

## **Virginia Tree Farm Program Update**

**By: Shannon McCabe, Virginia Tree Farm Program**

Each time you receive this newsletter, you see the diamond-shaped American Tree Farm System (ATFS) logo on the back panel. Do you recognize it? Do you know what it represents? If you are one of over 1,300 Virginia Tree Farmers, you probably recognize the logo from the large green and white sign displayed on your property. What does it mean to you? Similar questions were asked at a recent meeting of Tree Farmers and other ATFS leaders from around the country. Responses were varied but one common theme emerged: pride. Tree Farmers are proud to manage their woodlands sustainably and foresters are proud to work with landowners doing so. As Administrator for the Virginia Tree Farm Program, I am proud to work among this strong network of individuals dedicated to the sustainability of Virginia's family forests. Whether you have been a proud Virginia Tree Farmer for years or are just learning about the program and interested in joining this great network, I hope you will find this information helpful as you work to sustainably manage your land.

### **What are the American Tree Farm System and Virginia Tree Farm Program?**

ATFS is the largest and oldest sustainable family woodland system in America and a program of the American Forest Foundation (AFF). ATFS is endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification benefiting Tree Farmers by opening doors to markets for certified wood. The Virginia Tree Farm Program is one of 44 state programs working to implement ATFS goals on the ground. Virginia's program is managed by the Virginia Tree Farm Committee, a volunteer group made up of state and private foresters and Tree Farmers.

### **What are the benefits of being a Tree Farmer?**

Just as one landowner's objectives may be different from the next, each Tree Farmer may wish to realize different benefits of the program. Benefits of being a Tree Farmer include but are not limited to:

- **Family Legacy:** Participating in the Tree Farm Program gives families a sense of pride of ownership, which can be passed down generation after generation.
- **Recognition:** Tree Farmers are encouraged to display the familiar green and white diamond-shaped Tree Farm sign as evidence of their commitment to practicing sustainable forestry. Tree Farmers are models for other woodland owners who want to be better stewards of their land. Participation in state, regional, and national Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year programs creates opportunities for even broader recognition of a Tree Farmer's good work.

- **Community:** Tree Farmers promote neighbor-to-neighbor learning and promote stewardship values to sustain America's family forests.
- **Tools and Advice:** Through the Virginia Tree Farm Program and ATFS, landowners have access to online seminars, field days, workshops, online tools, and forest management information. Our local network of volunteers provides on-the-ground support and professional advice to woodland owners.
- **Third-Party Certification:** ATFS is internationally recognized and meets strict third-party certification standards, opening markets for Tree Farm wood.
- **Representation:** ATFS represents the interest of woodland owners to policymakers and educates the public about the role forest owners play in providing all Americans with multiple benefits such as clean air and clean water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and ways to connect children to the natural world.

### **What does it take to become a Tree Farmer?**

Landowners owning between 10 and 10,000 contiguous acres of forestland are eligible to become certified Tree Farmers. Properties must be managed under a written management plan that meets the 2015-2020 ATFS Standards of Sustainability, described below. Tree Farmers must be willing to participate in Standards compliance monitoring procedures should their Tree Farm be selected for inspection. Participation in Tree Farm recognition programs and landowner education and outreach opportunities is also encouraged.

### **What are the 2015-2020 Standards of Sustainability?**

Every five years, the ATFS Standards of Sustainability are updated through a transparent review process. The 2015-2020 Standards were recently approved by The American Forest Foundation (AFF) and went into effect January 1, 2015. As explained by a recent ATFS Certification Update, these revised Standards include key elements to support landowners in achieving their conservation goals including:

- Emphasis on your objectives, as a landowner, and additional guidance in implementing management strategies and techniques to help you accomplish your goals.
- Integrated approaches to help you address forest health and resilience in your woods.
- Increased continuity with global sustainability frameworks and market opportunities, including recognition by the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC).
- Expanded recognition of the work you do implementing your State Forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs) and its benefit for air, water, and soil.
- Additional clarity about how to manage for the protection of threatened and endangered species as required by law.

The 2015-2020 Standards of Sustainability are available on the Virginia Tree Farm program website, listed below.

### **What steps should landowners take as a result of the Standards update?**

If you are a Tree Farmer, this is an excellent time to review your management plan and ensure that it meets the updated Standards. If you are not currently a Tree Farmer, I encourage you to look over and familiarize yourself with the Standards and consider taking the next steps to become certified including creating or updating your management plan. In either case, you may wish to consult your forester during this process or use one of the many online resources available through ATFS such as My Land Plan. As the weather warms up, it's also a good idea to spend time in your woods checking for any changes that may impact your management. Both of these tasks are wonderful opportunities to engage all of those involved or interested in the management of your property, in particular the next generations of forest owners. Establishing connections to the land and its management helps to ensure that informed decisions are made about its future.

### **What's going on in Virginia, specifically?**

The Virginia Tree Farm Committee has been busy working to grow and improve the quality of the Program. We are wrapping up a year-long project to improve the quality of our Tree Farmer database by reaching out to all Virginia Tree Farmers with a request to provide updated contact and Tree Farm information, in addition to providing materials to help ensure their Tree Farms meet the Standards of Sustainability. Our corps of volunteer certified Tree Farm Inspectors continue to work to ensure that Virginia Tree Farms meet the standards, and information is kept up-to-date through required and optional inspections. In addition, our inspectors certified 84 new Tree Farms last year totaling nearly 27,000 acres of sustainably managed forestland. In May, our Committee will undergo a Strategic Planning process to develop and ensure we are able to meet goals that benefit Virginia Tree Farmers and address challenges of financial sustainability, volunteer capacity, and future program growth. As a Committee we are looking forward to the future of the Program and opportunities ahead of us.

### **Interested in becoming a Tree Farmer?**

Visit [www.treefarmssystem.org/virginia](http://www.treefarmssystem.org/virginia) and complete the Prospective Tree Farmer questionnaire.

### **Want more information?**

For more information about the Virginia Tree Farm Program, contact Shannon McCabe at: [vatreefarm@vaforestry.org](mailto:vatreefarm@vaforestry.org) or visit: [www.treefarmssystem.org/virginia](http://www.treefarmssystem.org/virginia).