

Greg Kuhns: Private landowners key to stronger forest industry

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This article was first published in the December 28, 2013, Lexington Herald-Leader. Re-printed with permission.

Are wood products and forests Eastern Kentucky's economic salvation? The answer is both yes and no. As a forest landowner and former resident of Harlan County, I would love to say that forests are the magic bullet.

As our country slowly recovers from its recent economic tragedy, we should appreciate the role that sustainable forests and the wood industry already play in Kentucky's economy and job growth. According to a University of Kentucky study, the total economic impact of the forest industry in 2012 was \$9.92 billion, with direct revenue from the forestry sector of \$6.37 billion. This sector was responsible for total employment of 51,928 or 2.7 percent of Kentucky's jobs and \$1.25 billion in earned income. This is during a soft economic recovery with slow housing starts. Kentucky is blessed with abundant hardwood forests and ranks as the leading producer of hardwoods in the South. About 75 percent of these forests are owned by private landowners. About half of Kentucky's forests lie in Eastern Kentucky. However, as is typical throughout Kentucky, management of these forest lands is woefully short of producing desirable, high-value hardwood. To produce high-quality lumber, veneer, and staves for the cooperage industry, forests need to be managed or tended like a garden. While the growth and number of trees in Kentucky have increased, the quality of timber has decreased. Many forests have been "high graded" — that is logging in the past has taken the biggest and best and left the rest. This has resulted in low-quality forests with damaged, deformed, or less valuable trees. High-quality trees are important to develop and attract a forest industry and make it profitable. How can Kentucky, especially the mountains, attract, support and sustain a viable forest industry? It begins with the private landowner growing quality trees and practicing economically sustainable forestry.

Out of 168,000 landowners in Kentucky, a small number have developed management plans that will sustain their woodlands and increase their economic benefit. These plans include best practices that address tree planting, repressing destructive invasive species, fire trails, sustainable and eco-sensitive harvesting, water quality enhancement and protection, wildlife habitat improvement, and opportunities

for recreation. Money is available on a cost-share basis through the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to implement some of these practices.

The Kentucky Woodland Owners Association (www.kwoa.net) is another valuable resource for landowners as is the Kentucky Division of Forestry which continues to suffer severe personnel impacts because of state budget cuts. These incredibly valuable experts are critical to enhance and foster viable sustainable forests, forest management, and the forest industry. A ray of sunshine, despite the economic stress, the state is restoring the tornado-devastated tree-seedling nursery in West Liberty.

Can economical sustainable forestry and forestry practices significantly impact Eastern Kentucky's economy?

An unqualified yes.

-- *Greg Kuhns*



Dr. Greg Kuhns is a pathologist who also helped manage a family farm in Bullitt County that won awards for forest management and wildlife conservation.

KWOA is dedicated to promoting economically and environmentally sound forest management.

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