



The New Frontier of the Old South

How Premier Forestry Is Modernizing Site Prep

The NCFA recently sat down with longtime member Seth Ward to learn more about his consulting firm, Premier Forestry.

Based in eastern North Carolina, Premier Forestry is a full-service firm specializing in long-term forest management. Currently managing 35,000 acres, the company represents a diverse portfolio of clients, ranging from industrial landowners to municipalities.

The company's expertise spans management planning, timber sales, inventory management, Present Use Value (PUV), GIS/GPS mapping, and expert witness testimony. Every management plan is tailored to the client's specific objectives and executed strategically, accounting for weather and market fluctuations.


Ward founded the company in 2009, drawing on years of experience in prescribed burning and service as a county forester. After seeing success in those roles, he took

a leap of faith in starting his own firm, eventually buying out another consulting firm just two years later. His passion for forestry is rooted in his family's background in road construction and heavy equipment; by marrying these two worlds, Ward is now paving a new path for site-prep innovation.

When asked what sets Premier Forestry apart, he'll tell you it's all about the equipment they use to carry out their clients' forest management plans.

"One thing we do differently is we provide equipment — skidders, bulldozers for vegetation management, and machinery for mid-rotation herbicide work," said Ward. "Now, we've introduced Swedish site-prep machines to the fleet, and our entire staff is trained to use them."



 Seth Ward experiments with the Bracke P11 planting head (pictured above). He uses the Bracke T35 machine to create the elevated planting surfaces required for Southern pines. There is always room for innovation in site preparation!



A Strategic and Innovative Approach

When Premier Forestry gains a new client, they take the time to learn the lay of that client’s land. Ward’s team determines the landowner’s objectives and charts a path to meet them, whether through prescribed burning, herbicide applications, or navigating the complexities of PUV tax status.

While digital tools have improved accuracy, Ward believes the industry has only scratched the surface.

“Mapping tools have come a long way,” Ward noted. “We’re at a point where you should be able to create a GIS map for a client on the fly, right in the field, rather than back at the office. This real-time data shouldn’t just be for industrial landowners; it should be accessible to everyone.”

Ward analyzes the data he collects to create tailored land prescriptions for his clients. This is especially important for single generation landowners who, on average, will only get to experience one timber harvest in their lifetime.

“Single family landowners have less touchpoints over their rotation age than a large industrial landowner, who has multiple over the course of a year,” said Ward. “With only one harvest, there’s no wiggle room to get it wrong. You have to set them up for success from day one.”

50 Years of Tradition Meets Opportunity

In the U.S. South, there are approximately 210 million acres of timberland, 87% of which is privately owned. Of those acres, over 2.3 million are harvested annually, requiring roughly 900 million loblolly pine seedlings to be planted. Most of these acres require mechanical site preparation, according to ResourceWise.

Ward explained that traditional site prep in the U.S. South hasn’t

BY THE NUMBERS

35,000

Acres managed by Premier Forestry.

1979


The last time traditional Southern site prep saw a major shift.

2.5x

The speed increase of the Bracke T35 over traditional methods.

1

The number of T35 machines currently operating in the American South.

 The Bracke T35 machine is a vital part of Premier Forestry’s site-prep process. The pictures shown demonstrate how the machine creates planting beds for tree regeneration.

market. Unlike traditional tracked dozers, this machine utilizes rubber tires and combines multiple steps into one.

“The Bracke T35 machine allows for a lighter footprint and substantial fuel savings,” said Ward. “We can burn one-third of the fuel and prepare 2.5 times the number of acres per hour compared to traditional site-prep methods.”

Currently, Ward is using the only Bracke T35 machine in the South. While international markets use the tech primarily for scarification (clearing debris), Ward has adjusted the method to create the elevated planting surfaces required for Southern pines.

Proof of Concept

This past November, representatives from Quadco, Bracke Forest, and Komatsu traveled to North Carolina to witness a site-prep demonstration using the Bracke T35 machine. Since the demonstration, Premier Forestry has continued collecting data to prove how this method improves ROI — data they hope will eventually be used to duplicate the model across the region.

“The endgame is to completely innovate site preparation in the South,” said Ward. “We’ve proven the concept this past year. Now we’re ramping up and encouraging other companies to apply this same innovative approach.”

For Ward’s clients, the biggest benefit is the bottom line. The reduction in site-prep costs allows landowners to reinvest capital

fundamentally changed since 1979, despite the many advancements that have been made in logging technologies and seed genetics.

“Typically, a two-pass system using bulldozers is applied to prepare sites for replanting,” said Ward. “The first pass utilizes a large dozer with some kind of blade on the front to move debris out of the way for the second pass, which utilizes a bulldozer pulling a bedding plow. The bedding plow provides tillage and creates an elevated planting surface.”

Recognizing a need to keep pace with modern regeneration demands, Ward sought a “better, faster, cheaper” method. In 2020, he began talking with Bracke Forest (now a part of Komatsu Forestry). Those conversations led to the introduction of the Canada-based Quadco Bracke T35 machine to the Southern

back into forest management. Ward's advice to landowners is simple: don't get distracted by the "glitz" of the harvest.

"Harvesting is the exciting part of the plan," said Ward. "But the growth gains from high-quality site prep and genetics are where you see the fastest ROI. The front end is where you have the most impact on your investment. You can't afford to overlook it."

Looking to the Future

Over the next decade, Ward expects forest management to become increasingly high-tech, utilizing drones for herbicide application and LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) for real-time inventory tracking. He believes the U.S. can maintain its status as a forestry powerhouse by adopting equipment innovations from overseas while sharing our management expertise in return.

However, Ward admits that championing new ideas in a traditional industry can be an uphill battle. "Forestry is a very protected group, and conversations about change can be a challenge," he said. "I find it's best to sit everyone down for an open dialogue. You aren't going to change every acre, but if you can innovate on 25% of them, that is a massive tipping point for a landowner."

Engaging the Next Generation of Forestry Leaders

Ward is also dedicated to ensuring these innovations outlast his own career. Outside of his role at Premier Forestry, Ward teaches an Intro to Consulting Forestry at NC State University. The class is taught by 22 different Association of Consulting Forestry members from across the state, typically with two or three of them co-teaching each session, alongside Department Head Erin Sills.

"I feel honored to be playing a part in bridging the gap between academics and practical forestry," said Ward. "I believe that this forestry course is truly working and moving the needle in preparing students for the forestry industry."

Ward noted that the momentum from this course has caught the attention of other universities. Auburn University and the University of Florida will be introducing a similar model and approach to this course, hoping to duplicate the same results. ■



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