

## Program aids African Americans in land preservation

BY LIZ SEGRIST

lsegrist@scbiznews.com

Alex Goodwine rests his arms on his chain-link fence and looks over his land in Ridgeville.

His pigs are covered in mud, the cows are grazing and the dogs are barking. Behind his brick home, large yard and wooden barn, a thick forest shoots up. Among those trees, Goodwine sees a future for generations to come.

"I put two girls through college on raising pigs and cows. Now I look to the forest. Most people don't realize what their land can do for them," Goodwine said. "It can mean being able to pay your taxes as property values rise. It can mean the difference between paying your mortgage or not. It can mean everything."

Goodwine, who owns his land, is a participant in the Sustainable Forestry Program, a new initiative that helps African-American families in the Lowcountry develop a forestry plan and learn forestry techniques to make money off their land.

In spring 2013, the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities selected The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation in Charleston and Roanoke Electric Cooperative in North Carolina to run these pilot forestry programs.

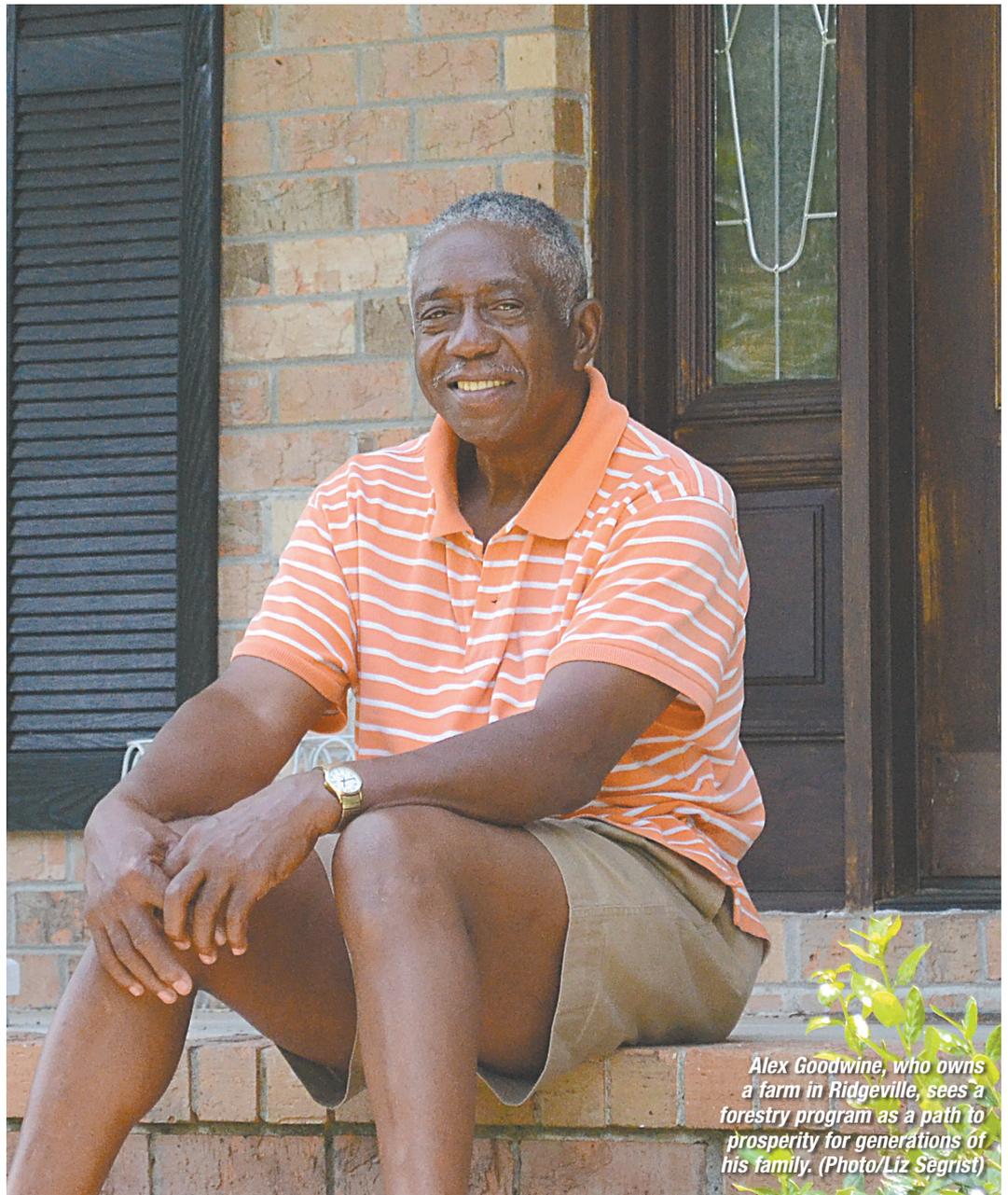
The center — a nonprofit that helps heirs' property owners clear their titles — received \$425,000 to launch its program.

Managed timber plots can yield a new income source and increase land value for these families, helping African-American families maintain or secure ownership of their land, according to Sam Cook, the director of the Sustainable Forestry Program for the center.

Cook said offers to buy timber often entice landowners to sell before implementing a forest management plan or having a professional forester survey the land. He worked with one woman who sold timber from her 32 acres for about \$2,000 only to later discover it was worth tens of thousands of dollars.

"Most African-American landowners cut the timber and do nothing with the land," Cook said. "This program shows landowners the value in reinvesting in their land. A land management plan can provide an ongoing revenue source rather than a one-time payout for the timber."

Participating landowners work with professional foresters, representatives from the center and other state and federal agencies to take inventory of their tree stands and create a plan for the property.



