

South Carolina FARMER

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South Carolina's BIGGEST CROP

In More Ways Than One

By Larry Chesney
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They're all around us. Even in the suburbs and the cities, they're scattered here and there, their branches reaching up to the skies, their roots solidly entrenched in the earth. Trees. All shapes and sizes, they provide cool shade, clean air and water, natural beauty, and food for wildlife. But out in the country, away from the neighborhoods and tall buildings, broad expanses of trees provide much more. Those forests are big business in South Carolina.

Gene Kodama is the director of the South Carolina Forestry Commission, or as the position is commonly referred to, the South Carolina State Forester. He's been there since 2008, leading the agency that oversees the state's 13 million forested acres.

Below: Russell Hubright (left), an advisor to Farm Bureau's Forestry Committee, and Billy Cate survey a stand on Cate's 1,200 forested acres that he manages for timber production, wildlife, and aesthetics.



Below: Billy Cate pauses during his inspection of a pine plantation.

Opposite: Young longleaf pines sprout up in area that had been clearcut several years earlier.



“Forestry is one of the largest industries in the state,” says Kadoma, “with a nearly 19 billion dollar impact and over 90,000 jobs. It’s huge. As big as tourism. The forest industry and agriculture together total over \$40 billion in economic impact. That’s larger than any other industry grouping.

“About 88 percent of the state’s forests is owned by private individuals,” he pointed out. “And two-thirds of this is owned by family forest landowners with an average acreage of 80 acres. These private lands produce about 95 percent of the wood that the state’s timber industry uses and it supports about 95 percent of the jobs.”

Billy Cate of Eastover manages one of the many family-owned timber tracts in the state. His farm has been producing trees successfully for more than 65 years.

“I’m a second generation tree farmer,” says Cate. “It was around 1950 when my father enrolled in the Tree Farm program. He was South Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year back in 1979.”

Cate took over the farm some time back and was named the 2016 Tree Farmer of the Year. “I’m a second generation legacy in that capacity,” he adds, “which is kind of cool.”

The Cates have tried a variety of crops over the years, but forestry has always paid the majority of their bills. One of the reasons they’ve been successful with their forestry is that they’ve had a long-term plan going in.

“I think every landowner needs to prioritize what his goals are when managing a farm of any kind,” Cate notes. “In our case, our number one priority is timber production. Number two is wildlife management. And number three is aesthetics. We would never make a management decision without considering all three.

“For instance, we might not do a particular timber harvest that makes good economic sense simply because we don’t think it would look good.”

Cate says they take a lot of pride in the appearance of their 1,200-acre farm. Of that area, 1,100 acres are in loblolly and longleaf pines, and a variety of hardwoods. The loblollies are intensively managed as a crop with regular thinnings and eventually, clearcuts.

Cate realizes that another landowner might have different priorities. “They might not need the money,” he says. “It might not be important to them.”

Based on his priorities, his farm is right where Cate wants it. “Our forest is self-sustaining, meaning we’re able to harvest something every year. It may be a thinning. It may be a clearcut. We always have timber tracts of different ages . . . always something ready to be harvested.”

While Cate handles the management of the farm, he trusts a professional forester to make most of the recommendations.

“We spend a day per year riding through the farm, deciding what the next projects are going to be,” says Cate. “Whatever we decide to cut, the forester contacts timber buyers, and they contract a logger. The forester oversees the job to make sure it’s done right. And he makes sure I’m getting the right price. I’ve always felt it was worth the expense to pay a professional to oversee that process. His commission more than pays for itself.”

Charles Buist got his start in South Carolina’s forestry industry in 1973. He retired from the International Paper Company around eight years ago. Today, he manages his own 110 acres of pine trees near Greenwood. And despite his retirement status, Charles is a hands-on manager.

“On my 110 acres I do what needs to be done myself,” he says. “I planted some trees in 2004 and some in ’09. I’ll probably wait until the first planting is 18 years old before I do any thinning.”

Buist is president of the Greenwood County Farm Bureau and a member of the Farm Bureau Forestry Committee, so he stays on top of the industry in South Carolina.



“We have lobbyists in Washington and in Columbia to help make sure the Forestry Commission gets the funding they need to buy equipment, to fight wildfires, and to do replanting on clearcuts. We just want to see these tracts, large ones and small ones, planted in pines and put back into production.

“Our main priorities,” Buist concludes, “are to keep the Clemson Extension Service and the Forestry Commission going strong.”

