hope

to highlight a cross-section of landowners from our community, as we know that there are many wonderful stories of stewardship that don't often see the limelight. What makes a good forest owner feature? We want to hear stories with a strong human element, stories about lifelong learners constantly seeking new resources to help them care for their land, stories about people who are undaunted by aspirations that exceed their capabilities because they know stewardship is a lifelong (and often multi-generational) endeavor. Please reach out to us at [info@forestfoundation.org](mailto:info@forestfoundation.org) if you know a family forest owner that should be profiled, or to give us feedback on this new section of *Woodland*.

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## Don Newell

When Don and Patricia Newell acquired their 250-acre property in Thorndike, Maine, in 1978, they were motivated by a determination to keep the land from falling into uses that were unworthy of it. A man from outside Maine had purchased the property, which totaled closer to 300 acres at the time, and was attempting to divide it into residential lots while leaving small, unsustainable lots for forestry. Don, a native of the area and a real estate agent, recognized the housing lots would not sell and—more importantly—the land represented high quality farmland and forestland that was much better suited to remain undeveloped.



Don Newell says he strives to follow the preamble to the realtor code of ethics by always pursuing “the highest and best use of the land.”





Don Newell takes great pride in the hands-on work he does managing his property in Thorndike, Maine. He believes it is important for him to continuously be learning about best woodland management practices.

Newell stepped in to buy the property when the developer's financial circumstances wobbled, selling the land with the prime soil for farmland and keeping the remaining forestland for his family. In the years since, he's been guided in the management of the property by the same impetus that inspired him to purchase the land in the first place—the preamble to the realtor code of ethics, which begins, "Under all is the land. Upon its wise utilization and widely allocated ownership depend on the survival and growth of free institutions and of our civilization. Realtors should recognize that the interests of the nation and its citizens require the highest and best use of the land."

"It's something I take very seriously," Newell said. "I try to live by it every day."

As part of that, Newell has perpetually sought to seek out resources and experts to help him be as good a steward of his woodland as possible. Newell points to a birth defect that left him with a "flat" foot as part of the inspiration for his headlong pursuit of forestry success. From a young age, the physical challenges associated with the foot taught him to always be considering his strengths and how to "lean on them." He grew up to run a marathon and to spend hours first thing in the morning and on weekends traversing across his property, forever looking for ways to help it thrive.

Newell said working on his land has become an important mental exercise for him that replenishes him and refreshes him for the challenges of his day job. He loves to get up early, go work on his woodlot for a few hours, shower, and then dive into the intricacies of working with buyers and sellers of residential properties.

"I'm addicted to it," Newell said.

In recent years, Newell thinned 20 acres for high-quality stems and released crop trees on

50 acres for robust crown development. With the help of forester Rob Nelson, Newell planted 2,500 spruce seedlings in a 10-acre clearcut in 2018 and 150 spruce in a two-acre clearcut in 2019. Each spring, he transplants 300 spruce seedlings from his woodlot to a small rocky field behind his house for Christmas trees, a wildlife thicket, and pole-sized timber. Even after 40-plus years of ownership, Newell said he's still learning and searching.

"There's plenty for me to do to improve my woodlot," Newell said. "And I'm going to keep at it."

Through it all, Newell has aimed to make his property a place where the public can come for recreation—from hiking to cross-country skiing—to find the energy and peace in it that he finds there. In this way, he said, they become owners of the land, too. He recalls encountering a woman on a hike who thanked him for the opportunity to enjoy the property. She'd been thinking about what the most appropriate word to describe the place was.

She told him she'd decided the best word was "magical."

Newell had grinned at her and nodded. "That's a good word for it."

## Foots Parnell

Leighton "Foots" Parnell had been missing a lot of church, and his minister had noticed. After one Sunday service, his minister asked Parnell about it. Parnell explained that he had been watching the livestream of the services at Foothills Farm, the 648-acre Alabama Tree Farm where he now spent most weekends. The property, located about 75 minutes from his Birmingham home, has been in his family for generations, and he loved it there.

His minister understood. "You're out there renewing your soul," he said.



