

A Short History of the American Tree Farm System

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The American Tree Farm System is celebrating its 75th Anniversary in 2016. Tree Farm is a national program that provides tools for family forest landowners to keep their forests healthy and productive and also certifies their sustainable forest management. Tree Farm has been operating in Michigan since 1949. Today there are 539 Certified Tree Farms covering 153,292 acres in 78 of Michigan's 83 counties. There are 137 professional foresters who are active Tree Farm Inspectors in Michigan. The Michigan Tree Farm is administered by a volunteer committee of foresters and landowners that help private forest landowners learn about their forests and certify their sustainable forest management.

The Weyerhaeuser forest products company started Tree Farm in 1941 in Montesano, Washington. The historical context 75 years ago is important to the creation of the American Tree Farm System. In the early part of the last century, property taxes were very high and catastrophic forest fires were rampant. It was often cheaper for a landowner to liquidate all of their timber, give up the land to tax reversion, and buy new land instead of sustainably managing their forest for decades. Weyerhaeuser wanted to prove that private forest lands can be protected and managed for "continuous forest production" of commercial forest products.

The government was skeptical about Tree Farm at its origins. The United States was still recovering from the Depression in the 1930's when the federal government had to rescue and operate many sectors of the economy. The federal government also wanted to regulate forestry practices on private forest lands. Lyle Watts, the Chief of the US Forest Service in 1941, wanted to stop Tree Farm before it spread. He asked the Society of American Foresters (SAF) to speak out against Tree Farm, but SAF actually supported Tree Farm in their August 1942 *Journal of Forestry* editorial. SAF agreed with Tree Farm that private landowners who voluntarily adopt improved forestry practices should not be subject to federal regulation.

The American Forest and Paper Association took over the national administration of Tree Farm in 1946 and helped it spread to 44 states today. Each participating state has its own committee made up of volunteers in the forestry community to implement Tree Farm in their local context. For its first few decades, the forest products industry used Tree Farm to recognize and reward private landowners for their good forest management and for supplying wood to their mills. Since 1991, Tree Farm has been administered nationally by the American Forest Foundation (www.forestfoundation.org).

As the environmental movement developed in the 1970's and 1980's, society also focused their attention on forests and forest management. Many people were concerned about air and water pollution, forest management practices, and deforestation in tropical countries. In 1992, leaders from 172 countries and hundreds of environmental organizations met in Brazil for the "Rio Earth Summit" to declare international support for taking better care of our natural resources. A year later, "forest certification" was created as a means to document for society that forests are being sustainably managed in conformance to high quality standards and verified by independent, third party auditors.

The American Tree Farm System has adapted to meet these societal concerns. Tree Farm developed their first "Standards of Sustainability" in 2000 to provide a forest certification program designed for family forest owners in the United States. The first forest certification programs were more focused on international forestry and large, multi-national corporations. However, the American Tree Farm System is recognized internationally by the Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certifications (www.pefc.org).

Although Tree Farms can range from 10 to 10,000 acres, they are usually in the 40 to 240 acre sizes in Michigan. Tree Farm requires that landowners have a written forest management plan and comply with the eight Standards of

Sustainability to document their good forestry practices. These Standards are available on the Tree Farm website at www.treefarmssystem.org. Tree Farm is an accessible, low cost option for family forest owners to learn about their forests, and brag to their neighbors about their excellent forest management.

Forest certification is important because it provides credibility to the general public that forest landowners are providing forest products and ecosystem services for society in a sustainable manner. The big green Tree Farm sign proclaims that well managed forests provide wood, water, recreation, and wildlife benefits for all of us to enjoy. For more information about the Michigan Tree Farm, explore www.treefarmssystem.org/michigan or contact Mike Smalligan at smalliganm@michigan.gov.



Dead River Campers Inc Tree Farm in Marquette County.



Gates Tree Farm in Montcalm County.