

Walterboro, SC, Letters to the Editor | Opinion | The Press and Standard

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Program helps black landowners preserve their family farms

Dear Editor:

Since I retired in January 2014, I've become involved in many new activities of which I've learned so much. One program which is near and dear to my heart is the Sustainable Forest Program (SFP), in conjunction with a program to help African Americans retain or keep possession of their lands. The SFP tend to work with those forested landowners with 10 acres or more.



Joe Hamilton

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention is a project of the US Endowment for Forestry and Communities with a goal of creating an enduring system of support for African American forest owners. This effort is designed to increase the value and the profit margins of African Americans who own forestry products (trees) and to strongly promote retention, or keeping, of their forest lands.

“In general, forestlands owned by blacks are not returning their full earning potential” and “black landowners manage forests less intensively than other non-industrial private landowners,” as declared in a 2015 publication by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities.

When not managed properly, the forestland could be seen generally as a liability rather than an asset. Therefore, if the landowner is approached with a fair-sounding offer to purchase the forested land or to purchase the timber on the land, the landowner may only realize the short-term gain. Conversely, the unsuspecting landowner may not see the long-term earning loss because the long-term earning component of forestry ownership had never been realized, explained or taught to all equally.

Landowners may dutifully and faithfully pay the property taxes owed and may announce that they “own some land;” however, the land is not paying them as the land potentially could and should pay if it is managed correctly.

When I started in the Sustainable Forestry Program by way of the Center for Heirs Property Preservation (Center), I too did not have a working knowledge of the forestry industry. However,

since we live and work in a cyber-space info-ready environment, any information that I needed was immediately accessible and through a series of workshops and research. I've become "forestry-savvy" enough to take my story to others in the form of a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. Additionally, I get to address groups about sustainable forestry management for wealth creation (harvesting timber products for profits), land retention (keeping or holding onto the land), and techniques of replanting trees, clearing titles, and estate planning.

I would not be surprised if the average landowner reading this declared, "all of that is going to cost money that I do not have to spend on trees." Well, I wholeheartedly would have agreed until about three years ago, when I met Mr. Sam Cook through the center. Sam, through guidance and mentoring, introduced me to how "the system" worked, and what I've learned has thrust me to a level where I was recognized in the S.C. Tree Farm News as District 7 Tree Farmer of the Year. Although Sam Cook has moved on to greater challenges, the center has since hired a very capable, talented and knowledgeable forester in Mr. Vince Keeler.

I recently rode along with Vince and Dr. Jen Stephens to Columbia, and I left in awe of how their vision for the black forestland owners should be preached and expounded by pastors in every "black church." Vince and Jenny's vision, once fully realized, is one of empowerment of the landowner. This empowerment then translates into parishioners realizing the full potential of their forestlands that can be used as a wealth retention tool (land or forest lands rarely if ever loses its dollar value,) to not only benefit themselves personally, but to also address the needs of young black boys and young black girls who can actively pursue natural resources-type programs when offered in certain colleges and universities. Accordingly, the empowered church member then becomes a greater contributor to the church body, as well as his/her local community.

Another hurdle that I hear often is the whole forestry thing is a "white boys game." I assumed that declaration is based on the fact that was this belief was indeed at one time true!! The few black landowners that I knew of who were reasonably getting some modicum or smidgen of a profit for the wood harvested from their properties had to have some connection to a white person because, quite frankly, we as a people were solidly locked on the outside looking in, but could not participate. I wish I could say that it's all changed, but it has not. The plight of the African American landowners is still very evident because of years of distrust, theft, betrayal, and — well you should get the picture — it is a major hurdle that will not be overcome easily. So how did I overcome this hurdle?

First, I visited with the very generous folks at the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and then the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) who are located in the same building. In both offices, I was treated with the utmost respect and professionalism. (Interestingly, at no time was I served by a minority.) Then, I visited the S.C. Forestry Commission on Sidneys Road and met with the supervisor and a very capable staff of registered foresters. The behavior of this team of people can be a little surprising because of "our" natural propensity to distrust. I can truthfully say, I did not fully

believe they had my best interests at heart.

Kip Terry, and later Michael Broome, were more than concerned about my short-term and long-term plans; in fact, I learned most of what I know from Mr. Terry because of his knowledge not only as a forester, but also his involvement in the law enforcement component.

Finally, to round out the team was a forester who allowed me to “know” the land was mine to manage and that he was there as a resource to aid me in reaching my objective. Vaughn Spearman helped me craft my Stewardship Plan. He is a professional and has a wealth of information to shepherd, guide, teach and develop a strategy to allow my forest lands to be the most rewarding for me, the land owner. Again, at no time was I served by a minority. These were all white men and women assisting and advising me.

I realize that there are still some who do not trust the process. I am now trained, along with others, to be a Woodlands Community Advocate. We are here as a “trusted voice” for those in the community to assist landowners and to offer what worked for us, and to point any landowner in the direction of a profession attorney or forester to develop their productive forestland.

So I make myself available as a forestry evangelist of sorts to share my story about my poor old dad and the opposition he'd faced. I share the stories told to me by my brother, who'd accompany dad on his trips to Waltherboro to “trade” and/or travel in the surrounding area to seek employment. The man literally worked until he could work no more. I worked until I was 60 and did not have to work anymore. So I benefited from Steve Hamilton and the opposition he faced.

My son, my daddy's grandson, is at the level he is in the U.S. Navy because of the sacrifice Steve made and the insults he endured. So if I do nothing, then I am insulting my dad, Steve Hamilton, and his legacy, and I am ridiculing his suffering when I do not pursue the opportunities he longed to experience because he was prohibited by laws from doing so.

Now, however, there are laws and opportunities that are available for me to succeed and make a difference. We can now begin to sing in some corners of America, “We Are Overcoming.”

Joe Hamilton
Green Pond