

## **Virginia Hardwood Initiative**

### **Spring 2020 Update**

It was just over a year ago on April 3<sup>rd</sup> that we held the Virginia Hardwood Initiative kickoff meeting. I'm glad I didn't place any bets on what would be happening in Virginia a year later. No one could have predicted the sudden worldwide impact that COVID-19 has had on our lives and the world economy.

I also don't think that anyone at that meeting would have predicted that the next General Assembly session would include funding for a hardwood coordinator position at VDOF and a statewide hardwood incentive program. Secretary Ring, Governor Northam, and Virginia's legislature all recognized the importance of the hardwood forest resource and the need to take action to safeguard and grow it. Those exciting first steps may be delayed by the economic impact of COVID-19, but that will not stop us from making progress in the meantime. The following is a status report on various elements of the Hardwood Initiative.

#### **Outreach & Support for the Hardwood Initiative**

Following the great turnout at last spring's kickoff meeting, the Hardwood Initiative's momentum continued to build. Many additional partners and stakeholders have stepped forward, expressing their support and interest in participating, bringing their unique backgrounds and perspectives. One of our next steps will be harnessing all the stakeholder support and getting people working on the various elements of the initiative and the suggestions that we gathered at the kickoff meeting. A dedicated hardwood coordinator will be a key to moving all of this forward.

Virginia's Board of Forestry has been leading the charge for increased hardwood management for several years now. This past October, the Board convened a special fall meeting focused on the Hardwood Initiative which included field tours to see hardwood management demonstration sites on the Appomattox-Buckingham State Forest. The Board will be instrumental in providing guidance as well developing the hardwood incentive program.

Over the past year, we have taken many opportunities to share the status of the hardwood resource and the elements of the Hardwood Initiative with a wide range of audiences. I was invited to speak about our Initiative at the annual meeting of the Associated Cooperage Industries of America, Inc. The barrel mills are, of course, primarily interested in white oaks but they are also very knowledgeable about the issues facing the hardwood resource and they are interested in being part of the solution. During the recent General Assembly session I spoke to the Sportsmen's Caucus about the Hardwood Initiative and the legislators showed interest in the issues facing the hardwood resource.

The legislative session was a great one for VDOF, and especially for the Hardwood Initiative. Governor Northam's budget included funding for the Hardwood Coordinator position and \$350,000 to establish a hardwood incentive program. This amount is equal to the amount paid by the forest industry for the hardwood portion of the Forest Products Tax (past three years' average). The budget passed by the GA includes the coordinator position in year-one of the budget, and the incentive funding starting in year-

two. As of the middle of April, those two items remain in the budget; but the associated funding has been “unallotted” until state revenues return to levels anticipated before COVID-19.

## **Implementation**

The Hardwood assessment tool, which will be used to support hardwood management planning and incentive programs, continues to be a priority focus. We used some of the Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP) mitigation funding earmarked for forest enhancement to hire a contractor to work on the assessment tool. They organized a team that included VDOF and scientists from Virginia Tech CNRE and the U.S. Forest Service Southern Research Station.

This tool is intended to help foresters to more simply assess the condition of a hardwood stand and to help the foresters select the most appropriate treatment to meet the landowner’s objective. The tool will also provide a current condition score for a hardwood stand and then score again after treatment to measure improvement. The goal is to not just measure accomplishments by acres, but by actual improvement accomplished on those acres. We are currently finalizing plans to field test the tool.

The original intent of the assessment tool is to facilitate project selection for the MVP mitigation funds so it will be launched first in the area around the MVP route in Southwest Virginia. The mitigation funding is set aside for long-term improvement of forest health so the projects will have to be on land that we are confident will remain in forest. The MVP forest enhancement work will occur on public lands, starting with national forest and wildlife management areas. Toward that end, we have had initial meetings with the national forest staff in the Roanoke office.

The work that we are doing to support the MVP mitigation program will also support the Virginia hardwood incentive program for private landowners when that funding becomes available.

