



Albert Coffey, CF, RF:

GROWING TREES

‘It’s What I Do’

BY AMANDA MURPHY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, NCFCA

In October, John Hatcher and I took a short, but extremely foggy drive to Bailey, NC — about 10 miles east of Zebulon — to interview Albert Coffey. Coffey has been a landowner member of the NCFCA for more than 17 years. When we pulled up to his gated property, named Turkey Creek Tree Farm, Coffey was waiting for us with bug spray in hand. The farm is 64 acres total, with a 16-acre crop field.

“We manage the tract for multiple uses, and it’s certified under the American Tree Farm System,” Coffey said. “Land ownership is really land stewardship because we are merely custodians for our lifetimes.”

After our walking tour of the land, Coffey grabbed three waters and three camp chairs from the back of his pickup truck, and we sat down to complete the interview. We all took time to listen to the sounds of the woods surrounding us. The sun began to break up the fog, and it was pleasant to sit outside and experience the glory of the work others do in sustainably managing North Carolina’s forests.

Q: Tell me about yourself. Our records show you’ve been an NCFCA member since 2004.

A: I am a retired forester, having spent my career with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. Actually, I spent the first 19 years working as a soil conservationist in five locations in North Carolina and Virginia. In 1989, I moved to Raleigh to work as Staff Forester for the state, and in 1995 I began work as Staff Forester for both North and South Carolina. I retired from the agency in 2003, and have done some “lightweight” consulting since then, including a short assignment as Circuit Rider Forester for the American Forest Foundation in a group of Piedmont counties. More recently, I have spent much of my time managing our small forests in Avery, Franklin, and Nash counties. At this point, that is about all I have the energy to do, but it’s a lot of fun. In addition, it is rewarding to think we will be leaving some well-managed land to our children and grandchildren at some point in time.

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Q: What was your original reason for joining the NCFA?

A: My original reason for joining the NCFA was to become part of the larger forestry community following my retirement. I have enjoyed being a member of the Forest Management Committee and hearing viewpoints from representatives of industry, consulting, university, and agencies, as well as landowners. Taking part in discussions of issues facing our profession has enabled me to make better decisions for properties that we manage.

Q: What sustainability measures do you take?

A: As a former soil conservationist, my first priority is preventing soil erosion and maintaining soil structure. When harvesting, I had the loggers use one skid trail to bring everything back to the log deck in order to confine compaction to one road. My viewpoint is that if I protect the soil and keep it in good health, then Mother Nature will take care of many of the sustainability issues. Thinning is a sustainability measure because it protects the health of the residual forest, reducing the risk of Southern Pine Beetle infestation. Thinning provides a health benefit so trees are less susceptible to pests. Another sustainability measure we have is the filter strip, which is a water quality measure. We install water bars to prevent erosion. I manage the land to minimize erosion and compaction. On the last three harvests we did, we worked with a logger with low ground pressure equipment, which is great for helping to prevent compaction even on Piedmont soils.

Q: Are there economic reasons for taking these measures?

A: If soil is healthy, trees will be healthy and they'll grow well. If the soil is shallow, degraded, or compacted, then the roots won't penetrate if bulk density gets above a certain level. Healthy soil means more tree growth and better tree survival. When roots grow deep, you have a higher survival rate. A thinning in forest

management produces income, and allows residual trees to grow better. My objective is to harvest trees between 43 and 46 years in order to maximize the saw timber volume of the tree.

Q: Do you support the local community?

A: Yes. This tract has significant water quality benefits for the City of Wilson since they are an adjacent landowner. Wilson uses Buckhorn Reservoir, immediately downstream from my land, as their primary source of water. Keeping land in crops and forests is a direct benefit. Harvesting trees generates jobs, which also benefits the community.

Q: Why do you grow trees?

A: It's what I do.


Q: What is the importance of reforesting tracts?

A: Mother Nature will fill a void. You don't have to replant in terms of keeping land in forests. Something will come back. In terms of reforestation, it is important to generate the forest you would like to have. What kind of forest do you value? You need to put emphasis on reforestation in order to harvest what you value.

Q: Over your lifetime, how have you seen genetics change?

A: Forty-fifty years ago if you went into a natural stand of loblolly, you'd see a lot of sweep and crook. Improved first- and second-generation loblolly have been a godsend in regards to form, quality, and the value of the timber product. What I'm talking about isn't advanced genetics; just selection alone has reduced sweep, crook, and fusiform, and gotten it out of the stands, which is a blessing to the forestry community. I have two primary requirements when buying seedlings: form or straightness and fusiform resistance. ■



 Albert Coffey and John Hatcher discuss the benefits of keeping land in crops and forests.