

# **Committee on Resources**

## **Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health**

---

### **Witness Statement**

---

**Statement of**  
**Dr. A. G. "Skeet" Burris**  
  
**South Carolina Tree Farmer**  
**and**  
**American Tree Farm System** □  
**2000 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year**  
  
**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health**  
**Committee on Resources**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**September 14, 2000**

Good morning.

My name is Skeet Burris. I'm a certified Tree Farmer from Beaufort, South Carolina. I was recently named this year's National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year by the American Tree Farm System.

Madam Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this Committee. My family and I were selected by the American Tree Farm System as the National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year out of 66,000 other certified Tree Farmers in the US because our Tree Farm is a shining example of good forest management. We lovingly manage Cypress Bay Plantation for multiple use. By that I mean for long-term softwood production, watershed and soil protection, conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat, and recreational use. Our management has included the creation of wetlands and ponds, wildlife food and shelter plots, and improving forest aesthetics. It □ is a productive, sustainable forest that □ is managed by my family □ my wife Gail, and my five sons.

I am here today to speak on behalf of 66,000 family forestland owners who are members of the American Tree Farm System--founded in 1941 and now the nation's largest and oldest forest certification program for small, private landowners. Together, we Certified Tree Farmers own nearly 25 million acres of diverse, healthy and productive forests around the country. We are part of the nearly 10 million forestland owners in the United States who hold nearly 60 percent of America's productive forests.

We have relied on many management tools and techniques to achieve the results that brought us national recognition. Harvesting, planting, prudent use of herbicides, fertilizers and even fire are all part of our forest steward "tool kit." Our aim is to mimic, as best we can, natural cycles of removal and regeneration. Cutting

trees down is part of that, of course, because it opens a mosaic of age classes in the forest – and makes sure that there are young stands intermixed with old. Fire is a part of that cycle. I'm a certified prescribed fire manager and use controlled burns in 30 % - 40% of my forest each year. I evaluate weather conditions, fuel loads and my desired results. When it all comes together, fire greatly enhances our forest ecosystems, helping us maintain a diverse landscape of habitats, with many species of trees, plants and animals.

It was 20 years ago that Gail and I began looking for forestland for our family to own. Back then, like today, existing forest plantations are seldom available or affordable. But in 1986, we finally found an abandoned, cut over, exhausted 100-acre farm, with dilapidated barns and a decaying cabin. Where once stately open pine-savanna forests had grown, the unmanaged land was overgrown with dense thickets of stunted, crowded, twisted pine, gum, and maple. The whole place was a disaster, but we could afford it.

Our first step was to develop a vision statement for the land we had just purchased. It went like this: □Our vision is to develop an ordinary piece of land and, with a plan and a commitment to lots of hard work, create a Tree Farm that will serve as a model for other Tree Farmers.□ Our vision includes five principles: **restoration** of the forest, land and buildings; **conservation** practices for our primary crop, trees and wildlife; **preservation** of the native live oaks, wildflowers, and nongame animal species; **education**, through demonstrating the finest modern Tree Farming practices to our neighbors; and **perpetuation** of the forest, to □ensure a sustainable forest which will be self-supporting generation after generation.□ My wife and I and each of our sons signed the document and hung it on our cabin wall.

Private forestland owners, like Gail and I, actively manage our forests because we have to. We have to generate income from our Tree Farms to keep our property viable. We can't risk letting our forests burn, or be attacked by insects and disease. Lack of management is not a way for us to take care of our land. And we believe that it is active management that has made our forest the showcase it is today.

There are many stories I can share with you about what other Tree Farmers have done with their properties to ensure their sustainability.

Chester Thigpen of Montrose, Mississippi is a past recipient of the National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year award. Chester is the grandson of slaves. Today his 850-acre showcase Tree Farm is built around the forty acres he inherited from his uncle and plowed with a mule as a young boy. But it wasn't always a showcase. When Chester began to build his Tree Farm, he purchased 810 acres of played-out, highly eroded cotton fields. To hear neighbors tell it, before Chester owned it, his purchase looked like a "dustbowl posterchild." Today, Chester will proudly tell you, "Not one grain of sand washes off this property without me knowing it." With active management, information from the Mississippi Forestry Commission and hard work, Chester built a managed forest that helped put his five children through college and earned him the title 1995 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year.

The Robert Olson family of Hayward, Wisconsin are "Century Tree Farmers." They have owned and managed their forestland for over 100 years. They understand that responsible forest management is not a prerogative. Soren Olson, Robert's grandfather, managed their forest with techniques he brought from Scandinavia. He managed for sustained yield and kept the brush and slash out of his woodlot. When his neighbors' woods burned in the great fires of 1910, his land remained virtually undamaged.

Nearly 100 years ago Soren Olson realized the importance of actively managing the forest. He knew that nature pays no respect to survey lines. Good forest stewards understand these concepts, protecting not only their forests, but respecting their neighbors' forests as well. There is something we can all learn from these

outstanding forest stewards.

Every Certified Tree Farmer--all 66,000 of us--has made a written pledge to grow the wood our nation needs while protecting water quality, soil and wildlife habitat. Each of us has pledged to meet or exceed our state's best management practices. Many of us provide recreation opportunities for our neighbors and community --a place to hike, marvel at the fall colors, fish, hunt or just seek peace and solitude. And our Tree Farms are inspected every five years by professional foresters to assure we meet the high standards of the American Tree Farm System. I'm proud to say that Certified Tree Farms are among the most beautiful, best managed forests in the United States.

Certified Tree Farmers are outstanding examples of how active forest stewardship, through the multiple-use concept, brings economic values to local communities, reduces the tragedies brought by natural catastrophes such as wildfires and insect infestations and protects our forest resources for future generations. Not only can America's other 10 million forest owners learn something from this ethic, but so too can federal forest managers and the public at large.

# # #