



S.C. Representative Chip Limehouse presents Jeff Benton Dennis with the Master Tree Farmer program 2010 Volunteer of the Year award on March 2, 2011 at the state capital along with S.C. Tree Farm Committee Chair Denise Bonnette.

Colleton recognized by S.C. Tree Farm System

By Jeff Benton Dennis

On March 2, 2011 the South Carolina Tree Farm Committee held a Legislative Lobby Day at the state capital in Columbia in conjunction with their 65-year anniversary. The Tree Farm System was created nationally in 1941, and five years later the South Carolina Committee was established, and it is still going strong.

Tree Farm signs at timber tracts and family farms are not uncommon in Colleton County or across the state. The signs are awarded to landowners after the land is inspected by a forestry professional to verify that a sustainable supply of forestry products is being produced while safeguarding the environment. One such Tree Farm inspector is Bob Franklin, who has been with the Clemson Extension in Walterboro for 26 years, and who is nearing retirement.

The Clemson Extension has been a partner in the S.C. Tree Farm since day one, and the Tree Farm website, www.sctfs.org, is actually hosted by Clemson University. Today in South Carolina there are 1,145 certified Tree Farms with approximately 765,000-acres enrolled in the program. Their motto reads Celebrate America's Family Forests: Wood, Water, Recreation and Wildlife.

Colleton County was among the very first to have family farms sign up for the S.C. Tree Farm status, with Mr. Madison Howell registered as Number Six on the state roster. Number Sixty-one on the S.C. Tree Farm list is registered to my grandfather, Heyward Benton, who was a forester and sportsman in Colleton County.

With a current timber inspection completed by Bob Franklin, Snipe Hill on Benton Farm Road has remained enrolled in the Tree Farm program. As caretaker and timber manager for my family's property that has been passed down through the generations for 200 years, I have sought continuing education in the classroom and experienced hands on learning in the field.

Completion of Clemson Extension classes like Master Tree Farmer and Master Wildlifer, along with timber management partnerships with the American Forest Foundation and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, have brought sound forestry practices to Snipe Hill. Local involvement is also a key, and Snipe Hill is an affiliate member of the Colleton Soil and Water Conservation District.

After raising awareness about forestry practices among private landowners for years, I was recognized at the Legislative Day as the Master Tree Farmer 2010 Volunteer of the Year, and I was proud to be representing a small family farm from Western Colleton County. “We are proud to have Jeff Dennis as part of our community as an advocate for forestry,” said Denise Bonnette of York, S.C. Tree Fame Committee Chair.

Influenced by the Tree Farm program and mentored by Tree Farmers like Johney Haralson of Denmark, I founded a private landowner group for Colleton County in the summer of 2008. PL-ACE, or Private Landowners of the ACE, came about because of my deep roots in Colleton, a county that is defined by hundreds of small farms just like Snipe Hill.

Colleton County has about 502,000-acres of forestland, which is roughly 74% of the county. Only Berkley County has more forestland in S.C. and Colleton should embrace its rural aesthetics. PL-ACE wants to help landowners communicate in unison about forestry practices and conservation concerns. In 2007 Colleton County led the state in Timber Products Output, and continued sustainable forestry practices are part of the future for our sensitive ACE Basin.

Bob Scott is the Executive Director of the South Carolina Forestry Association (SCFA) and he said, “The numbers are impressive but what is encouraging is the potential to expand agribusiness through proper planning and marketing.” Scott has been a tireless leader at SCFA for 41-years and will retire this June and move to his home on Edisto Beach. Scott has supported the formation of PL-ACE and Bob Franklin has agreed to help create a roster of landowners that wish to join PL-ACE.

Why Now?

As a forestry association for Colleton, PL-ACE members would primarily discuss topics like prescribed fire, wildlife habitat management, timber management strategies, and hunting and fishing stories too. But perhaps with the recent decrease in zoning voted on and approved by Colleton County Council for the 2010 Land Use Plan, and a proposed SCE&G coal ash landfill in Cottageville, county landowners might wish to express their conservation concerns with new urgency.

Colleton County has a story to tell about a wealth of natural resources and the recreational opportunities that appeal to its citizens, and The Colletonian will play a role in publishing that important message. Colleton County is potentially home to new Tree Farmers, and other member groups and volunteers who will give back to the natural world by promoting their message of renewable resources.

One group that appreciates the beauty of the county is The Mayfield Garden Club, which held a meeting on January 18, 2011 featuring conservation as the topic of discussion. The ladies had questions and concerns about everything from easements to clearcuts, with an overall sentiment to preserve the landscape of Colleton as much as possible. Concerned citizens raising awareness about the future look and feel of Colleton County is great.