



## ALLEN PLASTER: Tree Farm Advocate & Landowning NCFA Member

BY AMANDA MURPHY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, NCFA

**I**n October, I took a two-hour drive east of our offices to Trenton, NC to meet with Allen Plaster, long-time industrial and consulting forester here in North Carolina. I'm used to driving up to sawmills, cabinet companies, and other industrial-looking sites, but this time I pulled up in the driveway of the Plasters' home.

The Plasters have a nice, fenced-in garden where they grow all kinds of produce. (After the interview, Plaster's wife Karen sent me home with an entire grocery bag's worth of kale.) I'm not sure if it's the forestry industry or folks in North Carolina or both, but I felt at ease at the Plasters' home and am grateful for being welcomed into this community of folks who care about forestry and the land in our state.

**Q:** Tell me about yourself and your role in forestry in North Carolina. When did you get involved in NCFA?

**A:** I followed my father into the forestry profession and graduated from NC State University with a BS in Forest Management in 1968. My first job was with Albemarle Paper Company in Roanoke Rapids, NC, where I evaluated thinning regimes using time and motion studies. I joined Weyerhaeuser in Plymouth, NC that same year. After various training/learning assignments, I started my first real job as Forestry Foreman and, over the next 17 years, had a number of assignments in just about all aspects of industrial forestry, except wood procurement. In 1985, Weyerhaeuser parted ways with me in a major restructuring. After an unsuccessful job search, consulting forestry called and I eventually formed my own firm, named Comprehensive Forestry Services because I wanted to offer private landowners everything they needed to manage their land successfully. I sold my business in 2011, but continued working through 2014. My role in forestry in North Carolina has been as an industrial forester and a

consulting forester, but always on the forest management side of things. My volunteer role was a bit more varied.

I have always thought of my volunteer role as a way of broadening my horizons through contact with peers in other parts of the state and the profession. I wanted to be a positive influence on forestry practiced here in our state. The NCFA was my first venture into being a volunteer participant; I guess it's been around 45 years now. I also am a member of the Society of American Foresters (NC Division Chair 2004 and Fellow 2007), Association of Consulting Foresters (President of the NC Chapter 2000-2001), Governor's Forestry Advisory Council (Vice Chair 2007-2015), NC Tree Farm Program (current President), the Working Lands Trust Board of Directors (2019+), and the Forest Landowners Association. I have enjoyed all of these efforts and hope I have indeed been able to move the needle a bit in the right direction.

**Q: What was your original reason for joining the NCFA? What does it mean to you to be involved with our association?**

**A:** The original reason I joined the NCFA was that Weyerhaeuser encouraged employees to participate in both community and professional organizations. I saw my involvement in the NCFA as an opportunity to make an impact on forest policy while getting to meet and know forestry professionals from across the state. Being on the board since 2000 and on the Executive Committee (2010-2014, President 2013) was both challenging and satisfying. As an association, we came through a tough couple of years better and stronger than we were going in. Not too bad for an organization that is anything but monolithic! The thoughtful discussions and deliberations through that period gave me a new appreciation for the leadership shown by all of the executive committees and the boards that pulled the association through. It was a pleasure to serve with them. And the NCFA annual meetings are still a lot of fun.

**Q: Why do you grow trees?**

**A:** I grow trees because it is a good, positive thing to do — economically, socially, and environmentally. When I became a consulting forester, the environmental and social aspects of forestry became more apparent and important to me. Private landowners have

a wide variety of reasons for owning their land and of management goals/objectives. Economic return is not necessarily at the top of their list. As a consultant, I had to think like a landowner in order to provide my clients sound, professional advice. I became a more rounded and certainly a “greener” forester. Now my tree growing has equal objectives of taking care of wood, water, wildlife, and recreation.

**Q: Tell us about the NC Tree Farm Program and its connection to the NCFA. Why is Tree Farm important to landowners?**

**A:** The Tree Farm sign pretty much says it all: “Wood, Water, Wildlife, and Recreation.” Originally, Tree Farm was a recognition program and really had no requirements for membership other than land ownership. The first Tree Farm sign was erected on Weyerhaeuser land in 1941 in cooperation with the American Forest Council's new American Tree Farm System (ATFS) program. Because of the industry focus, organizations like state forestry associations became the local ATFS sponsors. That is true of the NCFA-ATFS relationship. From 1945 until the early 1990s, the NCFA supported the Tree Farm program directly. But the program was faltering and after several years of revival attempts, the NCFA dropped support and the program went dormant. In the early 2000s, a small, diverse group of landowners, foresters, and natural resource professionals began work to revive the program as both a recognition and certification program. Today, the NC Tree Farm Program (NC TFP) is no longer directly associated with the NCFA but does receive financial and indirect support. The program currently has about 800 certified Tree Farms with about 215,000 acres and more than 100 trained inspectors under the 2021 Standards of Sustainability of the American Tree Farm System. We have a new member benefits program, a college scholarship program for Tree Farmer children or grandchildren, and we offer webinars, short “how to” videos on YouTube, a Tree Farm management plan binder, and workshops/tours. By being certified, NC TFP landowners can provide third-party-certified sustainably grown wood to markets worldwide.

But most Tree Farmers would tell you that the biggest member benefit is being part of a like-minded community of landowners and the interaction they have with other Tree Farmers.

**Q: What sustainability measures do you take?**

**A:** The sustainability measures I take relative to the environment have evolved over time. My wife and I are certified Tree Farmers. We chose this route because we believe that forest management has tremendous potential to provide healthy economic returns while simultaneously enhancing environmental benefits to society, even on 46 acres in eastern North Carolina. In addition to adhering to environmental laws, regulations, and best management practices, we are actively working to restore longleaf pine, improve and enhance habitat for bobwhite quail and wild turkey, restore natural drainage patterns, eliminate erosion issues, provide pollinator and amphibious species habitat, and improve recreational opportunities.

**Q: Are there economic reasons for taking these measures?**

**A:** Yes, there are economic benefits to our sustainability measures. Procurement foresters are not inclined to reveal what factors go into their stumpage value calculations, but most companies are trying to conform to sustainability standards required by their customers and therefore require that a percentage of their supply be certified. How much that translates to value to the landowner is unknown. It is implied that certified wood is more desirable and therefore more valuable. On the non-timber side, society is slowly coming to appreciate the value of land for the benefits it produces — such as wood, water, wildlife, recreation. I believe we will see more value placed on these societal values in the next decade or so.

**Q: How do you support the local community?**

**A:** I prefer to volunteer and support the local community where I see the need. Karen and I volunteered at the “Filling Station” food pantry in Pollocksville following Hurricane Florence for about three months. The need was great even before Florence flooded Pollocksville. Karen wound up serving on the board and suggested a fundraiser: “Jones County — A Perfect 10”. In addition to six other sites, we made our Tree Farm available for walking tours touting forest management, longleaf pine, naval stores industry, and wildlife management. As needs arise, we help. We have also hosted NC TFP programs at our Tree Farm. ■