12 things AFA did for its members in 2020...

January – The AFA staff met to finalize plans for a successful 2020 with several new initiatives ready for launch. Little did we know that COVID-19’s impact was just a few months away. Planning for AFA’s 75th Annual Meeting kicked off, and Communication Coordinator Seth Stephenson and AFA Executive Vice President Max Braswell recorded the association’s first-ever Podcast. This new communication tool proved to be a big hit during the year and was a perfect new outreach tool for a pandemic environment.

February – The AFA Education Foundation conducted the first of its three planned Teacher Conservation Tour sessions in 2020. Woods, Water and Waterfowl was the theme of TCT session #1. Rob Beadel, AFAEF’s director of forestry education, hosted 15 formal and non-formal educators for this interactive, hands-on 2-day workshop focused on Arkansas’s flooded timber habitat.

March – In mid-March, much of AFA’s work switched from the office to on-line when Governor Asa Hutchinson joined states across the country in declaring a state of emergency. AFA immediately went to work on behalf of the timber and forest products community to ensure our sector was positioned to be part of keeping the state’s economy going. Step one was to ensure the forestry sector was deemed critical infrastructure, designated by the Governor.

April – AFA was honored to be added to Governor Asa Hutchinson’s Arkansas Economic Recovery Task Force. Max Braswell, executive vice president, represented the forestry sector on the task force, comprised of more than 30 representatives of the state’s business community. The task force and subcommittees, focusing on agriculture, forestry, transportation, education, retail and hospitality continue to meet to help chart the course for returning the state’s economy to full strength as quickly and as safely as possible.

May – Planned special events like the AFA Spring Board Meeting and “Night with the Travelers” may have been canceled, but AFA continued advocating for the forestry sector during the pandemic. Working directly or through partnerships with organizations like the Arkansas Timber Producers Association, the association successfully gained temporary regulatory relief for forest products manufacturers and a weight waiver for log trucks carrying pulpwood used in the production of certain products critical to the COVID relief effort.

June – After completely planning the 2020 Annual Meeting, the AFA Program Committee made the difficult decision to transition from an in-person event to a virtual meeting. The decision necessitated starting over from scratch. The committee and AFA staff revisited every aspect of the conference – securing speakers, sponsors and identifying the technology and expertise needed to provide a high-value, virtual meeting. AFA also published its quarterly “10 Things” accomplishments list focusing on its efforts during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

July – AFA was pleased to play a small role in the success of the first American Forestry Conference, presented by the Georgia Forestry Association. AFA invited Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson to participate in a panel discussion moderated by U. S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue. During the discussion, Governor Hutchinson provided an excellent overview of the impact of Arkansas’s timber and forest products sector. During the national conference, our state had a significant presence as 4th District Congressman Bruce Westerman was also featured in a segment discussing his Trillion Trees initiative with Ivanka Trump, advisor to President Donald Trump.

August – County road ordinances are frequently on AFA’s radar, and the association again advocated for loggers in and around Nevada County. After discussions with the County Judge, Deputy Prosecuting Attorney and members of the Quorum Court, AFA provided feedback on a proposed county road ordinance that had been in place since 1997 but not enforced. Ultimately, the ordinance required no bond or permit fee and was designed to improve communication, identifying loggers working in Nevada County and accountability for road damage.

September – More than 245 attendees and 33 sponsors participated in AFA’s first-ever virtual annual meeting from September 29-October 1. The AFA staff turned the conference room into a makeshift studio and, working in partnership with the U of A Cooperative Extension Service, delivered three days of quality presentations. Participants were able to earn Continuing Forestry Education credits during Tuesday’s Forest Management Workshop and again on Wednesday during the general session that featured the likes of Aurelia Skipwith, director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Hardy Wentzel, president and CEO of Structurlam, and 4th District Congressman Bruce Westerman.

October – The virtual offerings continued in October as Jennifer Johnson, director of business and Tree Farm Program administrator, conducted the first on-line version of the annual Tree Farm Conference. Attendees heard from Angela Wells and Leigh Peters of the American Forest Foundation, who discussed upcoming changes to the Tree Farm System Standards of Sustainability, a Landscape Management Plan planned for implementation in Arkansas in 2021, and the 2021 program Assessment. Max Braswell, Arkansas Forestry Association EVP, provided a legislative outlook for the 2021 General Session. Then a panel of foresters (Bill Chaney, Arkansas Dept. of Agriculture - Forestry Division; Doug Teale, Domtar, and Phil Wright, Kingwood Forestry Services, Inc.) will discussed the difference in the duties of a state, industry, and consulting forester, and the roles they play in assisting landowners. After a break for lunch, the meeting convened with District Tree Farmer Award presentations, followed by a virtual tour of the 2020 Arkansas Tree Farm of the Year.

November – AFA loves to step up in times of need – to fill the gap, provide resources and information, or maintain or create outreach opportunities. Jennifer Johnson did just that when she revitalized the very important Women Owning Woodlands program. Persimmons - Growing, Eating, and Forecasting the Weather kicked-off a new series of workshops designed to engage and educate women in the stewardship of their land by connecting them to resources, trusted professionals, and a community of other women. Monthly workshops are planned for early 2021, including Tax Tips for Landowners, Bobwhite Quail, Pollinators - Managing your Property for These and Other Species, Prescribed Fire - An Effective and Economical Forest Management Practice, and Photography 101 - Taking Tree-mendous Photos with your Smartphone.

December – Financial responsibility is always important to AFA, especially during a year like 2020 with so much uncertainty. Thanks to the continued support of our members, sponsors, meeting participants, and project partners, the association finished 2020 with a strong bottom line and enters the new year ready to meet all challenges. The AFA staff is proud to work with you and for you as “The Voice of Forestry” in Arkansas.