

*In 2011, the American Tree Farm System celebrated its 70th anniversary.
After a controversial beginning, it is now an important player in efforts to mitigate climate change.*

THE AMERICAN TREE FARM SYSTEM

GROWING STEWARDSHIP FROM THE ROOTS

Kill the thing before it spreads,” U.S. Forest Service Chief Lyle Watts allegedly declared. Watts and his assistant C. Edward Behre tried to kill the thing in 1941. They failed, and it spread from the West, into the South, and eventually all across America. The “thing” was the American Tree Farm System (ATFS),

which is now 71 years old and America’s oldest family-owned woodland sustainability program, covering more than 26 million privately owned acres.

Why were Watts and Behre against tree farms in 1941? Encouraging private owners to grow continuous crops of trees (as tree farming was defined) probably was not abhorrent to them. What they disliked was substituting private cooperation for public regulation. They saw tree farming as a move to decrease pressure for federal regulation.

Watts and Behre asked the Society of American Foresters to question the ethics of members who participated in tree farming. This move could have killed the program, since foresters’ cooperation was needed to make the program work. But the professional group disagreed. Why, asked its August 1942 *Journal of Forestry*, should not private owners work to eliminate the need for federal regulation?

“That one of [tree farming’s] purposes is frankly to forestall

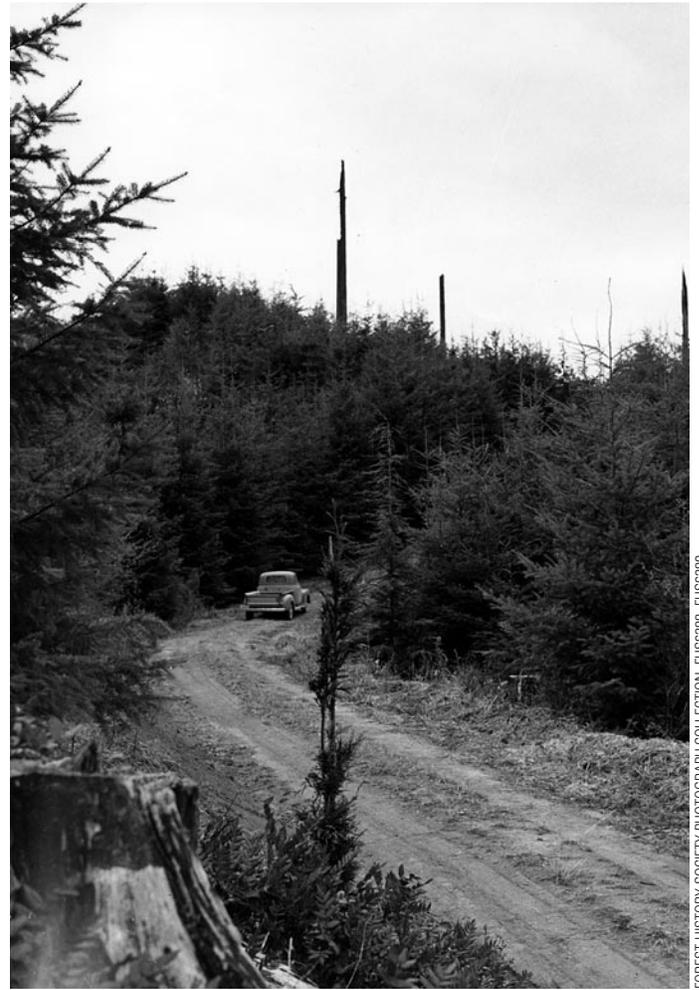
federal regulation is certainly not to its discredit,” according to the journal.

PUSH FOR FEDERAL REGULATION

The strong push for federal regulation of forestry had begun in the 1930s, during America’s Great Depression. Federal forestry leaders believed that they should closely regulate the private sector, and many people agreed. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, for example, had authority to coordinate major industries to set prices, working conditions, and (in the case of forest industry) control forest practices. Industry executives were determined to manage private lands without federal policing.

Tree farming was not new to this debate. Foresters had been advocating something like it since the first glimmers of American forestry in 1900. Some companies and landowners had essentially been tree farming since then, generally with little public notice.

