

# The Post and Courier

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## Commentary

# Trees — and friends — help keep S.C. land in the family

BY JENNIE L. STEPHENS

In 2015 the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation will celebrate its 10th anniversary of helping low-wealth heirs' property owners protect their family land by obtaining clear title to it through legal education and direct legal services. Without clear title, heirs' landowners are at high risk of losing their land and cannot secure a loan or mortgage, or qualify for a wide range of local, state and federal programs to improve their land or derive economic benefit from it.



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Clearing title on heirs' property is complex and can often take years to achieve. To date, the center has resolved 115 titles on family land with an assessed, cumulative value of \$5.9 million.

The questions are then: So what? What real difference does it make for these families?

A year ago, the center provided one answer to that question by receiving funding from the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, the USDA Forest Service and the USDA/Natu-

ral Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to launch the Sustainable Forestry Program (SFP). SFP provides education, technical assistance and resources to African American landowners (heirs' and non-heirs' property owners), with a minimum of ten forested acres, to develop and implement sustainable forestry plans to promote healthy forests and to increase the value and income of their family land.

Forestry is a \$17 billion industry in South Carolina. To many landowners' surprise, their "woods out back" have real value if managed properly. In less than a year, 130 African American families owning collectively 6,000 forested acres expressed an interest in the Sustainable Forestry Program (SFP). Forty family groups have become active participants in SFP which will put 3,229 acres of rich, rural land to economic and conservation use across 10 S.C. counties.

But those are just statistics. Here's what this program really means. It is the story of land saved that would have been lost.

It's about Vander Green. Van owed money on his mortgage. His father had bought the 42 acres on which Van was living in the 1940s and now Van was starting into the face of foreclosure. He had already put up a "For Sale" sign for half



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### Vander Green still has his heirs' land.

of the land when one of his neighbors talked to him about SFP and its director, Sam Cook.

Cook and Van ended up walking the land together. Cook, a forester, could see right away that there was enough marketable fiber (trees and tree products) to give Van the income he needed without having to sell his land.

Over the course of four months, Cook returned

to the land with three different wood buying professionals, who each gave Van quotes for purchasing the wood. He picked the best bid and the logging began. After the harvest, Van had made enough money to meet his mortgage payments, to make a small profit and to save every inch of his family land. He is proud of his USDA Farm and Tract number and his enthusiasm has infected others.

With the help of forestry professionals and NRCS, Van is beginning to realize the true value of the asset his father left him. His sharp eyes are ablaze with dreams of planting longleaf pine, putting in a fish farm and maybe leasing some of his land for hunting. His daughter might even come back home to help make those dreams come true.

What happens to our rural landscape happens to all of us. Providing the knowledge, technical assistance and market connections to help these families create working, rural landscapes is one way to sustain African American landownership and preserve the landscape that we all treasure.

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