

ForestHER podcast. Season 1. Episode 2. “I just want it to be healthy”

- 1) Becky Barlow (BB): Alabama has an estimated 23 million acres of timberland. This is land that is growing or has the potential to grow trees that can be marketed, sold and made into lumber or other wood-based products. Eighty-seven percent of timberland acres in Alabama are privately owned by non-industrial private landowners, many of whom are considered “Family forest landowners”. These may be individuals, couples, families, estates or trusts who are responsible for forestland decision-making on their property. For some, managing a family forest can be an overwhelming task especially if they feel like they lack the knowledge and training to make informed choices. They may also have limited time and resources to make desired property improvements. Or maybe they are working with family members who have a different land management vision than they do. Any one of these factors can make a family forest landowner want to give up and do nothing– which exactly what they should NOT do! Today we will visit with a landowner who shares her experiences as she navigates the ins and outs of managing a small woodlot with her family. I’m Becky Barlow, and this is ForestHER.

- 2) BB: 30 acres. That is the estimated average size of a family forest in Alabama. That’s about the size of 23 football fields – endzones included. The average family forest ownership in the United States is just over 2 times that at about 65 acres. And while timberland is owned for many different reasons, in general landowners in the Southern United States are more likely to have inherited and live near their land than in other parts of the country. Southern US family forest landowners are also more likely to focus on timber management than their counterparts in other regions of the US. But one thing is consistent nationwide- Women are increasingly taking an active role in forestland decision making. In fact, the number of women who are the primary forestland decision makers increased from 11 to 22% between 2006 and 2013.

- 3) Lynn Dickenson (LD): I’m Lynn Dickenson, and this is our family property. I’m not entirely sure where our property lines are, I have a good idea, probably about 25 or 30 yards over that way. There’s a metal peg and that’s where our property starts and it goes back through the wetland area I know part of this side of the road is ours but I don’t know how far back it goes, and then there is an old pulp-wood road over here...

- 4) BB: Lynn and her husband, Paul, help manage 15 acres of their family’s forestland in East Alabama. And as Lynn described the property, you might have noticed that she is uncertain about where the property lines are. But she is working on figuring that out – which is good because until landowners know what they own, and have boundary lines well established, it is difficult to do other management activities. And landowners who don’t have well established property lines are more susceptible to land loss due to adverse possession. That is, someone claiming to own another person’s property either as an honest mistake, or knowingly in a dishonest attempt to claim title to the land. She and Paul are also trying to figure out what they should do to improve the property. So, I asked her if their family had discussed or written down any goals for their forest.

- 5) LD: No, we haven't written anything down. Paul never really came down here and did much. It still belongs to his dad, when his dad passes it'll go to Paul, but his brother used to take care of this. He died in 2013? 2014? And from that point until about 2017-2018 nobody came down here and did anything. And the only thing his brother did was hunt down here. But he kept, like this road, he kept cleared. Everything was cleared out, like when limbs fell, like this right here he would take care of it. It got neglected until we started coming down here. And we haven't done much, mostly because we just didn't know where to start. It's overwhelming. You know, when you stand back and look at it, and try to figure out what you want to do and how you want to do it trying to find that starting point is difficult.

- 6) LD: Long term objectives? I just want it to be healthy. I don't know what we actually want to use it for yet, but I think we're still trying to figure that out. I know it'll either be recreational or residential. I am leaning more towards the recreational side of it. Just simply because of what it takes to get down here. In order to make this a home site, we'd have to do a lot of work on the roads first. And right now they're not even wide enough to get the equipment down here to lay a foundation for a house or anything else so... we're also kind of leary of putting too much work and effort into it until his name is added to that deed because he talked about putting a camper down here and "oh well we'll get a septic tank put in." and I was like "no I'm not doing that. If your dad wants to add your name to the deed, not sign it over to you, just add your name to it, I've got no problem with it. But until that's done, I don't want to put a lot of time and effort and money into it because it may not end up going to us when all is said and done. We never know. Until we know for sure, we're not going to do a whole lot. I don't mind doing some thinning and things like that, but I'm not putting a septic tank in for a camper. No, I'm not doing that. Those are the kinds of things we disagree on.

- 7) BB: Conversations with family members about the future of your family's forestland can be difficult, especially if there are multiple people involved. But these conversations are an important part of forest management planning. Talking about goals and objectives helps your family determine what forest management activities are most important and it also helps you think about how the work will get done. Once everyone is on the same page --document the plan in writing. Then, follow up through proper legal channels to leave nothing to chance, and help avoid hard feelings down the road. With that taken care of, families can enjoy doing things they love on the land like wildlife watching, and other forms of recreation as they put the plan into practice.

- 8) LD: We do have a lot of deer, and turkey, woodpecker, owls, there's a couple of hawks that live down in here. I see them flying around every once in a while. One of them is huge. Tons of raccoons. I was down here one time by myself, and I was sitting in that tree stand, and I had an apple, and I had eaten it. And I thought "Well I'm just going to throw the core of it out into the field, but you can't throw from up there. You can't- There's a tree behind you! You it landing, you know, very close to where I was sitting and later on that evening a raccoon came down this road, and I watched him and he stopped, and he sat up, and he smelled that apple, and there were logs over there then, and it was between those logs. And he went over there and he got it and sat there and ate that apple core. And I thought "Oh, how cute! He's so adorable!" And then he climbed up the tree right next to me and stared at me. I thought "Okay. I don't like you anymore." he was just

above my head and he was only about six feet from me, and he just sat there and looked at me and I thought "Please go away." he finally went further up the tree and got around on the other side of it and I was like "Okay. I feel better now," but I was like "Are you going to jump on my head? What is going to happen here because I'm going to have a heart attack."

