

Taking On A Tall Order

Young couple attempts to overcome stiff odds in New Jersey.

Bob Williams



Throughout America, many of public forestlands are in trouble. Whether it is a result of windstorms, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfire or from the wide range outbreaks of insects or diseases, or plain benign neglect, many forests now need active management. It is true that at times forest ecosystems actually depend on some of these disturbance agents to regenerate and renew themselves. However, we must begin to decide what results we would like to see from these disturbances and take an active hand in managing them for desired outcomes.

In the fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy disturbed many forest ecosystems across the state of New Jersey. In the coastal plain swamps of southern New Jersey, Atlantic white cedar, a threatened forest ecosystem, had been in decline long before the further devastating impacts of the storm.

Atlantic white cedar (AWC) contin-



Harvesting Atlantic white cedar in New Jersey is a specialty of Colin and Deborah McLaughlin, inset.

ues its decline on “preserved” public lands. Flooding by beaver activity, rising sea levels, and the previously mentioned disturbance agents remove cedar from the landscape within its entire range, and these stands are not regenerating, thus there appears to be a net annual loss of this forest type. New, young regenerated stands are only found

where loggers have worked with foresters and scientists to insure that cedar regeneration is successful and a more diverse age class structure is developed, building resilience in the cedar stands and insuring their perpetuity. The key is the need for a professional logger to be able to viably complete these projects economically.

Up until the 1970s, southern New Jersey had a significant AWC industry and many cedar mills dotted the forest landscape. As in many areas of the country, the forest industry is long gone from this region, leaving it almost impossible for forest scientists or foresters to find the needed logging professionals required to successfully regenerate or restore stands of white cedar.

Light, aromatic and durable, Atlantic white cedar is a high value wood, utilized for shake roofs, siding, decking, boat building, posts, and other important uses. Historical buildings such as Independence Hall in nearby Philadelphia are still roofed with Atlantic white cedar.



Old Prentice 410E is reliable but is used sparingly.

Enter The McLaughlins

In early 2007 a young man and his wife decided they wanted to develop a forestry business. That in itself is somewhat unusual in these days of technology and service jobs, but to try and do it in New Jersey, of all places, seemed a real stretch. But contrary to what many in our society think (particularly politicians), America is still a place where if you believe in your

heart you can make something happen, you can. Colin and Deborah McLaughlin couldn't have picked a worse time to begin a business, on the cusp of a major economic meltdown, or a more challenging type than woodland management and logging.

"I was making real good money but the commute to New York City (early starts and late returns) was getting old, and my kids were growing up. I was

itching for a change. Everybody thought I was out of my mind," recalls McLaughlin.

After buying an ASV skid-steer machine fitted with a Bradco mulching head to maintain their own small woodland around their home in Salem County, the couple decided to leave their careers—Colin an ironworker and Deborah a day care school manager—and start a woodland management compa-



To reduce rutting, Advanced Forestry Solutions keeps Clark tracks on its Timberjack forwarders.

Species In Decline

Atantic white cedar forests have been in decline since European settlement. This wetland forest type is found along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Georgia, with a separate population on the Gulf Coast from Florida to Mississippi. When settlers arrived in North America, there were an estimated 500,000 acres of this forest type. By the late 1990s it had dwindled to an estimated 50,000 acres across its entire range. This acreage remains in steep decline and without an active management program, white cedar will be lost to the environment in the future.

The science of white cedar management was begun in 1931 by Korstian & Brush-Research USFS, then followed up by Dr. Silas Little in the 1950s (Yale University, School of Forestry), and continues today with Dr. George Zimmermann for the past 23 years at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Thus, the science on white cedar management is sound. Although at times white cedar can naturally regenerate, today, the losses exceed regeneration.

A landscape level recovery plan is needed. This recovery plan will need to integrate a timber component. Restoration of the species is expensive and revenue from wood sales will provide the economic base to begin to increase and perpetuate it on our landscapes. We only need to look at the success of the longleaf pine restoration initiative that is successful because of the high value timber longleaf pine produces. Thinking that grants and/or government subsidies will save white cedar forests only will insure its demise. For more information visit atlantic-white-cedar.org. **TH**

ny. Their initial approach was to provide a brush mowing service to help landowners manage their forests for wildlife habitat and wildfire fuel mitigation. They quickly realized they needed to diversify if they were to survive and continue working in the woods. Ventures into both firewood and pulpwood harvesting soon followed. The learning curve was sharp, and painful at times. Despite many obstacles, they not only persevered but also expanded along the way.

Today their Advanced Forestry Solutions LLC (AFS) is a small company that specializes in Atlantic white cedar harvesting and restoration, based on the best available science for the species. AFS continues other forestry work, including harvesting pitch pine, but over the last 24 months it has become adept in harvesting white cedar species in swamp conditions, with ongoing advice from other professionals from New Jersey, the southeastern U.S., and as far away as the Pacific Northwest and Canada.

With no background in logging, McLaughlin did it the hard way, learning as he went. In the swampy white cedar terrain, McLaughlin first tried lightweight skidders—old Timberjack 230s—but soon took another path. Seeking advice from loggers in both Canada and the U.S. Pacific Northwest as to what equipment and harvesting methods would work best, he switched to a modified cut-to-length system. In regeneration cuts, which are necessary to insure a good stand of AWC from dormant seeds, the company fells and processes at the stump and forwards logs out on corduroy roads padded with cedar slash and other low-grade material found on site. This cutting system is commonly found in the Northeast, Lake States and Pacific Northwest. A similar corduroy system is commonly found in southern swamps. The track-type machine is a natural for spongy, wet underfoot conditions.

