Moving Forward for Forests

Forests have long covered a third of the land across the United States. A resource often taken for granted, our forests provide Americans with significant benefits that are often forgotten on a daily basis. Forests helps provide the drinking water that comes from your faucet, the clean air you breath when you step out the door and a place for our abundant wildlife to call home. But you can't stop there, forests also support our everyday needs like wood products for homes, furniture, paper, energy and good-paying jobs in rural areas. They even help improve our quality of life, fulfill our need for privacy, allow us space to recreate and give us a connection with nature and its beauty.

Over the past 75 years, these forests, in particular, our family-owned forests, have faced many challenges. Some of these challenges have remained constant – such as the impeding threat of wildfire – while others have evolved as society's needs have changed.

Yet in the face of these challenges, the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) have proven again and again that well-managed family-owned forests can meet Americans' needs generation after generation.

A Brief History of the American Tree Farm System

In the early 1940s, the then American Lumber Manufacturers Association, was faced with pivotal challenges of its time. Westward expansion meant individual landowners eagerly buying up large tracts of land, facing issues such as wildfire, with little education or support to stop it. Yet, the industry needed these forests and the wood supply to provide for a burgeoning society, they needed a solution.

On June 12, 1941, to meet these demands, ATFS was born. A forestry movement founded on the concept that recognizing landowners who practiced good forest stewardship, would encourage their neighbors to do the same, ATFS quickly began to take root. The program immediately proved successful, becoming what has been described as the greatest voluntary forest conservation movement in this country's history. Landowners, who were passionate about the land began joining the movement from west to east, starting long-term relationships and commitments to forest stewardship.

Then in the 1950s, as ATFS hit 7,500 Tree Farmers, partnerships became a large part of the program, with local committees forming of Tree Farmers, state foresters, forest products companies, state associations and consultants coming together in a collective effort to assist family and private landowners with management practices.

In the 1970s, President Nixon declared the first Earth Day, bringing attention to the need to protect our resources such as forests. As environmentalists began questioning the practices of landowners, ATFS stepped forward to prove them wrong, creating a robust standards of sustainability, to provide uniform national standards of good stewardship practiced by the 34,000 Tree Farms across the country at that time. In the 1980's, thanks in part to ATFS, Tree Farmers began taking part in advocacy in Washington, D.C. helping to become a voice for a community that was growing in size and importance.

In 1991, ATFS marked its 50th anniversary, evolving its mission, stressing that good forestry is much more than growing trees for wood fiber, it's also ensuring that forests continue to provide clean water, home for wildlife and space for recreation as well, all of which is exemplified on the ATFS sign today.

In the 2000s, due to global demand for wood fiber and increased brand pressure, ATFS evolved again and began using third-party certification as a tool for providing assurance of its woodland owner's management practices. ATFS soon become endorsed by the global Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC).

Today, ATFS is the largest and oldest program for family-owned woodlands sustaining relationships more than 80,000 Tree Farmers covering 21 million acres of forest.

But our work is not done. Today's challenges have grown in size and scope. New global markets for wood supply are emerging making sustained wood supplies from family-owned lands all the more essential. Clean water supply is a top priority for Westerners, and being threatened by high risk of catastrophic wildfire in forested watersheds. And wildlife species are being threatened by not enough family woodland owners managing their land to conserve and enhance their habitat.

With these threats come new opportunities. ATFS, thanks to its Tree Farmers, volunteers and partners, is primed to once again respond to these issues, and prove that well-managed family-owned forests can meet Americans' needs generation after generation.