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Work to save black-owned forests garners praise

- By BRUCE SMITH Associated Press [Posted: Thursday, November 7, 2013 10:00 p.m.]



Alex Singleton, a harvest manager for the MeadWestvaco forest products company, explains a new program to help black landowners keep their forest land and realize value from it during a tour near Ridgeville, S.C. on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2013. Singleton is a board member of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation which works to clear titles for land that has been passed down through generations of black families without wills. (AP Photo/Bruce Smith)

RIDGEVILLE — A top U.S. Agriculture Department official on Thursday praised a South Carolina pilot program he said could be a model for keeping millions of acres of Southern forests in the hands of black landowners.

“I would hope that this could be replicated throughout the country,” said Joe Leonard Jr., the assistant secretary of agriculture for civil rights, who visited rural Ridgeville to learn what the nonprofit Center for Heirs' Property Preservation is doing to help black landowners manage their forest land and realize value from it.



Joe Leonard the U.S. Department of Agriculture assistant secretary for Civil Rights, listens as Sam Cook explains a new program to help black landowners keep their forest land and realize value from it during a tour near Ridgeville, S.C. on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2013. Cook is the sustainable forestry program director for the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation which works to clear titles for land that has been passed down through generations of black landowners without clear title.

Forest tracts along a rural road near Ridgeville, S.C., are seen on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2013. The tract on the left is managed by the MeadWestvaco and is worth about \$2,700 an acre at harvest. The tract on the right is heirs' property owned by black landowners. Such property is generally passed down through the generations without wills and so without clear title. Because there is no clear ownership, the land has not been thinned and maintained for timbering. Officials with the Center for Heirs'

Property Preservation say that, if the tract on the right were to be timbered, it would bring in only about \$600 per acre.

Joe Leonard, the U.S. Department of Agriculture assistant secretary for civil rights, listens as officials explain a new program to help black landowners keep their forest land and realize value from it during a tour near Ridgeville, S.C. on Thursday, Nov. 7, 2013. The pilot program is working with black landowners to help them profit from their land through timbering, forest products and hunting rights.

For almost a decade, the center has worked to clear titles on heirs' property — land generally deeded to blacks following the Civil War and passed down without benefit of wills. Much of it is now owned in common by sometimes dozens of heirs. Often, one descendant can demand their value and force a sale for the proceeds, at which time the land often passes out of the family.

Earlier this year the center, as well as the Roanoke Electrical Cooperative-Roanoke Center in Ahoskie, N.C., began a pilot project to help preserve black-owned forests. It was financed in part by a \$1.2 million grant from the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities and agencies of Agriculture Department.

The object is to help blacks realize income from their forest land through timbering, forest products and hunting rights. According to the Forest Service, about 229 million acres of Southern forest is owned privately, about 16 million of that by blacks and other minorities.

“We’ve been focusing our efforts on heirs’ property,” said Jennie Stephens, executive director of the center. “If we can help families earn money while clearing title to their land, we’re going to help a lot of African-American families in the South.” She estimated there is at least 41,000 acres of heirs’ property in the six South Carolina counties that the center serves.

Sam Cook, the sustainable forestry director for the Center, said the agency has identified 130 landowners with about 5,000 acres interested in working on developing management plans for their forests. He said there’s already a success story. One landowner had planned to sell 22 acres of his land to help pay his mortgage. But after working with the center, he took the land off the market and will raise the money through timbering.

Leonard was driven down a dirt road between two tracts of forest land — one heirs’ property that was overgrown and neglected, the other managed by MeadWestvaco for timbering and which had been thinned.

Alex Singleton, a harvest manager for MeadWestvaco, said the managed land would bring in \$2,700 an acre if timbered; the heirs property only about \$600 an acre.

Leonard said the pilot program shows what cooperation can do.

“The government shouldn’t do everything and the nonprofit can’t,” he said. “This is where everyone chips in and gets a shovel and finds a way to achieve something.”