

Paper mill closure bodes poorly for sustainable forestry in WNC

The closing of the paper mill in Canton is a major loss for its 1,100 employees and a shock to the area's economy. The ripple effects also make it very bad news for sustainable forestry in the mountains.

For more than 100 years, timber harvests to supply forest products in southern Appalachia have shaped and created the forests we see today. The pending closure of the paper mill in Canton will now shape the future of our forests. While historically some of the supply chain demands necessary to support these industries negatively impacted overall forest health, the paper mill's use of only low-grade and small-diameter wood created opportunities for sustainable and beneficial forest management.

When timber harvests are done using sound ecological principles, forest health can be maintained or even enhanced through an increase in species and structural (tree age/size) diversity. The closure of the paper mill in Canton will severely reduce demand for pulpwood, which comes from small diameter (less than 12 inches) or poorly formed trees. Many of the restoration needs of our forests include reducing weedy, small trees that are often less desirable (economically and ecologically) and outcompete more desirable trees. The loss of demand for these lower value forest products will make it much less economically feasible for forestland owners to do improvement cuts to benefit wildlife, regenerate oaks, or to even sustainably harvest timber in Western North Carolina.

High costs were already leading loggers to cut *only* the larger and much more profitable sawtimber trees to make a short-term profit. This unsustainable "high-grading" has degraded forests for decades. Now, it will be almost impossible to sell the low-grade pulpwood, and even more high-grade sawtimber harvests will happen as a consequence. In these high-grade harvests, only the biggest and best trees (which are the best seed trees for future forests) are cut, leaving the smaller, poorly formed, or unhealthy trees.

The smaller pulpwood already had such low profit margins that many loggers would not cut it. Highgrade harvests are usually implemented as a diameter-limit cut - i.e., cut all trees less than 16 inches in diameter, which is when trees have significant sawtimber value, leaving behind a degraded forest with much lower quality, smaller (usually slower-growing) trees. Often a tree's economic value as sawtimber/ pulp mirrors its ecological value for wildlife, carbon storage, or simple beauty.

Forests struggle to recover on their own from these unsustainable high-grade harvests due to the removal of better adapted trees and their genetics. A sustainable timber harvest usually has to remove lower quality trees to let in enough sun so that a young stand of new trees can grow vigorously and compete in good conditions to develop into a healthy future forest. With no market for low quality trees, these less well adapted trees will now be left even more frequently and will become our future forests.

Rehabilitation forestry is already needed in many forests, usually where past high-grading has occurred, to improve their health, resilience, and diversity. Beneficial harvests remove lower quality, very common, less desirable trees to favor fitter trees and stronger forests. This can benefit plant and animal species of conservation concern that need our help to compete in the absence of historic disturbances like fire and sustainable timber harvesting-or natural mortality and succession in true old-growth forests. In particular, habitat restoration for species in severe decline, like the golden-winged warbler-that depend

on young regenerating forests or forest openings, do not get the habitat they need from high-grade harvests or development.

The closing of this FSC/SFI certified sustainable paper mill in Canton bodes very poorly for the future of sound and ecologically beneficial forestry in WNC. To make rehabilitation forestry projects economically feasible requires a market for low-quality pulpwood, so that loggers cut it to create diverse habitats and room for more desirable trees like oaks, which need sun to regenerate and are the keystone species for wildlife. The losses from the mill closing extend from local to regional economic and social disruption to further degrading our forests and slowing needed restoration efforts.

EcoForesters will continue seeking solutions that incentivize restorative forest management by engaging with conservation partners, government agencies and local communities. Western North Carolina benefits from sustainable and ecological forest management, but this will be a much taller order without the steady and significant demand for pulpwood supplied by the Canton paper mill. *Andrew Tait, co-Executive/Forestry Director, NC Registered Forester #1791. EcoForesters is a nonprofit professional forestry organization dedicated to conserving and restoring our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.*

Advertisement