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Piedmont family recognized for forest stewardship

By Deb Holland, Black Hills Pioneer

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Bob Burns and Mary LaHood, who operate LaHood-Burns Family Forest, have been named the American Tree Farm System's 2021 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year. Courtesy photo

PIEDMONT — Nestled at the foot of the Black Hills near Piedmont, Bob Burns and Mary LaHood continue to nurture the forest that surrounds them much like they have nurtured their four children.

For their efforts, the American Forest Foundation, a national conservation organization that empowers family forest owners to make a positive impact through their woodlands, named Burns and LaHood as the American Tree Farm System's 2021 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year.

The LaHood-Burns Family Forest has been a certified tree farm for more than 20 years. It is comprised of ponderosa pine, along with a mix of other conifers and deciduous trees. Their property is one of more than 100 on about 20,000 acres of privately owned forest land in the Black Hills.



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“We were quite honored to be in the running,” LaHood said of the award. “We weren’t really seeking the recognition, so it’s kind of surprising that we received the award. We do this because we love it.”

Burns joked that his reaction to the national award was akin to his reaction when his kids brought home a great report card.

The tree farm story

The railroad has played a role in connecting people to new lands since its inception and so it was with the LaHood-Burns Family Forest.

Bob Burn’s great-grandfather purchased the land in 1887 for \$675 while working on the construction of the first railroad through the Piedmont Valley. Nineteen years later on Dec. 7, 1906, he contracted with a sawmill to harvest pine trees 11 inches in diameter at two-and-a-half feet above the ground for \$8,500. An inflation calculation from 1913 would estimate it at almost \$210,000 today.

The land remained unoccupied until Bob Burn’s father, Richard, built their home in 1956. Other than a major timber theft in the 1930s there was no history of timber management until Bob took over the property following his father’s death in 1969. At that time, Bob was majoring in environmental science at Rutgers University and had taken several courses in forestry and watershed management.

Caring for the forest

As he built his excavation company which specialized in land and stream improvements for the U.S. Forest Service and South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks, Bob used his slow time to begin thinning some of the several overgrown dog hair areas that dominated the property.

Bob worked by himself at first, selling posts to help finance the thinning project, but soon learned about available cost-share programs. This enabled him to hire timber contractors to help with the work.

Bob's marriage to Mary LaHood in 1986 and the subsequent birth of three of their four children ushered in a period of slowed conservation work on the property.

Fire threatens the forest

On Aug. 15, 1994, the lightning-caused Stagebarn forest fire erupted on National Forest Service land bordering the LaHood-Burns property.

By that evening, the fire appeared under control. State and Forest Service firefighters positioned themselves atop a ridge on the LaHood-Burns property where they'd established a mobile water reservoir and could monitor the fire overnight.

Bob had been working in Wyoming, but when he arrived home, he assured Mary, now in her last month of pregnancy with their fourth child, that they could go to sleep with no worries.

"Mary's just a worry-wart.

Mary said that just after midnight that night they were awakened when their bedroom window glowed red as flames soared over a 100-foot in the air. The fire had blown up, forcing the firefighters to flee and abandon the reservoir.

"Something woke me up. I think a flash of light. I told Bob, 'Something's not right,'" she said.

She and Bob drove to the end of their driveway to get a better view of the hillside.

Bob was convinced there was something wrong and rushed to the emergency fire headquarters set up at the nearby Stagebarn Elementary School where he discovered that Forest Service heavy equipment was being mobilized and the homes adjacent to the LaHood-Burns property were being evacuated.

From his work, Bob knew many of the Forest Service personnel onsite and his knowledge of the area became instrumental in laying out an attack plan.

About 2 a.m. when the first Forest Service bulldozer arrived, Bob was enlisted to guide the operator in creating a fire line the length of their tree farm.

During the next 14 hours, they put in almost two miles of fire line to surround the fire on the south and west sides. The fire did not jump the fire lines and no homes were lost. In addition to the fire line, a mile long, 100-foot-wide fuel break established seven years prior was instrumental in slowing the fire.

Refocusing on forest health

Bob said the experience with the Stagebarn Fire and the upcoming task of dealing with the 80 burned acres of their land re-focused he and Mary on forest health.