The young logger was struck with how helpful he found loggers and equipment companies to be in his quest for information and machines. He zoomed in on Timberjack 608 track-type machines—“they’re good, light machines and simple to fix”—buying two for himself and a third to fix up and sell. He says he chose Log Max felling-processing heads, a 5000 and a 7500, for their reliability and the fact that a dealer, Blondin, had established itself years ago in not-so-far-

away Indiana, Pa. “Rikard (Rikard Olofsson, the Blondin owner) and his people are the best. They have been so helpful to us. I don’t know what we’d do without them.”

He also sought out Timberjack forwarders, buying an 810 and an 1110, both eight-wheel drive models. When working in white cedar swamps, he fits them with Clark tracks, which are typically removed when working in higher and dryer stands of pitch pine. He recently purchased a Caterpillar 574 forwarder, saying he is warming up quickly to the yellow machine. An old Prentice 410E is kept on hand for occasional use. His service truck is a Ford F250.

The McLaughlins have a crew of five working cedar projects. Chris Hall, the field supervisor, had a background in cedar logging, having worked previously with a cedar mill. His skills and knowledge have made the difference. Even so, finding and keeping dependable employees is an ongoing challenge, according to McLaughlin.

White cedar logs are trucked to a couple of small local markets, however, the primary market is a specialty sawmill in eastern North Carolina. Pine pulpwood is trucked to Glatfelter in Spring Grove, Pa. McLaughlin relies on two Pennsylvania-based contract truck outfits, saying he is well satisfied with both.

Salvage Effort

After many years of trial and error and gaining the skills and equipment to successfully harvest AWC and insure its regeneration, along came Hurricane Sandy. The storm blew down patches of cedar, turning mature stands into piles of large “pick-up sticks.” The loss of cedar from the hurricane continues after many months. In addition to the blowdown damage, significant coastal stands are now dead or dying from the storm surge that flooded areas with salt water. As trees began to grow in the spring of 2013, the ingested residual salt left in the soil killed mature trees.

Early in 2013, AFS shifted from harvesting standing timber to restoring blowdown damaged stands on the private Pine Island Cranberry Stewardship Forest in Woodland Township, Burlington County. The company has a long-term timber agreement to assist the sixth generation owner, Bill Haines, Jr., with the management and restoration of his cedar resource that also sustains a large watershed for the

family's primary business of growing high-quality cranberry crops.

McLaughlin says Haines reached out to him early on, encouraging him, and even offering temporary assistance as he steadied himself financially. "I was blown away by what he did and will forever be grateful to him."

Haines owns more than 20,000 acres, about 3,000 of which are in white cedar. Pitch pine dominates a good chunk of the property. AFS harvests both white cedar and pine in helping Haines manage the forest.

By the summer of 2013, the New Jersey State Forest Service had identified a 20-acre hurricane damaged stand of cedar that was in need of salvage and restoration. This area is in what's known as Double Trouble State Park. This forest has a long history of being harvested since colonial times. Double Trouble was once a company town, producing both cranberries and milled wood products. The sawmill was restored in 1995 by the state government, but is little used. Double Trouble State Park is a blend of significant natural and cultural resources, however, the decline of the cedar forest resource has been ongoing in recent decades.

Bill Zipse, an assistant regional state forester, had designed and planned other cedar restoration efforts for this forest but with the severity of the impact from the hurricane, action was needed. AFS met with Zipse and he explained the need to begin to restore the cedar forest to insure both the important ecological and cultural values of the park will be sustained and perpetuated for future generations.

After careful assessment and consideration, the state of New Jersey let a bid for the harvest and salvage of the cedar and AFS successfully received the approval of the bid in August of 2013. Their harvesting experience and track record of success was a major consideration in their being tabbed by the state. After many months of government paperwork, AFS was given to go ahead to begin the salvage harvest in January 2014. The company has a two-year window to complete the salvage but hopes to complete the work by fall of 2014, leaving the land in excellent condition for regeneration to occur naturally.

Even with the success of its cedar work, AFS continues to work on diverse woodland management projects. The brush control work for fire hazard reduction and wildlife habitat



Hurricane Sandy blew down white cedar on state property. A new stand of the species grows vigorously after regeneration harvest on private property.



enhancement remains a mainstay. Recently this work has opened the way for pine thinning.

McLaughlin's hope is that this small cedar salvage, the first in decades on state forests, will be the beginning of a much larger and more sustainable restoration of thousands of acres of cedar throughout New Jersey's system of 600,000-plus acres of state forests. Restoration of the state's cedar resource will require a private-public partnership that allows cedar ecosystems to be restored at little to no cost to New Jersey taxpayers. McLaughlin's vision is to save the forest and provide forest products and jobs in perpetuity.

It is time to move away from the past and maximize the use of our science and technology to insure the conservation of all of our forest ecosystems across America. AFS is just one great

example of the possibilities. We need more young loggers with this vision—a vision of a future in the forestry business, the business of caring for our forests. Taxes, limited markets, regulations, trucking issues, insurance and thin margins all make a forestry business difficult to succeed today. McLaughlin's takeaway from all of this: "Perseverance, hard work, dedication and a land ethic can lead to good things in the forestry business." **TH**

A forest advocate locally and nationwide, Williams is a certified forester and owner of Pine Creek Forestry LLC, Laurel Springs, NJ.

Editor's Note: McLaughlin says he is indebted to Williams for his guidance, assistance, direction, and passionate forest advocacy. McLaughlin can be reached at 856-498-4969 or advancedforestry@comcast.net.