BY BRIGITTE W. JOHNSON



FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, FHS6288, FHS6289

These photographs taken in 1941 and 1951 from the same location show the rapid recovery of cut-over and burned-over land on the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company's Clemons Tree Farm near Montesano, Washington.

“Wood is a crop,” Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, said in a speech in 1935. “Forestry is tree farming.” M. L. Alexander, commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, advocated timber farming on cutover lands in 1917. But the chronic conditions of bad tax policies and poor fire prevention kept undermining the idea of private owners’ managing their land for growing trees.

Government tax policies fueled the widespread destruction of forests. The town and county land tax rates for private landowners often demanded more annually than it cost to buy new land. This encouraged timber companies to cut their trees, then move on to new land rather than hold onto the property and wait for a new timber crop.

Over several decades government authorities took millions of acres of tax-delinquent private property and then sold it for cheap to get it back into the tax system. The land often ended up back in tax sales after the new owners had extracted what they could—or the woodlands had burned in uncontrolled fires. Farmers used fire frequently to clear land and burn off old grass and weeds, and campers tossed away burning cigarettes and left campfires unattended. Firefighting forces were scarce.

Starting around 1936 with Oregon and Washington, some states passed tax legislation to treat forestland more fairly. Aided by federal legislation—namely the Weeks Act of 1911 and the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924—fire prevention and control pro-

grams had improved but had not prevented an uneducated and careless public from causing fires.

By the summer of 1941, the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company was ready to tackle the problem head-on. The company opened its land for tours on what it called its tree farm. More than 700 visitors from the Elma and Montesano areas of Washington took a 25-mile motorized trip over dirt roads on Weyerhaeuser land to witness a new forest—a combination of naturally seeded and planted trees—that had previously been logged and burned. Named in honor of a well-known local logger, Charles H. Clemons, the 120,000-acre Clemons Tree Farm was dedicated on June 12, 1941. Washington Governor Arthur Langlie joined other dignitaries to witness the dedication of the country’s first tree farm.

The area was protected by an impressive system of firefighting equipment and lookout towers. Weyerhaeuser used this premier tree farm as a model to encourage hunting, fishing, and camping visitors to be more careful with fire. Weyerhaeuser suggested an equation that would help all forest landowners become tree farmers: fire protection + fair taxation + forestry expertise = an entirely new industry built on forest management.

1940s: PLANTING THE IDEA

The term “tree farm” was an inspired choice. Chapin Collins, a Montesano newspaper editor, is commonly credited with its coinage. After years of talking about silviculture, sustained yield,

and scientific management, foresters finally had a term that non-foresters could understand. Farmers grew crops; clearly, a tree farmer grew crops of trees.

Forest product firms began to lead the tree farm movement through their western and national associations, with state foresters assisting, especially in the South. The principle was that foresters would certify that the management practices on each tree farm met high standards. In effect, this was the forerunner of the current forest certification programs. The early movement also focused on communications. Certified tree farms were to be marked with green-and-white diamond-shaped signs—now widely recognized as a sign of sustainable forestry.

The West Coast Tree Farm Program was under way by the end of 1941, organized by the West Coast Lumberman's Association and the Pacific Northwest Loggers Association. The two associations soon merged into the Industrial Forestry Association. Urged on by its western members, the National Lumber Manufacturers Association (NLMA) in Washington, D.C., started working on a national system of tree farms, and its subsidiary, American Forest Products Industries (AFPI), took on national sponsorship in 1942. By 1946 AFPI was independent and the Tree Farm System was one of its major programs.

The South quickly followed the West in adopting tree farming. The Alabama State Chamber of Commerce and the state Division of Forestry certified the first nonindustrial property, 60 acres owned by Emmett McCall in Brewton, on April 4, 1942. The Arkansas Forestry Commission was next, with a tree farm dedication on June 6, 1942. As the tree farm movement gained momentum and spread to the South, the participation of small landowners became a focus for outreach and growth, and provided the foundation for a nationwide organization. By 1945 there were 945 tree farming operations covering more than 11 million acres in 11 states: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin.

