

Master Tree Farmer – Distance Education Improves Forestry for Landowners

Bill Hubbard, Southern Regional Extension Forester

Forest sustainability at risk in the South?

Forest landowners today are caught in the middle of a major debate. This debate centers on the sustainability of our forests and all the goods, services and amenities they provide. Timber and wood products, wildlife, recreation, watershed and water quality, endangered plants and animals, alternative forest products and aesthetics are but a few of the resources we must work to protect and conserve. Not only has the concept of sustainability been extremely difficult to define, but two fairly polarized perspectives have arisen leaving the landowner in the middle. Some argue that the forests are not sustainable while others are quite sure we have a more healthy, diverse and sustainable forest than we've ever had. Who to believe? The debate may rage on for years but the solution to better sustainable forest management lies in providing information and technology today.

To offer solutions to the debate, the South Carolina Master Tree Farmer (MTF) program was offered via satellite downlink to any state in the South wishing to participate. This program, a seven-week, 21-hour course for private forestland owners is aimed at providing landowners conceptual and practical information on economically and environmentally sustainable forest management practices. Over the course of the seven week program landowners

are exposed to introductory forestry terms and concepts, wildlife and timber management, economics, taxes and estate planning, timber marketing, harvesting and security, forestry services available to landowner.

More efficiency through regional programming

The Master Tree Farmer programs success lies in the fact that a regional team of Extension foresters responded to a need for more in-place landowner education. Limited budgets and expertise across the South were an added impetus. These foresters were also responding to an Extension administration and USDA request for more multi-state and regional programs that result in more efficient, non-duplicative programs.

A regional steering committee was formed and consisted of Extension and key partners such as the USDA Forest Service, the American Forest & Paper



Association, the American Tree Farm System, the Southern Group of State Foresters and 1890's Extension representation.

Results of this program, now in its third year, have been impressive; a second, more advanced course is underway due to the overwhelming demand from participants to learn more. Tables 1 and 2 outline the results of the MTF programs to date. In total, 5,375 landowners at 268 sites and in 14 states have participated in the live program. Countless others have viewed the program either via videotape or live streamed on the internet.

In 2001 and 2002, over 90% of the landowners who filled out evaluations felt that they would implement a sustainable forestry management practice. Close to 80% said their knowledge after the course had increased drastically. Close to 90% said they would be willing to continue on with sustainable forestry training.

As the result of the success of the Master Tree Farmer programs, a Master Wildlife Manager course will be developed and delivered to interested audiences in 2003. For more information about the Master Tree Farmer program visit www.mastertreefarmer.net.

| | 2000 | 2001 |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Number of states participating | 10 | 14 |
| Number of sites | 62 | 132 |
| Audience | 1275 | 2500 |
| Timberland acreage reported | 347,295 | 748,227 |
| Dollars expected to earn due to program | \$21.3 mil. | \$16.4 mil. |

Table 1. Master Tree Farmer Introductory Program Statistics

| | 2002 |
|--|------|
| Number of states participating (estimated) | 11 |
| Number of sites (estimated) | 75 |
| Audience (estimated) | 1480 |
| Timberland acreage reported (data not available yet) | |
| Dollars expected to earn (data not available yet) | |

Table 2. Master Tree Farmer Advanced Program Statistics



For more information about Regional Extension Forestry programming contact Bill Hubbard, Southern Regional Extension Forester, 4-402 Forest Resources Building, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, (706) 542-7813, whubbard@uga.edu, homepage: www.soforext.net and www.forestryindex.net