- 9) LD: We've tried to get people to come out here and plow this up for us so that we can plant before deer season because we use this as a food plot during the winter, and it's too small. No one wants to come out here and do that. It's too much effort to get a tractor out here for such a small piece of land to be plowed. And I had a couple different people that I talked to about it last year. One of the actually came out and did look at it, and said he was going to do it, but before he hit the paved road he called me back and said "You know what, it's just really not worth my effort. SO I think it's more feasible for us to find a good used tractor and buy it. And that way we can take care of it ourselves, because I don't think we're really ever going to find anyone that does that for a living that's going to be willing to come and do such a small piece of land. And that's one of the biggest challenges; just to get people out here. The man that came and cleared this for us was somebody that my husband worked with. I think that's the only reason that he did it. You know, it was more as a favor. When you just own a small piece, they don't want to be bothered with it. It's not worth their time.
- 10) BB: Like Lynn and Paul, family forest landowners may decide to do some of the work on their forest themselves - because finding a contractor to work on tracts smaller than 20 acres can sometimes be difficult. And while things like clearing food plots, maintaining forest roads, and basic forest inventories can be done by landowners with the right equipment, larger jobs like getting timber harvests, site preparation work, and tree planting may be more than a landowner wants to take on.
- 11) LD: Probably why we started with that little piece that we had cleared up front there, because we knew we wanted to do that, and we had somebody who was willing to come out and do it so... I wish I had stayed out here when he was doing it, because we just told him "Use your best judgement," and we left. He took out more than I wanted him to, but it's okay. He gave us a nice place to camp, or maybe build a little pavilion or something at some point so it'll be alright. But yeah, he took out a little more than what I wanted him to. I'm not sure how much Paul wanted him to take out, but I think we were both a little shocked when we came back down and saw how much was gone.
- 12) BB: As Lynn and her husband discovered, it is important that expectations are clearly outlined with a contractor before any work is done. Written contracts between the landowner and the contractor can ensure that everyone understands what will be done, when it will be done, and how much it will cost. Also, it is important that you have good lines of communication with the contractor while work is ongoing. And from time to time be onsite when work is being completed so you can address any concerns as they arise.

13) LD: Yeah, I think what I need to do is some research to figure out what should be or what was at one time growing down here, and then what we can do to kind of encourage that. But really we've got to open it up a little bit because otherwise nothing's going to- as far as grasses- nothing's going to grow. I mean it doesn't. It's June and you can see how much we've got. It's almost all hardwoods. A pine tree, here and there, and you can see how many of them are so little. It gets kind of thick. I feel like we need to thin it a little to open it up, but that's what I wanted to do to this open area right here. But instead we had that man just come in and knock things down. If we do anything back through this area, I just want to thin it. I don't want a bulldozer to come back here and knock things down. I just want to open it up a little bit because it gets really dark back in here. The canopy is real full, especially in the summertime. There's almost no grass growing. There's- I mean there's nothing. It's just ground for the most part. Especially when you get back in there to where it gets a little but thicker, so I would like to eventually thin it, if for no other reason than just to open it up a little bit. BB: I think Lynn has the right idea. Do some research to figure out what species are best suited to your forest, determine what you have currently growing on site, and then start with small, manageable projects that will help you meet your goals. And as you go along, document what you do and how it turns out. This can be in writing, or with photographs. This gives you a way to see how far you have come, and gives you hope and inspiration for future land management projects.

14) LD: I've got a list of native grasses and I want to kind of see if I can't plant some of them out here. Because I'd kind of like to try to restore it with some of what should be out here, and I need to research that, because I don't know what should be growing here as opposed to what actually is growing here. Yeah, I mean I know we'll never get it back to what it once was. I mean, if we could encourage some of the trees that should be growing here to grow here then I think that would be a step in the right direction. And I think that's another one of the challenges we're going to face is trying to get someone down here with the equipment to do it that's willing to put in the time and the effort. We could come down with a chainsaw and cut some of these small trees out ourselves, but to really thin it out the way that it probably needs to be... Because, the canopy is thick back here and it's strange because like during hunting season I sit in that little shack over there a lot and it's so interesting to me because this is the west over here, and it get's so dark on this side before it does on this side, and it's just because of all the tree cover, you know? I'll still be able to see into this open field but if I turn around and look the other way I can't see anything, and it's just because of the tree cover. That's why there's not much growing back here either. It's just mostly leaf litter everywhere.

15) BB: It is easy to become overwhelmed. You could probably hear it in Lynn's voice. One thing I suggested to her was that they take a small area, an acre, or even 1/10 of an acre and make improvements, then build on that over time as they start to see results. This mini-management project approach is a good way to try new management ideas before you implement them across your entire forest, just to see if they will work and give you the results you hope for. No matter what improvement you decide to make, always keep in mind your goals, and why you love the land.

16) LD: I love it down here, it's so peaceful. Sometimes when i just need to destress I just come down here, and just sit. Chill out for a while. Just let the world go away.

17) BB: If you, like Lynn and her family, want to improve your forest but are unsure how to start, you are in good company. But know that you don't have to do it all on your own! There is information on boundary lines, wildlife management, and writing a forest management plans at the "Resources" link found on the ForestHER podcast page. And you can contact one of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System Forestry, Wildlife or Natural Resource Agents working in your county who are always happy to help. You can also check the Alabama Cooperative Extension System calendar for upcoming workshops online or in your area.

18) BB: Thanks for listening! We hope you will join for future ForestHER podcasts. In the meantime, remember - find your voice, to be bold, and to do good things for your land.