Parnell smiled. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

Parnell's property has been in the family in some form or fashion since "before Alabama was a state," he said. The land is marked by a diverse array of hills, valleys and flat areas. Parnell and his wife, Allene, built a cabin on the property in 2006, and they also installed a gazebo on a hilltop that offers stunning 15-mile views and a perfect place to end the day at dusk, often in the company of deer and other creatures. A feeder below the cabin in an open field attracts a variety of wildlife. Parnell calls it his "field of dreams."

"This property is extraordinarily special to me and my family," Parnell said.

Parnell learned a love for the outdoors when he was a child, largely due to the influence of a grandfather who was an avid outdoorsman. After his father died and Parnell took over management of the property, he sat down with Allene and they studied topographical maps of the land. His father, a physician, had not been active on the farm, so "we were starting from scratch," he said.

"All the roads had been washed away or were covered with foliage, and there were no green fields," Parnell said. "Today we have 20 green fields, lots of trails, and a great road system that goes all throughout the property. It's been fun to see our progress, and it's been very rewarding. We're doing what's right for the property, and I get a lot of gratification from that. Everything about it excites me."

Parnell said a strong approach to conservation is at the core of everything he does with the farm. He has worked with the Alabama Forestry Commission to develop conservation plans – he is on his second 10-year plan – and he said "we have followed them to a tee." He has enrolled in a range of USDA programs that have "helped immensely," he said.

Because of "sandy, loamy, gravelly soil," Parnell said Foothills Farm is particularly conducive to longleaf pines. A recent major project was planting 40 new acres of longleaf pines, approximately 622 trees per acre. The Parnells also had a prescribed burn of 250 acres to control underbrush and restore nutrients in the soil.

Looking ahead, Parnell said his next major challenge is managing the approximately 150 to 200 acres of loblolly pines that his father planted about 25 years ago.

"We've selected the harvesting of those trees so they're spread out beautifully on the property, but they're beginning to die and I'm going to have to replace them," Parnell said. "We're working on a



Allene and Leighton "Foots" Parnell at the driveway entrance to Foothills Farm, their 648-acre Alabama Tree Farm. The couple built a cabin on the property and love spending time there.



Foots Parnell and his grandson investigate the new longleaf pine growth resulting from a recent prescribed burn on the Foothills Farm property. Parnell is on his second 10-year conservation plan with the Alabama Forestry Commission for the property.

plan to determine the best way to systematically harvest some of the loblollies and replant with longleafs so that we will have some growth on the longleafs as the loblollies die."

Both small and large challenges excite Parnell, and he revels in every new step he takes to strengthen his farm.

"Even if I don't see any immediate benefit from it, I still get gratification from knowing that I'm doing the right thing," Parnell said. "I'm not in tree farming to make money. I'm in tree farming to do what is right for this land."



## Taylor Family Elk Cave Farm

Scott Taylor remembers visiting a poplar tree stand with his father, Clifton, in 1972, on their Tree Farm, Elk Cave Farm, in Gravel Switch, Kentucky. It was a productive site, but the trees were overstocked and experts advised the family to remove some of the understory to help the crop trees. That's just what they did. Scott was 14 at the time, but he still vividly remembers that day when the decision was made.

In February of this year, Scott stood in that same track of timber, evaluating the mature poplar there and considering the next management activity for the space. The connections to that day with his father 50 years ago resonated with him, as did the powerful opportunity to continue the legacy that long-ago experience represented: managing the land to do what was best for it.

Clifton and his late wife, Barbara, started Elk Cave Farm with the acquisition of 287 acres in 1959, the start of what would eventually grow to become 1,076 acres of certified hardwood forestland, but the family's connection to the land goes back much further. The property today encompasses several parcels owned and farmed by previous generations of family members. Clifton, who is in his early 90s, has passed on management of the land to his sons, Scott and Steve.

A multigenerational commitment helps sharpen a focus on long-term thinking, Steve said. Clifton and Barbara taught Steve and Scott to emphasize what was best for the land, even if the greatest benefits were not apparent until you were no longer around to enjoy them.

