

Sustainable forestry benefiting Great Cypress Swamp

Selective timbering funding management of 10,700 acres

By Dennis Forney

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When Neil Sampson and Larry Walton of Vision Forestry send logging crews into yellow pine forests on Delmarva, they expect their trucks to emerge with 50 or 60 long and straight trees for either the pulpwood or saw log industry.

That was before they sent crews into the Great Cypress Swamp, in south- central Sussex County.

" The first load we brought out of here amounted to 13 trees and that put us into an over - weight position," said Sampson. " I've worked a lot out in the Pacific northwest. That's what we expect to see out there, not here."

Loads of timber like those are at the heart of a sustainable forestry plan for the Great Cypress Swamp, as well as economic sustainability for swamp owner Delaware Wild Lands and management of its holdings. " Trees that we're harvesting are yielding boards as much as 18- inches wide and 40- feet long," said Gene Bayard, a board member of the private conservation organization. " They're incredible."

Peter Martin, field ecologist for Delaware Wild Lands, over-sees all of the activities at the swamp. In 2003, Delaware Wild Lands added the Roman Fisher Farm near Gumboro, on the western edge of the swamp, to its extensive swamp holdings. Martin now points proudly to buildings constructed with swamp timber and added to the Fisher spread. Stout beams, studs and planks form the skeleton for the metal- clad buildings.

Tightly grained boards of platinum- colored, furniture grade maple also play into Martin's vision for the swamp's sustainable future. He sees boards coming out of the swamp marketed as Great Cypress Swamp lumber and valued not only for their size and quality, but also for the fact that they come from a forest being managed for sustainability.

" We have nearly 11,000 acres here," said Martin. " Our plans for harvesting and managing for timber involve about 3,500 acres.

That sounds like a lot, but we're really only looking at harvesting trees from 60 to 100 acres per year. That's all the market will bear." In fact, over the first three years of the program, only 100 acres of timber, total, have been cut.

Sustainable forestry plans, according to Sampson, " are set up around what you leave, not what you take. You're always thinking about 50- 60 years out."

The southern yellow pine being harvested under Vision Forestry's oversight involves trees that have been growing much longer than that. A great fire swept through the swamp in the 1930s and burned for many years. That fire gave rise to the name Burnt Swamp for much of the area, but it also gave rise to great tracts of yellow pine which have been growing straight and tight- grained ever since then.

Rather than losing the trees eventually to pine beetle and other problems, the decision was made to go with Vision Forestry's program.

Once a tract is harvested, it is immediately replanted either with trees for future harvest or with restoration water trees such as bald cypress or Atlantic whiter cedar. Those cypress and cedars were the historic residents of this unique natural area that gives rise to the headwaters of the Indian River, flowing to the Atlantic, and the Pocomoke River flowing to the Chesapeake Bay. Certain parts of the swamp lend themselves better to yellow pine growth than to the swampier conditions where bald cypresses thrive. Those are the areas identified for the 50- 60- year cycle timber management.

Once the bald cypresses get going, management can stand back for a while. Relatives of the great redwoods of the west, the bald cypresses have life spans in the 1,500- year magnitude.

Delaware Wild Lands has been acquiring its Great Cypress Swamp holdings since 1961 when it began identifying unique natural lands throughout Delaware for conservation. Up until now though, managing the Great Cypress Swamp and its 20 miles of criss- crossing roads, eight water control structures and the Roman Fisher Farm improvements has registered almost exclusively on the expense side of the organization's ledger sheets.

With the sustainable forestry plan in place, Delaware Wild-lands now has a sustainable revenue stream to fund preservation and enhancement of one of the state's richest, most unique and biologically diverse natural areas.



DENNIS FORNEY PHOTOS

MEMBERS OF THE DELAWARE WILDLANDS board of directors stand on the yellow pine- timber steps inside the equipment and gathering building. Shown are (l- r) Gene Bayard, Peter Martin (front), Bob Edgell, Rick Fisher, Bill D'Alonzo and Pete McGaffin. All of the building's framing lumber came from trees harvested through Great Cypress Swamp's sustainable forestry program



Daughters, grandchildren and great- grandchildren of Roman Fisher gathered out-side the house where they lived and where many were born. They were part of a recent celebration of the swamp and its friends put on by Great Cypress Swamp owner Delaware Wildlands. Shown are (l- r) Hilda Dorey, Carol Oliphant, Travis Waples, Joyce Hudson, Don and Doris Carrier, Linda Hitchens, Thelma Green and Bonnie Hudson.