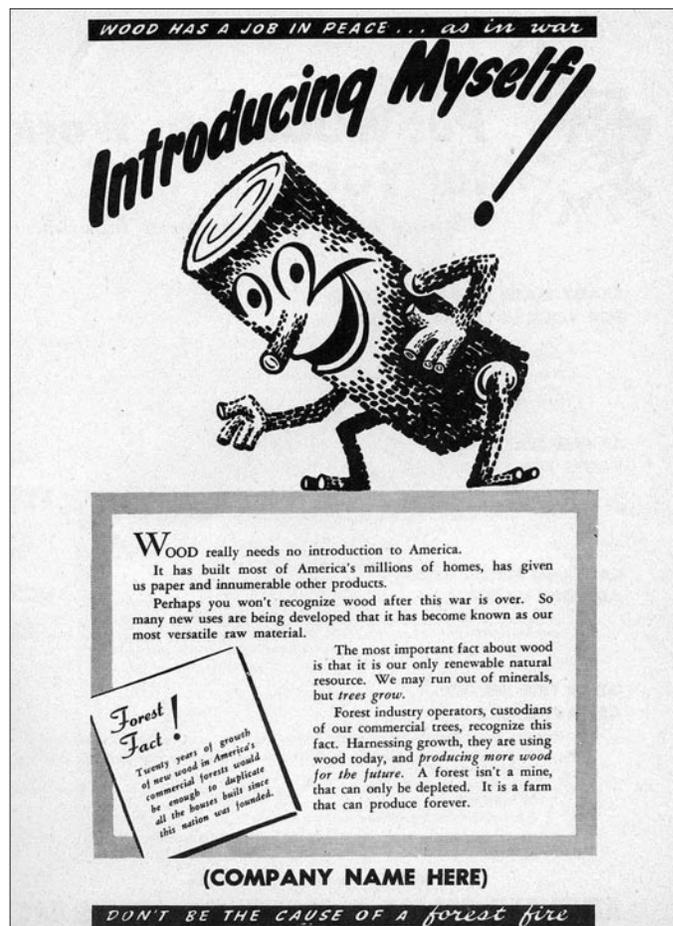
Communication efforts focused on fire prevention: AFPI annually sent more than 3 million pieces of educational materials on forestry and fires to approximately 50,000 schools and organizations. The U.S. Forest Service's Smokey Bear program, created in 1944, followed a similar approach and eventually assumed much of the industry's fire prevention program.

THE 1950s: TAKING ROOT

Cooperation was the theme during the 1950s, with tree farming putting down roots in most states. Although industrial forests were still the backbone of the system, the focus turned to the more numerous family-owned forests. More and more, the Tree Farm program courted farmers and woodlot owners. As the program tried to become national in scale, focus was placed on support for self-regulation of privately owned forestland.

In 1954 AFPI helped organize forest industry commit-

The American Tree Farm System name and logo were officially registered and trademarked in 1976. Before standard Tree Farm signs were adopted in 1954, individual landowners often crafted their own signs.

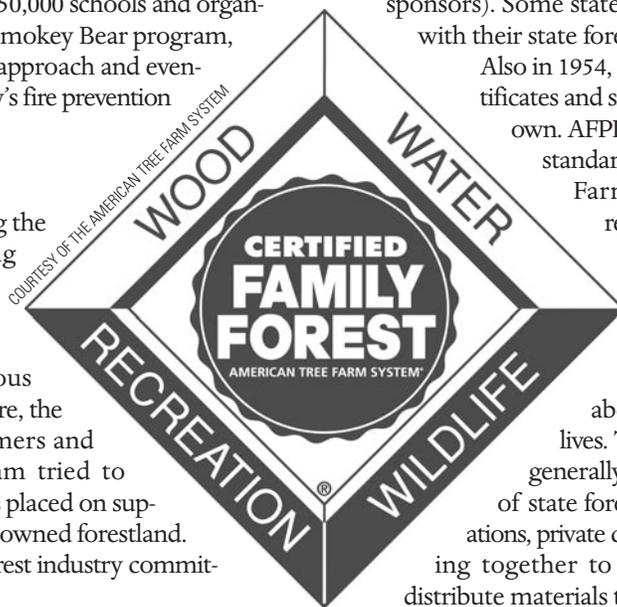


When Woody debuted in 1944, the AFPI press release described him as "a smiling, animated log."

tees state by state, and turned most of the administration of tree farms over to state-level Tree Farm System subcommittees (except in western states, where the program continued under regional sponsors). Some states also maintained a joint sponsorship with their state forestry associations.