"This is our home," Scott said. "It's not just a place where we're cutting timber to make money this week. That's something that Mom and Daddy instilled in us – this is where we're from, and this land is our connection to our history. So we look at it that way. There's that strong emotional hook, and that guides us in the management decisions that Steve and I make just like they drove the decisions that Mom and Dad made 40, 50, 60 years ago."

Clifton and Barbara were both extension faculty members in the Kentucky and Florida university systems and accustomed to turn to academic and nonacademic experts for the insight and knowledge to strengthen their land management practices. One of Clifton's driving interests was regenerating white oak on the land to foster long-term forest health.



Clifton Taylor Tree Farm: Clifton Taylor and his late wife, Barbara, emphasized a multigenerational commitment to Elk Cave Farm, the family's 1,076-acre property in Kentucky. The farm was certified by the American Tree Farm System in 1972.

The Taylors have worked with Christopher Will, a consulting forester, on the effort. Will said Clifton was a focused, determined force.

"He was willing to do whatever it took to set the stage so that when the time came to harvest some of these beautiful oak hickory forests that he would increase the probability that he could replace them with another stand of oak hickory," Will said. "And he did that. Clifton never gave up. Even when there were challenges and setbacks, he was always determined to figure things out. He always went forward."

As an example of the far-sightedness that marked his parents' management of Elk Cave Farm, Steve points to his parents' decision in 1972 to join the American Tree Farm System and then more recently secure Forest Stewardship Council certification, becoming one of the first private landowners in Kentucky to earn that achievement.

A half-century later, the Taylors are seeing more and more buyers who value that distinction and are seeking FSC-certified or PEFC-certified wood. For instance, it was key to Elk Cave Farm becoming the first white oak log supplier to Irish Distillers Ltd. for the production of PEFC-certified whiskey barrels in the United States.

"They wanted wood for their barrels that was sourced from sustainably managed forests," Steve said. "Our parents were visionary in that sense. They jumped on this long before everyone realized it would be important, and we're benefiting from it today." 🌲

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

Join **the Giving Tree**, the American Forest Foundation's monthly giving society, today! By becoming a monthly donor, you can help us to overcome our nation's most pressing conservation challenges in ways that support America's family forest owners. Members of the Giving Tree are a critical element to creating a steady, reliable source of funds that enables the American Forest Foundation 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, water bottles and more.

Joining is an easy and convenient way to ensure you are making an even bigger, sustaining impact on the work we're accomplishing! Sign up today and receive a special AFF hat!\* Visit [forestfoundation.org/givemonthly](http://forestfoundation.org/givemonthly).

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

Curtis Barnett  
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**If you have any questions, please contact Bethany Mueller, AFF's Donor Relations Manager, at (202) 852-7520.**

*\*Must make four consecutive monthly gifts of at least \$25 or at least one \$100 gift in order to qualify.*



# You Can Leave a Legacy of Forest Stewardship for Future Generations

Are you looking to put your donation to work throughout or beyond your lifetime? The American Forest Foundation is happy to collaborate with you to design a meaningful gift opportunity which will make a lasting impact and fulfill your estate planning needs.

**The Seedling Society** is a new approach to legacy planning connecting your passion for forest conservation with a path to ensure its future.

Find out more at [forestfoundation.org/plannedgiving](http://forestfoundation.org/plannedgiving).

1. Learn how your gift will provide resources for stewardship solutions for the future.
2. Discover how a gift honors your stewardship values and supports your legacy planning.
3. Consider joining The Seedling Society, a recognition community for others who have similar goals as you in their estate planning.
4. Share with us what's on your mind. We want to partner with you!

## Share Your Plans with Us!

If you have included the American Forest Foundation in your estate plans, please let us know. We would like to thank you for your generous commitment to supporting family forest owners and our nations' ongoing conservation efforts and welcome you to the Seedling Society!

**Beth Riley, Director of Philanthropy**  
**(402) 983-0655**



American  
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The Seedling Society



"We worked hard, we saved our money, and invested wisely. Now we're thankful to be where we are. We're not going to live forever, but **we want our forests to make a difference.** We want to make a long-term investment in the planet. And we trust the staff at AFF. They are impeccable people. They're honest, innovative and intellectual."

—Salem & Dianne Saloom,  
Seedling Society Founding Members  
Evergreen, AL