Alex Goodwine, who owns a farm in Ridgeville, sees a forestry program as a path to prosperity for generations of his family. (Photo/Liz Segrist)

They will determine what should be harvested and planted, what needs to be thinned or clear-cut, where prescribed burning should take place and when these practices should occur. Landowners receive professional guidance through the program, but they are ultimately responsible for performing the work and covering the cost — though reimbursement is possible.

Cook meets with landowners and heirs' property owners around the area to educate them on their rights, their land's potential value and the importance of waiting before cutting.

"Think about your land for future generations," Cook said. "It can be hard to turn down thousands of dollars on the spot, but that tim-

ber could be worth tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars over time with a forest management plan."

Within six months of the program's launch, 130 local landowners requested to join, and 41 were admitted; of those 15 are heirs' property owners. They collectively represent more than 3,200 acres.

### Clearing titles

For many African-American property owners in rural parts of the Lowcountry, the threat of losing their land is real, particularly for heirs' property owners.

Heirs' property refers to mostly rural land owned by African Americans who acquired

their land after the Civil War. These landowners were either denied access to the legal system or did not trust it, and therefore the land has been passed down for generations without a will or clear title.

As of 2012, The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation determined there are nearly 41,000 acres of heirs' property left in the Lowcountry south to the Georgia border, and around 53% of it is within Charleston, Dorchester and Berkeley counties.

The families usually respect these word-of-mouth ownership rights, but the law does not.

To further complicate the issue, every descendant of the original owner is entitled to a percentage of the land.

Any member of the family can sell his or her plot to developers or other buyers, even having never lived on the land, paid taxes there or set foot on it.

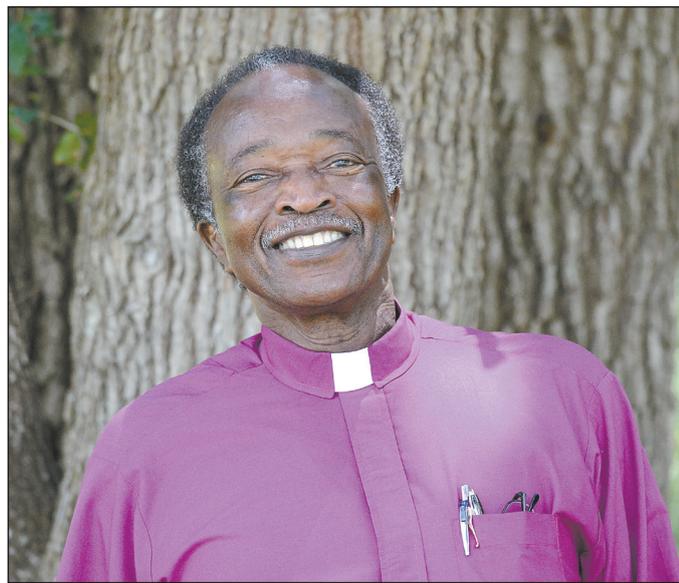
Family members that have lived on the land their entire lives could have it sold from under them since their ownership is not recognized in the legal system. Clearing up ownership of an heirs' title requires that heirs define their family tree, track down every heir and get them to decide whether to sign over their rights or maintain ownership.

The Rev. Malachi Perry, head of the Perry family in Ridgeville, lives near Goodwine on heirs' property. He grew up raising pigs and growing corn on the land that his family has owned for nearly a century.

He's seen the community change in the past few decades. Roads paved, fire stations and schools built. New construction and redevelopment are on the horizon.

The family is rushing to finish its family tree and contact every living relative to discuss whether they will sign over ownership to the family members who have been working the land for more than 80 years, paving the way for a clear title.

"Once development starts, taxes are going to skyrocket. It's very important to clear our families' titles and start making money off of our land



**"This land and its potential gives us hope for our community here."**

**The Rev. Alphonza Gadsden Sr.**  
*bishop, Southeast diocese, Reformed Episcopal Church*

*Photos/Liz Segrist*

before then to make sure we can keep our land," Goodwine said. "We're not going to stop the growth. This growth will help our community. We just want to make sure we can be here to see it."

The forestry program can also help give landowners incentive to expedite the clearing of their titles, Cook said.

If the landowners follow through with management practices and have a clear title, the U.S. Department of Natural Resources/Natural Resources Conservation Service will reimburse up to 90% of the costs of implementing the plan.

### **A bishop's vision**

Tall trees tower over a long gravel road off U.S. Highway 17 near Awendaw, eventually opening up onto a large clearing near a lake.

A large, light blue building — the Bishop Wm. J.S. Jerden Conference Center — hosts a public meeting. Kids run around laughing and playing games alongside their cabins at summer camp.

The Reformed Episcopal Church, founded in 1873, owns the land. The Rev. Alphonza Gadsden Sr., bishop of the Southeast diocese, has a vision for the 82-acre site.

Gadsden wants to create a place where the community will gather. He hopes to build new cabins and lease the community center for events.

He hopes to clear some of the trees and create a pathway leading to Bulls Bay, which is less than a mile from the center. He sees an opportunity for ecotourism on the site. He wants to maintain most of the forest to create a refuge for youth and families to explore nature.

Gadsden, who is a participant in the Sustainable Forestry Program, wants to use the profit from timber to achieve his vision.

"It would be so good for the community and for young people here to have a place to gather and observe nature," Gadsden said. "This land and its potential gives us hope for our community here."

Looking ahead, Goodwine said the greatest challenge is getting younger generations interested in farming the land, managing the forest and keeping ownership.

"Most people don't realize what their land and their forest can do for them. ... Knowledge is power, and even though we might not see the rewards yet, these efforts will be enjoyed for generations to come," Goodwine said. ■

**"Knowledge is power, and even though we might not see the rewards yet, these efforts will be enjoyed for generations to come."**

**Alex Goodwine**  
*landowner in Ridgeville*