Reg Williams of Edgefield is co-owner of Log Creek Timber Company along with his brother and sister. “My dad started in the timber business in ’84,” said Williams, “so our family has been in it for quite awhile.”

Today they procure wood from individual landowners and corporate landowners, then have it harvested and hauled to the mills. Williams was an Ag-Econ major at Clemson and says none of them are “educated” foresters, but they have credentialed foresters working for them.

Williams is chairman of the South Carolina Forestry Association, which represents all aspects of the timber industry, from the landowners to the timber harvesters to the consultants to the mill people.

“We have different goals,” he explains, “but we work together to fight for the rights of the timber industry, which entails lobbying plus watching rules and regulations that might affect the timber industry. We want to make sure that we will always have healthy, abundant, and well-managed forests.

“We also work hand-in-hand with other organizations like the South Carolina Forestry Commission and the Cooperative Clemson Extension Service, as well as the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, to support what they do. Things ranging from fighting wildfires to assisting forest landowners for the betterment of forestry.”

Williams goes on to say that South Carolina is unique in that it has a voluntary rulebook of best management practices that is implemented and supported by the industry and monitored by the state’s Forestry Commission.

“In South Carolina, we do a great job of following these guidelines,” says Williams. “It keeps us in compliance with state and federal laws, and at the same time helps us protect the environment.”

Just to be on the safe side, best management practices (BMPs) are monitored by the South Carolina Forestry Commission. The SCFC actually picks out logging sites randomly, then makes inspections to be certain the BMPs are being abided by.

“These rules include the Streamside Management Zones, which states that good stewardship on our forest lands includes the protection of the water quality of nearby streams, lakes, and ponds,” says Williams.

Russell Hubright is a forester with the commission and an advisor to Farm Bureau’s Forestry Committee. He explained that his first priority is to lend a hand to timber growers large and small.

“We have eighteen foresters who provide assistance to landowners across the state,” says Hubright. “We’ll help them draw up a plan that aligns with the goals they’ve set for their property.”

Hubright notes that on a statewide level, the commission works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Services Agency, Farm Bureau, National Wild Turkey Federation, and the U.S. Forest Service.

“I also work on regional issues,” he says. “For example, we’ve been trying to decide what our position should be on the northern long-eared bat, which is listed as a threatened species. How we can advise our landowners to manage their land in a way to keep this species from going extinct?”

“All of our foresters have some wildlife background education, whether they are graduates of Clemson, North Carolina State, or Georgia. Active timber management involves good wildlife management,” Hubright says. “For instance if a tract of woods is left unmanaged, it may become an impenetrable mass. The canopy leaves nothing on the ground but basically pine straw and leaves.

“So a form of active management would be to thin those trees. That encourages the remaining trees to grow better, become more resistant to diseases, and be less likely to burn up in a fire because there’s less tree-to-tree contact. That also gets some sunlight to the forest floor, which really helps to