Also in 1954, AFPI adopted standard Tree Farm certificates and signs. Up until then, states had had their own. AFPI also adopted a set of common national standards called "Principles of American Tree Farm System." However, several of the regional organizations refused to accept them, and the failure to adopt those national standards would cause problems later on.

Promoting fire prevention went hand-in-hand with educating the public about the role of wood in their everyday lives. The Keep America Green program was generally linked to local committees composed of state foresters, state and regional forest associations, private consultants, and industry foresters working together to reduce wildfires and produce and distribute materials to inform people about the Tree Farm program. AFPI created the cartoon character Woody and featured him in ads and comic books to teach both young and old about all the benefits of a healthy forest and the need for fire prevention.



The U.S. Forest Service had dropped its opposition to the Tree Farm System by this time and was producing educational materials and financially backing local Tree Farm programs and efforts to build state forest services. Many states hired foresters (sometimes called farm foresters) to give forest management advice to private landowners. “State foresters deserve a lot of credit for keeping things going over the long haul,” said Don Smith, retired manager and forester for the southern Tree Farm System.

By 1955 there were more than 7,500 tree farmers using forestry advice to care for almost 38 million acres of woodlands in 41 states. AFPI, Tree Farm’s sponsor, ran an office and printing plant in Washington, D.C., a news bureau in New York City, and a dozen field offices in locations from Boston to San Francisco.

Tree Farms signs were posted, news releases distributed, and dignitaries invited to dedication ceremonies. Hollywood stars like Bing Crosby and Bob Hope lent their celebrity to the cause. Tree Farm was now a recognized program that supported private landowners, giving them the tools they needed to keep their forests healthy, productive, and enjoyable. However, the lack of national standards and practices accepted by all left the program vulnerable.

THE 1960s AND 1970s: FIX IT OR DROWN IT

Concern about the environment came to the forefront in the 1960s. Besides influencing public lands management and forestry in the 1960s, environmentalists also put private property and tree farming under intense scrutiny. For ATFS, this brought changes in the field and the front office.

By this time some foresters had begun to question their own methods and their roles in the changing landscape. Were forests strictly about timber? Or were there other values on the land? They began calling for uniform standards, improved quality control, and even a simplification of Tree Farm System forms. One forester wrote to the national Tree Farm office in 1965, “The McBee (Tree Farm) inspection form is the worst form I’ve ever used.” Uniform standards were still lacking into the mid-1960s because some localities in the West and some Lakes states ran their own systems with little national input. Reexamining traditional assumptions, forestry leaders at many organizations introduced changes. Realignment and retrenchment for the American Forest Products Industries meant a change in 1969 to the American Forest Institute (AFI).

April 22, 1970, was the first Earth Day, called by activists to protest deteriorating environmental conditions. Having grown in size and influence, environmental groups started hiring scientists who could scrutinize traditional forest management methods. Land managers of all kinds—federal, state, and private—were pressured to change their practices. The Sierra Club suggested that tree farms were not forests but sterile rows of planted trees.

After 30 years, tree farming was in trouble, not only from environmental pressure but internally as well. George Cheek, president of AFI, was quoted as saying, “I’m either going to fix the Tree Farm thing or drown it in a bucket.”

There was plenty to be fixed. By 1970 the system listed nearly 34,000 tree farmers managing more than 74 million acres across the country, but funding and staffing for administration had not kept pace with growth. Records were in disorder or lost. Foresters had lost touch with many tree farmers or stopped documenting their work. Although tree farms were listed in all states, only 10 states had active committees.



FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION; IHS6016

Celebrities like Bing Crosby have been involved in the Tree Farm program from its early days. More recent celebrities include singer Taylor Swift, actress Andie MacDowell, and rock pianist and 1999 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year Chuck Leavell.

A decision was made: Tree Farm work was too valuable to be abandoned. The AFI board approved increases to member company dues to provide an increased Tree Farm budget targeted to improve recordkeeping and to convert the mechanical McBee system to a computer record keeping system. Significant funding incentives were created to encourage state committees and foresters to document all their work on tree farms and reinspect properties at five-year intervals. By 1973, after listings that could not be documented had been removed from the rolls, the count had been reduced to a little more than 30,000 tree farmers. Like a tree after pruning, new growth emerged. State Tree Farm committees came back to life and the program started growing again.

