AFA Virtual 75th Annual Meeting Draws 245 Guests, Over 30 Sponsors

With more than 30 sponsors and 245 registered attendees, the virtual 75th Arkansas Forestry Association (AFA) Annual Meeting provided important forestry information during a time when large in-person events may not be the safest way to meet.

AFA held its 75th Annual Meeting virtually on September 29 - October 1, 2020.

Cunningham of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

Tuesday morning started with our Forest Management Workshop. Chandler Barton, with the Arkansas Department of Agriculture – Forestry Division, kicked things off with a forest health presentation. Clint Johnson with the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission and Austin Klaas with Pheasants Forever followed up to discuss healthy forests and healthy wildlife. Dr. Vic Ford, with the UA Cooperative Extension Service, finished off the session with a lesson on forestry ethics.

Planning for AFA Annual Meetings begins years in advance. Specifics of each event are determined around the first of the year. When a pandemic hits three months into the year, things get a little complicated. Our Program Committee and staff worked very hard this year to ensure everyone remained safe but still received the quality meeting they have come to expect from AFA every year.

Our sponsors and attendees continued to show their support this year despite all the changes. We had over 30 sponsors, and about 245 people registered to join us. Both of these numbers were unexpected for our first big virtual meeting.

The new virtual format came with its fair share of unique challenges, including coordinating speakers from different time zones, communicating the multi-step process to get into the meeting, and providing a high-quality video for attendees. Organizing the event was made as seamless as possible with the Zoom expertise of Samantha Barker and Kyle Cunningham of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

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AFA Executive Vice President Max Branswell welcomed everyone Wednesday morning to the beginning of our general session. Attendees heard from Director of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Aurelia Skipwith on her organization’s vision and their partnership with the forestry industry. Heidi Brock, the President and CEO of the American Forest & Paper Association, joined the session to share information on some of the current public policy issues impacting forestry. AFA was fortunate enough to have 4th District U.S. Representative Bruce Westerman join us for about an hour after Brock’s presentation where he laid out his Trillion Trees Initiative and provided a congressional outlook for attendees.

The AFA staff would like to thank everyone involved in this year’s annual meeting. Without you, this would have been a very challenging endeavor. Thank you to our sponsors for continuing to support AFA during a challenging time.

You can find a list of them at arkforests.org on the Annual Meeting page. Starting November 2, we will also feature one of our sponsor commercials each week in our e-newsletter, Tree Mail.

Of course, thank you to all of our attendees who joined us throughout the meeting. Mark your calendars to join us for the 76th Annual Meeting, virtually, or hopefully in person, in Rogers on October 5-7, 2021.
Instead of having an awards breakfast on Thursday during the Annual Meeting, AFA provided a virtual way to recognize some of the fantastic people in our industry.

The video can still be found on the Arkansas Forestry Association YouTube page at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3j6eRAx5Aw.

For those unable to see the video, AFA would like to highlight our winners here one more time. Congratulations once again to all of these wonderful people and we thank them for the work they do every day.

2020 AFA Logger of the Year: Derrick Wilkins Logging, LLC

Clint Johnson is a Private Lands Wildlife Biologist with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Science and Master’s degree in Biology from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway.

Clint works with private landowners in Central Arkansas that are interested in improving their habitat to benefit wildlife. He teaches prescribed fire and other timber management techniques to natural resource professionals, private landowners, and educators through the Arkansas Prescribed Fire Council, landowner workshops, and AFA’s Teacher Conservation Workshop Series.

Clint is a Certified Wildlife Biologist through The Wildlife Society and serves as vice-chair on AFA’s Landowner Education Committee. He also shares his outdoor expertise as a Cubmaster with Boy Scout Pack 444. He serves on the Board of Directors of Mount Eagle Christian Retreat Center, where he advises on the management of 1,000 forested acres in the Arkansas Ozarks.

2020 AFA Communicator of the Year: Regine Skelton

Regine Skelton was born in Colorado, lives in Arkansas, but considers herself a Texan at heart. She grew up in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolix, but enjoyed weekend escapes to the family forestland and traveling to other states and countries where she explored a variety of outdoor recreational pursuits that helped develop her appreciation of the natural world.

Visualizing the future impacts of climate change, Regine opted to specialize in Fire Management and completed her Bachelor’s Degree in Forestry in 2009 at Stephen F. Austin State University. After graduating, she began working with CellFor Elite Pine Varieties. Her career has taken her to tasks to work for the US Forest Service as a Timber Sale Preparation crew member and eventually to Arkansas, where she began her work with the Arkansas Department of Agriculture - Forestry Division. Regine is a dedicated public servant and a voting member of the Hot Springs Urban Forestry Board, Vice-Chair of the Ouachita Society of American Foresters, a District Chair of the Arkansas Branch of the American Tree Farm System, and a District Urban Forestry Representative for the division.

AFA Honors Yearly Award Winners, con’t

2020 2020 AFA Tree Farmer of the Year: Pamela Jolly

Pamela Jolly is the proud and involved owner of the Patton Tree Farm, a 222-acre forest located in Yell County near Danville. The farm is named for her father, James Patton, who instilled in her land ownership values and the responsibility of land conservation for equity, livelihood and wildlife.

To honor her father and their common interest, she bought her timberland in 2015. Pam’s management strategies and goals go hand in hand with the core values of the American Tree Farm System. Wood, water, wildlife, and recreation are a big part of her long-term management goals. Pam has had a commercial pine thinning on the 40-acre pine plantation, and also 181 acres of injection to remove the hardwood and pine stand’s low quality and invasive species. She and her husband, Jim, involve their children and grandchildren on the farm to teach them responsible conservation practices.

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AFA Honors Yearly Award Winners

2020 AFA President’s Award: Frank Wilson

Frank Wilson has been involved in forestry and the family business since he was 10 years old when he began working with his father. The impact the local 4-H program made on his life as a young man inspired him to pursue a degree in forestry from the University of Arkansas-Monticello, which paved the way for a successful and storied career within the Arkansas forestry sector.

AFA, the Arkansas Forestry Commission and Rison’s community have benefited from Frank and the Wilson family’s dedication to success. He started his first sawmill in 1972 at the cost of $1,500, as a partnership between him and his two older brothers, Grady and Jewel Wilson. Throughout its history, Wilson Brothers Lumber Company has been a true family business. While Frank is the last of the three original partners still active in the sawmill, each brother has sons who continue to operate and manage the mill or several separate businesses.

Running his sawmill didn’t become a full-time business until 1983, but forestry is truly his life. And since November 2017, his life has revolved around a new Wilson Brothers Lumber Company sawmill in Rison, which employs 20 people and plays an integral role in the vibrant, rural community.

Frank is a long-time member of the AFA Executive Committee, served as President of the association in 2004-2005, and brings a wealth of knowledge to the Government Affairs Committee. His forestry leadership reaches beyond AFA. He is the current Chairman of the Arkansas Forestry Commission, having served since 2011, and was recently reappointed to a second nine-year term by Governor Asa Hutchinson.

“I’m thankful that I’ve never had a job where I looked forward to Friday or hated to see Monday come,” Frank said.