



#FridaysOnTheFarm: The Peak of Good Forestry

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, the USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests and resource areas where USDA customers and partners do right and feed everyone.

This Friday, meet John Cobb, a retired business executive who transformed an out-of-shape forest into a healthy, hill-top wildlife oasis in Ireland, West Virginia. At 76, he lives on top of the mountain overlooking what his family calls “Grandpa’s Forest.”

Planning a Healthy Forest

When he first bought the property back in 2006, no one had lived there for decades. Parts of it were overrun by invasive plants, and there were hardly any breaks in the forest canopy. Because his property was so uniformly forested, the biodiversity there was lower than it could be.

He decided to make a few changes.

He reached out to foresters for help, first a private one, and then Travis Miller, a forester with the West Virginia Division of Forestry. He came to realize the importance of forest stewardship plan, which enabled Cobb to reach natural resource and production goals.

“[Travis] and I worked for several years to get the stewardship plan together and realized,” Cobb said. “He opened up all new vistas for me about what I could do with my land for myself and my family.”

An important part of managing for healthy forests includes cutting trees.

“I hate to cut timber, but all of the foresters that I talk to say that at a certain age of timber you have to cut it,” Cobb said.

His plan divided the property into 11 stands, which have different management needs depending on their age and tree makeup.

Cobb has become a big believer in stewardship plans. “It helps support my managed timber status with the West Virginia Division of Forestry, and it allowed me to work with the assessor and get a tax break on my property taxes.”

Helping the Cerulean Warbler

One of his major wildlife goals was to increase habitat for the cerulean warbler, a migratory bird whose population declined 70 percent from 1966 to 1999, and is estimated to number about 560,000 today. The cerulean warbler's migratory range is large, stretching from New York to South America.

Cobb worked with the [Appalachian Mountain Joint Venture](#) (AMJV) and others to plan and implement forest management practices to create habitat for the cerulean warbler and other wildlife species.

"When you create this habitat, it benefits deer, a variety of birds and other animals," he added. "We created habitat last January through March, and it worked, as they found eight couples of warblers there this spring."

Through AMJV's [Cerulean Warbler Appalachian Forestland Enhancement Project](#), Cobb received funding from USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) to create openings in the forest canopy, enhance cerulean warbler habitat, and in turn, enhance biodiversity on his land.

The overall goal of the project is to improve 12,500 acres of forest habitat and 1,000 acres of reclaimed mine lands for Cerulean Warblers and other wildlife in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Ohio and Maryland.

"Because three-fourths of the cerulean warbler's distribution occurs on private lands, working with private landowners in this region is critical to the successful conservation of this songbird," AMJV Coordinator Todd Fearer said. "Fortunately, good cerulean habitat is best created using sustainable forestry practices that can improve the health of the forest stand and improve the future value of timber, so it's a win for both the birds and the landowners," Fearer said. Other partners in the AMJV project include the [American Bird Conservancy](#), West Virginia Division of Forestry, National Wild Turkey Federation and U.S. Forest Service.

Sharing Results

Since starting his own plan, Cobb has already helped four other landowners participate in AMJV's cerulean project. And as a retiree, he recommends other retirees consider managing their own land.

"It's a rewarding way to spend your later years and to do something good for the planet and for future generations," he said.



“Ever since I was six years old I wanted to live in the woods, and now I’ve fulfilled my childhood dream. I’ve travelled all over the world in my business days. There’s no place in the world that I haven’t been or that I would want to go back and visit. This is where my heart is and where my focus is. I don’t like leaving my mountaintop.”

Available Assistance

Through the Farm Bill, NRCS offers technical and financial assistance to farmers, ranchers and forest landowners wanting to make conservation improvements on their land. This assistance includes forest management practices, like those that Cobb implemented on his land.

Landowners wanting to participate in the AMJV’s effort for cerulean warbler are encouraged to reach out to [the AMJV](#) or their nearest [USDA service center](#). Also, for more information on NRCS forestry practices, visit the [“Managing for Healthy, Diverse Forests” multimedia story](#).

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