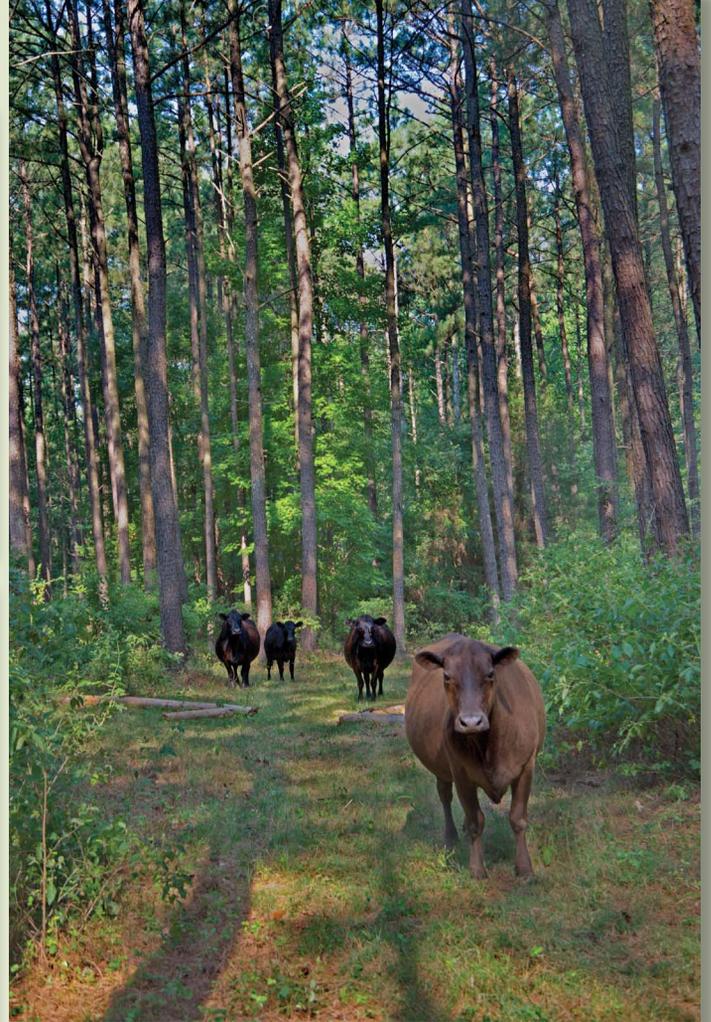


Reg Williams uses a coin to determine a tree's size on his land near Edgefield. Holding the coin, Williams extends his arm, and if the trunk extends beyond the coin, the tree is probably large enough to be harvested.



Williams (left) and Russell Hubright observe a thinning operation on a stand of loblolly pine at his Log Creek Timber Company. The poles are stacked to keep moisture build-up to a minimum.





Posey Copeland, vice chairman of the Farm Bureau Forestry Committee, raises beef cattle on his forested land in Laurens County. He keeps the donkeys to protect his calves from coyotes.

promote wildlife habitat. Deer, turkey, and migratory birds as well as the non-game species – all benefit.”

“It’s fairly easy to manage for both timber and wildlife,” Hubright adds. “When we ask our members ‘what would you like to have as the products of your land-holdings?’ most will answer, ‘I need to produce timber because I need to pay the taxes. But I also enjoy either seeing or hunting wildlife.’ The two simplest practices to help them achieve those goals are thinning and prescribed burning.”

He emphasizes the need for habitat diversity. “Variety is the spice of life for a lot of wildlife species,” he says.

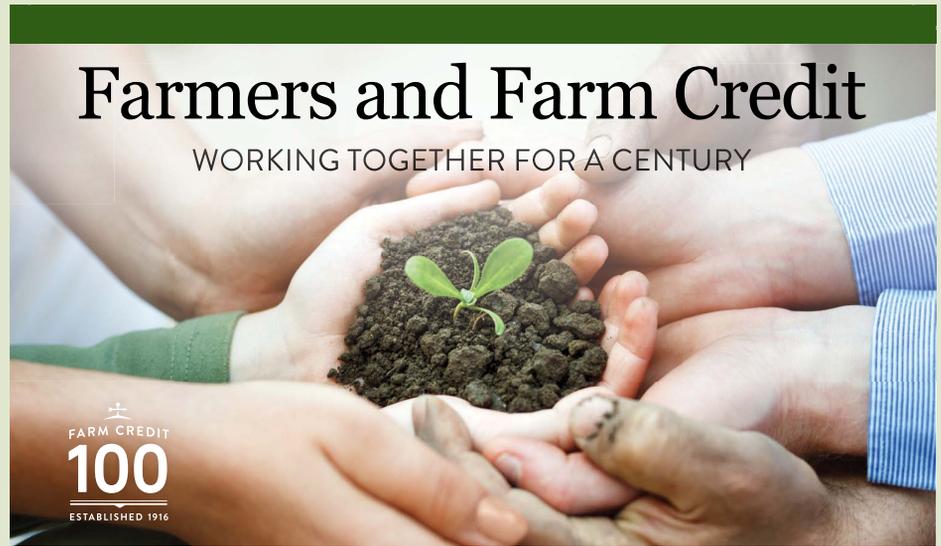
Russell considers the Farm Bureau to be a strong partner because they often go to bat for the South Carolina Forestry Commission at the legislature.

“One of the issues that came up in the legislature recently,” he notes, “was the Trespasser Responsibility Act. This protects landowners who face lawsuits because someone trespassed on their land and fell into a stump hole or something like that. So that’s where we align with Farm Bureau closely – working together to try to get some legislation that makes sense for the private landowners.”

“So my focus is really on the landowners,” Hubright says, “and how to help them meet whatever their objectives are, whether it’s timber or wildlife or recreation, or just a nice place to go for a walk in the woods.”

Billy Cate summed up forestry best when he talked about life on a tree farm.

“We take a lot of pleasure in our timber tracts,” Cate says. “It’s just a great place to live.”



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