Many State Tree Farm Committees were selecting and recognizing Outstanding State Tree Farms. Donald Smith, then southern ATFS manager, and Richard Lewis, the national director, recommended that AFI hold a contest for the best tree farms in all different regions of the country. A few years later Lewis was successful in convincing the AFI leadership to select and honor a National Outstanding Tree Farmer from the regional winners from which a national winner would be selected and honored by the U.S. president. The publicity, they hoped, would elevate the profile and status of ATFS and the program.

In 1976, Fred Barber of Florida became the first National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year. And as hoped, two years later, AFI was successful in having President Jimmy Carter (who



Rev. Henry Langford of Virginia (left), the National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year for 1978, is congratulated by President Jimmy Carter while Mrs. Langford looks on. ATFS Director Richard Lewis and Donald Smith hoped the award and the photo opportunity with the president would elevate the profile and status of ATFS and the program.

subsequently became a tree farmer himself) present the National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year Award to Henry Langford of Virginia. Ceremonies with the president since then have ranged from quick photo opportunities to full-scale presentations on such issues as estate taxes. Thirty-six years later, the Outstanding Tree Farm Award program has grown in prestige and recognition and is now nationally sponsored by Stihl, Inc.

THE 1980s: TREE FARM ADVOCACY

Tree farming grew rapidly in the 1980s and with it the level of turmoil. The 40th anniversary theme in 1981 was, appropriately, “40 Years of Counting and Growing.” Under the direction of Lester DeCoster, hired as the national director in 1982, ATFS sought to involve more tree farmers in forestry issues and operations and keep them informed through the *American Tree Farmer Magazine*, a full-color publication for ATFS members, now published as *Tree Farmer Magazine*. But in 1983, as part of another retrenchment effort, AFI slashed the budget from \$4.8 million to \$1.8 million. Staff was reduced from 48 to 18. Tree Farm remained a core program but with a reduced budget.

Though resources rebounded a bit, by 1984 ATFS leaders were seeking to clarify the program’s mission: was it a communications program or a forest productivity program? In 1986, AFI was reorganized as the American Forest Council (AFC), an education and outreach organization to supplement the lobbying activities of the National Forest Products Association (NFPA). The Tree Farm program was assigned productivity functions as well as a com-

munications role. By now the program covered 49 states and listed more than 55,000 tree farmers who owned 87 million acres of forestland.

The importance of Tree Farm advocacy efforts increased as Congress debated how forest income should be taxed. In September 1989, AFC and several other organizations put together a White House meeting with President George H. W. Bush. The goal was reinstatement of capital gains tax treatment for forest income.

Of the 17 landowners invited to attend, 11 were tree farmers or local Tree Farm sponsors. Two tree farmers—Murray Lloyd, a young lawyer from Louisiana, and May Grosetto, a widow from Pennsylvania—impressed the president so much that he invited them back for a round of media briefings and visits with political leaders. Tree farmers were clearly effective communicators on issues facing private landowners.

THE 1990s: CONSOLIDATION AND FOCUS

The American Tree Farm System really came into its own in the 1990s and became a truly national organization. ATFS started 1990 with its largest and most visible program ever: 70,000 tree farmers were managing 93 million acres, and 9,000 foresters were volunteering their time to the program. Tree farmers continued their involvement in advocacy and policy, serving on committees and promoting stewardship of America’s forest heritage. The theme for the 50th anniversary in 1991 was “50 Years of Growing Trees...And More Than Trees.” Tree farming was still about

growing trees as a crop but was now linked to all the benefits of good forestry: clean water and air, wildlife habitat, recreational activities, as well as wood and paper products.

After years of debate and discussion among forest industry leaders, consolidation of their organizations began toward the end of 1991. Most of the solid wood (lumber, plywood) and paper companies, which had funded separate national organizations for years, combined into the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) in 1991. Its Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) was launched in 1994 to certify sustainable management of industrial forests in North America. The American Forest Council, reorganized as the American Forest Foundation (AFF), took over administration of the American Tree Farm System and AFC's environmental education program, Project Learning Tree.