“That really got us thinking that we needed to have a timber sale. We knew we needed to get everything under management,” he said.

Bob contacted Fred Goetz, a professional forester, who explained the benefits of the American Tree Farm System.

With that, a forest stewardship plan was drawn up and a comprehensive timber management plan was initiated, which included not only a salvage sale of the burned property, but a sawlog harvest, a post-and-pole sale and the precommercial thinning of the remaining accessible property.

“It (the plan) essentially outlines your specific objectives,” Mary said.

Elements of that plan included timber production, fire management and creating wildlife habitat. One of their projects was to thin trees in an area to create a meadow. A bonus of that project was that it started a spring flowing that had not flowed in more than 50 years.

“A mature, large pine tree under the right circumstances can transpire 200 to 300 gallons of water a day, usually not that much because the water isn’t there,” Burns said.

The trees also act as a barrier to intercept the water before it hits the ground. And pine needles covering the forest floor can act like a thatched roof causing water to run off before getting into the ground, Burns said.

Burns said they diverted the spring water into a pond which gets visited often by wildlife in the forest.

Completion of that initial project earned the Stewardship Forest and Certified Tree Farm signs that proudly still stand at the entrance to the LaHood-Burns’ property a quarter of a century later. Little did Bob and Mary know then, but that placement of those signs marked an even more significant passage - one that propelled the LaHood-Burns Family Forest into a new era of robust, active, and rewarding stewardship of the land.

Passion for the forest

The 320-acre LaHood-Burns Family Forest is a place where neighbors hike and hunt, where the family works the land and gathers at their campsite, where youth groups experience nature and community and governmental groups are educated about tree farming, where marriage proposals occur, and where the foundation for the next generation of family forest landowners is being built, Mary said.

Bob and Mary continue to host tours of the farm to create a better understanding of their role in nurturing the forest.

Adjacent to the LaHood-Burns property is a biologically-diverse spring-fed canyon known as Botany Canyon. Though the majority of it resides on adjacent National Forest, access to the stream is through the LaHood-Burns Family Forest.

In 2004, excessive off-road travel through the sensitive spring inspired Bob to rally the U. S. Forest Service, environmental groups, off-road groups and a Boy Scout seeking his Eagle Scout badge to build and install a post-and-rail fence with a walk-through gate on the LaHood-Burns tree farm. Off-road motorized travel stopped, thus protecting the creek and the extraordinary sampling of flora in Botany Canyon.

The LaHood-Burns Family Forest property has evolved into a place for both solitary and group activities. Bob and Mary created a camp/picnic site with fire pit and benches. Every year, Bob mows trails enjoyed by hikers, cyclists, bow hunters and horseback riders.

Recognized for their stewardship

The LaHood-Burns family was selected from among more than 70,000 certified Tree Farmers nationwide as the American Tree Farm System's 2021 National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year for their decades of dedicated, proactive stewardship of their 320 acres of forestland, said Angela Wells, Director of the ATFS.

"I am privileged to know Mary and Bob personally and can attest to their commitment to building community among forest landowners, in addition to caring for their land in a way that would make past and future generations proud," she said.

The family takes a diverse approach to management, focusing on protecting the timber stands from wildfire danger, promoting water quality, reduce the threat of Mountain Pine beetles, reducing invasive weeds, as well as improving wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities such as camping and hiking for the greater community.

"I can't think of more deserving Tree Farmers," says Bill Coburn, chairman of the South Dakota Family Forests Association. "When I called them, they were up on their farm working. That says a lot about their incredible dedication."

Burns is currently the vice chair of the South Dakota Family Forests Association and chair of its advocacy committee. He has served as past president of the Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board, the Meade School Board and the Norbeck Society. LaHood is the Executive Director and Treasurer of the South Dakota Family Forests Association.

Besides the LaHood-Burns Family Forest, Bob and Mary's other children include Kevin LaHood-Burns, Macy, Neb.; Ryan LaHood-Burns and his wife, Erika, and son Kieran; Delainey LaHood-Burns and her fiancé Kyle Robertson, Manchester, N.H.; and Murray LaHood-Burns of Black Hawk.

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