



IFCO SEEDLINGS:

Supplying the Southeast Wood Basket

Kristen Fontana, Amy Juliana, Abigail Ridge, and I drove down to Washington, NC in October to interview the International Forest Company (IFCO Seedlings) crew, including:

- **Andrew Stewart**, Genetic Investment Advisor
- **Harris Kelly**, Nursery Manager
- **Rhodes Kelly**, On-Site Container Manager
- **James West**, Nursery Supervisor



Each time we have an opportunity to visit our people, I am overwhelmed by the generosity and welcome we receive. There was a threat of rain on our interview date, so Andrew Stewart and Harris Kelly had prepared a presentation in case we didn't get a chance to tour the company's operations. Fortunately, the rain held off for us and we got a full tour of the bareroot and container operations onsite.

IFCO Seedlings provides high-quality seedlings for a range of clients, including private landowners as well as timber investment management organizations (TIMOs). It produces more than 300 million seedlings annually and around 30% of the regeneration stock for the Southeast wood basket.

The company is a full member of the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Tree Improvement Cooperative and has a robust internal tree improvement program.

Let's dive into the interview with Andrew Stewart. 



“Relationships are what drive business at IFCO Seedlings. From the private landowner with a couple acres to national accounts, we are able to serve all our clients with the same enthusiasm.” — Andrew Stewart

Q: Tell me about yourself! Our records show you joined the NCFA this year.

A: I grew up in the Piedmont — in Rockingham County, NC on a row crop, mainly tobacco and cattle farm. I had a buddy whose family owned and operated a sawmill where I helped and learned the basics in cruising timber. I followed him to Haywood Community College, where I received my Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree in Forest Management Technology. From there, I transferred to NCSU and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Forest Management.

I gained work experience along the way: leading forest work crews at both Haywood and NCSU, performing contract work on the Hofmann Forest, and spending time with the United States Forest Service (USFS) on a wildland fire crew.

After graduation from NCSU, I landed in eastern North Carolina, working for Weyerhaeuser at the Southern regeneration business at the Washington nursery. At that time, my job focused heavily on the production and culture of pine seedlings in the nursery system. My agriculture background and forestry education seemed to marry here and I fell in love with the business. My wife and I left North Carolina in 2016 with our then two-month-old son and moved to Aiken, SC, where I took over as the Eastern Sales Manager and Safety Lead for Weyerhaeuser.

In October of 2018, I had the opportunity to join IFCO Seedlings and manage seedling sales and clients between Virginia and the Carolinas. Our daughter was born shortly after, and we moved back to eastern North Carolina to be closer to family and more centralized to my client base. My wife would tell you I'm always working, but when I'm not working, I enjoy sports and spending time outdoors with the family — fishing, hunting, and working on the family farms.

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

A: I've been tied to the NCFA since I started my career, but was associated professionally by both Weyerhaeuser and IFCO Seedlings. I joined on as an individual this year to stay more in tune with the direction of the association and better track association communications. My goal was to become a more integral part of bridging the knowledge gap between our link in the North Carolina forest industry as a genetically driven seedling provider and the product purchasers/users.

Q: Tell me about your organization.


A: IFCO Seedlings came under the ownership of the Mobley family in 2004. The operations are headquartered in Moultrie, GA along with our sister company, Mobley Greenhouses. IFCO Seedlings owns and operates multiple bareroot and container nurseries located strategically across the Southeast. Our container nurseries are located in Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina (in progress), and North Carolina, and our bareroot nurseries are located in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina. Our North Carolina nursery is one of our hybrid facilities where we produce both bareroot and container seedlings. A strong network of seed orchards that are set up for production and collection of high-performing open-pollinated and control-pollinated selections supports the broad nursery network. The Mobley family continues to make significant investments into technology, seed-producing complexes, nursery locations, and key personnel.

Q: What is the biggest issue facing your organization today?

A: We, like everyone in the industry, face year-to-year challenges, and most of those piggyback off issues that our clients face. We're normally sowing next year's crop while our client base is still actively planting this year's crop. As a genetically driven seedling provider, we are very specific with our planning process. Our process requires us to ask our reforestation partners to provide us with a forecast of what they will need a year in advance, so as to be able to deploy the best genetics to meet their needs. There are many variables that can affect our partners' plans, which in turn affects our plans. Variables like labor visas, market trends with reforestation, and weather can affect us significantly. Any weather event that slows harvesting has a direct impact on any silviculture practice downstream. If weather slows site preparation, it has the potential to push your planting window late or out completely.

Issues we face externally include awareness and understanding of the forest



 Rhodes Kelly explained cultural inputs for producing superior container stock, from sowing the seeds to shipping them out to clients.

industry, and the “why’s” of what we do. IFCO Seedlings supplies approximately 300 million seedlings for reforestation to about one third of the market. It’s a tremendous responsibility and one we do not take lightly.

Q: What lessons have you learned along the way? Is there anything you would do differently?

A: I’m a firm believer that there is a greater plan for us all other than the one we wake up with in our mind every morning and that every decision, action, or outcome has a purpose. I don’t think that I would do a whole lot differently besides learn earlier from my own mistakes. The lessons I’ve learned along the way encourage me to promote those in and outside our industry, both young and old, to commit to building strong relationships whether your viewpoints and business align 100% or not. We (the forest industry) are a large, diverse group, but also a tightknit, intertwined community. We have to work together.

Q: What sustainability measures does your organization take?

A: What could be more sustainable than producing 50 million +/- seedlings in the state for reforestation? We pride ourselves on the sustainable aspect of what our business harvests on an annual basis. Producing seedlings for reforestation provides jobs, income, and security for landowners and every company in the North Carolina forestry supply chain, from start to finish. We manage our nurseries in a manner that allows us to produce this amount of product year after year on the same footprint. We use packaging supplies for our seedlings that can be recycled, take measures at our facilities to reduce our carbon footprint, and work with local vendors who do the same.

Q: How does your organization support the local community?

A: From the ground up, IFCO Seedlings drives education and the understanding of our role in the supply chain of forest management and the benefits that this brings to future timber stands. We support our client base statewide in giving back during awareness campaigns, where we donate seedlings to help promote education and industry. We provide time and opportunity for Project Learning Tree (PLT) in our local school system and donate seedlings and materials to clients who participate in PLT, as well as other student programs that highlight trees and forestry. We also host nursery tours for groups willing to travel to our nursery in Washington, NC. We support local communities, provide jobs, sponsor youth sports, and engage with local and state forestry associations like the NCFCA. ■

 *Harris Kelly explains the complex bareroot seedling process to the NCFCA staff.*



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