Competition for attention and resources rose. A new, publicly funded stewardship program operated by state foresters emerged. This overlapped with ATFS in many ways. Hundreds of meetings ensued to coordinate stewardship and Tree Farm standards and minimize confusing and conflicting publicity. The coordination ultimately had the effect of tightening Tree Farm standards to reflect contemporary benchmarks for sustainability and emphasizing written forest management plans and documentation. Qualifications were established for Tree Farm inspectors, and a new national training curriculum was developed.

The first annual National Tree Farmer Convention was held in 1993 in Williamsburg, Virginia, and followed by conventions in Montana, Oregon, New Mexico, Colorado, Ohio, Wisconsin, Alabama, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Vermont. The conventions allowed hundreds of tree farmers to gather and network, share ideas, and learn from experts and one another.

The 1990s ended with 65,000 certified tree farmers managing more than 81 million acres in 48 states; 7,000 qualified volunteers were guiding these landowners in their forest management and sustainability efforts and conducting property inspections for Tree Farm certification.

THE 2000s: PROVE IT!

The new century has brought new opportunities and pressures; its first decade was the "prove it" era. Certification became more prevalent, driven largely by the rising demand for certified wood and paper products worldwide. The American Tree Farm System worked to become accepted internationally as a credible forest certification option for private family landowners. In 2001, ATFS underwent an internal program review by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which evaluated the quality of its certification and reinspection process.

As global markets increased the demand for wood products from private lands, ATFS continued its commitment to help landowners keep their forest legacy healthy and productive for the next generation by seeking international, third-party recognition from the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). The process required ATFS to ensure that family-owned woodlands were following established ATFS forest certification standards.

In 2008, upon receiving international endorsement by PEFC, ATFS moved to full third-party certification across the entire system. PEFC is the world's largest independent, nongovernmental organization that promotes sustainably managed forests through independent third-party certification. ATFS and SFI are both endorsed by PEFC.

Because of the high unit costs and slow rate of growth of individual forest certification, in 2003, ATFS took the initial step toward group certification. Under the group certification process, forestlands are evaluated by a third-party auditor to determine whether they are managed in accordance with the ATFS standards of sustainability for forest certification. The standards call for participants to have forest management plans, reforest their lands after harvest, comply with state best management practices, protect special places, enhance wildlife habitat, use approved forest contractors, and otherwise be good managers of their forests. Upon successful completion of the review, forest owners are grouped under a single certificate. The group certification program has made Tree Farm the largest forest certification group in terms of number of landowners in the Western Hemisphere.

Group certification enables ATFS to further its mission of getting more good forestry on more acres. It helps family forest owners certify their forest management and provides tools and resources related to sustainable forestry.

THE 21ST CENTURY: A GLOBAL APPROACH

Today, ATFS faces new challenges, including:

- providing tools for the successful generational transfer of woodlands, since tree farmers are increasingly 55 years of age and older. The program will need to reach out with hands-on advice and support for the next generation taking over the woods.
- helping to maintain markets for a range of forest products. Major trends are transforming the nation's forest industry: businesses are downsizing and merging, and traditional markets are disappearing.
- advocating for "market-based" conservation—the conservation of natural areas supported by market mechanisms. On the ground, this means providing woodland owners with economic incentives to conserve their woodlands for clean water and air and wildlife habitat. In legislative offices, it means Tree Farm members and supporters are lobbying for those incentives.
- persuading the U.S. Green Building Council to include Tree Farm-certified wood in credits for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) construction. USGBC currently recognizes only Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood.

As managers of everything from individual trees to extensive acreages of forestland, tree farmers have been protecting America's natural heritage and instilling in future generations the importance of sustainable forestry. Tree farming started that tradition of stewardship 70 years ago; now, a new frontier lies ahead. □

Brigitte Johnson is Director of Communications and Executive Editor at the American Forest Foundation. This article has been compiled from the materials listed below and updated.

FURTHER READING

- Johnson, APR, B. 2012. "American Tree Farm System—Growing Stewardship From the Roots," accessed at www.treefarmssystem.org.
- Preece, K. 2011. "Celebrating 70 Years 1941–2011." *Tree Farmer Magazine* 30(1): 6–15.
- DeCoster, L. A. 2001. "Tree Farming Tenacity—Sixty Years Old, and Still Going Strong." *Tree Farmer Magazine* 20(4): 6–15.