## **Identify Hardwood Management Practices to Implement**

We have also been considering the suite of potential hardwood management practices that could be included in the Hardwood Initiative. The practices that we are currently considering include:

1. Liberation (Post-harvest cleanup)
2. Prescribed Burning
3. Invasive Species Control
4. Shelterwood Harvest
5. Silvicultural Clearcut
6. Group Selection Harvest
7. Periodic Partial Harvests (irregular shelterwood, irregular group selection, patch or spot clearcut, as well as expanding gap or Femelschlag)
8. Thinning – Pre-commercial thinning, Mid-story removal, Timber Stand Improvement (TSI)
9. Crop Tree Release
10. Stand Assessment
11. Stand/Tree Marking

## **Demonstration and Education**

VDOF is engaged in a number of demonstration and education projects through collaboration with a range of partnerships. Our work with the Southern Research Station (SRS) led to our involvement in an effort led by the Forest Service to create new hardwood research and demonstration forests in the Southeastern U.S. Many of you will be familiar with the Bent Creek Experimental Forest near Asheville NC. This has long been a center of research for southern hardwood silviculture and they hosted on-site training sessions for foresters for many years. Those sessions ended during the economic downturn when states could no longer afford the travel expenses to send their staff.

Kentucky and Tennessee approached SRS about creating another demonstration forest on the Daniel Boone National Forest near their shared border to reestablish state forester training with less travel. It was suggested that we could create many more less-formal demonstration forests if the Forest Service and the states partnered to identify sites, decided on the appropriate management practices to demonstrate on those sites, and then created associated educational information. These sites could be on national forest land, state forests, or other lands; wherever we could be sure that the forest management work would be allowed to remain and there would be access for education.

Virginia is also a partner in the White Oak Initiative being led by the University of Kentucky. This initiative also includes funding for creating demonstration sites in the member states. We are looking at multiple sites around Virginia where VDOF has done hardwood silviculture work recently, or in decades past, to identify sites suitable for demonstration forests.

We were invited to work with Sweet Briar College to help them incorporate hardwood forest management into their campus sustainability initiative, and to support the College's desire that the campus serve as a demonstration forest for local landowners. Much of the 2000+ acres of forest on the campus is in preserves or protected from disturbance in some way, so we will have to find ways that hardwood management can be incorporated to help them meet their stewardship goals.

We are also partnering with Virginia Cooperative Extension at their McCormick Farm property on a potential femelschlag harvest research and demonstration project.

## **Professional Education for Foresters**

The Bent Creek Experimental Forest announced that they will be restarting their on-site educational sessions for professional foresters, hopefully with an initial session in July for state agency foresters. VDOF has several slots reserved for this initial training.

## **Institutionalize Hardwood Management within VDOF**

The Board of Forestry's March 2020 meeting included a discussion of the Reforestation of Timberlands (RT) pine planting incentive program and the Seed Tree Law, focusing on how hardwood forests may be impacted by these two state programs intended to support pine reforestation. VDOF will be working on internal policies and procedures to address any unintended impacts from pine reforestation on the hardwood resource.

## Incentives

Now that the General Assembly has approved funding for a hardwood incentive program, regardless of when the money is available, we need to set up a new cost-share program. That means selecting practices to pay for, reimbursement rates, eligibility, forms and procedures, training, outreach to contractors and landowners, and choosing a name other than 'Hardwood RT'. While \$350,000 will enable us to get a lot of good work done, it is a somewhat limited amount of money for a statewide program, given the need. We will have to think creatively to apply these dollars most effectively.

The other elements of the Initiative that I have not discussed are **Markets for Hardwood Products**, **Developing Service Providers**, and forming the **Stakeholder Group** to guide the Initiative. These are equally critical components that I hope we can devote more energy to in the year ahead.

Thank you all for your interest, support, and patience as we work to develop a robust and nation-leading hardwood management program for Virginia. It won't be quick and it won't be easy but it will be worthwhile. Virginia has a proud tradition of collaboration between state government and industry and the private landowners to create great programs like our pine reforestation program, the timber harvest water quality program, and recent improvements to timber fraud protections. I look forward to adding our hardwood management program to that list.

Rob Farrell

State Forester

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