

# THE ECOFORESTER

10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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Our Mission

EcoForesters is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional forestry organization dedicated to restoring and conserving our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.

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Cover Photo: EcoForesters Rob Lamb and Andy Tait address Yale forestry students in 2017.



# DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

By: Lang Hornthal  
*Executive Director*

## TEN YEARS DOWN, ONE YEAR IN: HURRICANE HELENE WILL DEFINE OUR NEXT TEN YEARS

This year has been filled with a wide range of emotions for EcoForesters staff. While we're proud of our ten years in existence and the difference we're making in the field of forestry, we are heartbroken on a weekly basis as our staff witnesses the damage still visible from Helene. We are reminded daily that our mission to restore and conserve forests is site specific and, in some cases, means telling people to be patient. If you have dealt with the destruction of your forest, the loss of or damage to your home, and countless unplanned expenses, being told to be patient can be hard to hear.

I am in my sixth year at EcoForesters. As a non-forester, I continue to learn from my colleagues that change happens incrementally and often undetected. The fruits of today's decisions are often not realized until decades later. And the ability to capitalize on those decisions—for instance, through a timber harvest—can be wrecked in the blink of an eye (or storm). Many landowners who had the security of a future timber harvest that could help pay for college tuition, retirement, or an unexpected health expense are now realizing that opportunity is gone. This loss is also paired with damage to their forest that must be accounted for, often at an expense. Quite the turn of events for thousands of people.



We are also reminded daily that we don't have all of the answers. Many problems will require funding to offset the costs of debris removal or wildfire mitigation. Figuring out how to restore and regenerate 800,000 acres of storm-damaged forest is a first for this region, but the solutions we're discovering are already being put into action. Through the help of agencies, NGO partners, and tenacious landowners, we are providing helpful advice and action that reduces risk and takes another step toward future forest health.

With the reduction in agricultural and forestry agency budgets and staff, we will see a reduction in capacity from the people best suited to help. The unforeseen costs for landowners due to Helene are still being realized, meaning that important restoration and regeneration work will be neglected to pay for more immediate needs. A year after this storm of the century, one thing is clear: assistance in the form of professional expertise will be essential, and we will need creativity to help fund the work that must be done.

Despite the difficulties of the last year, we still have much to celebrate after a decade of EcoForesters. Our mission is needed and our methods are working. We hope you will continue to stay interested and supportive of our work for the next ten years. Thank you for sticking with us!



## TEN YEARS: JUST A SAPLING IN FORESTRY YEARS! OAK SAPLINGS ARE FIGHTING FOR LIGHT

After a decade, EcoForesters is just getting started. But if you're a white oak, your height and your likelihood of making the overstory have most likely already been decided for you. In forests, trees are in constant competition for light. When a disturbance opens the canopy, phototropic species quickly move in to claim the new territory. Once that space is filled, little sunlight reaches the forest floor—and until the next disturbance, the order is set. The trees that reach the tallest heights should have all the sun they need until they meet their demise. Those that didn't "win" will be stunted in growth and make the most of their midstory conditions.

Post-Helene, we are witnessing a blowdown of historic proportions, including a surprising amount of oak trees. What comes back in this space depends on what species were present and what are still alive. Oaks are known for their strong roots and spend their early years growing down. This means that other species that start by growing upward have an advantage. Nature can be harsh, with brutal competition for growing space...truly survival of the fittest—or in this case, the fastest growing. Unfortunately, what grows fast is mostly non-native species or trees like maple and poplar. We don't play favorites with healthy trees, but we do acknowledge the valuable role oaks play in the greater forested ecosystem.

What comes back on those 800,000 acres impacted by Helene will impact our region's water, wildlife, climate, and ability to withstand future wildfires and drought. This is why EcoForesters is helping landowners by writing regeneration plans in areas disturbed by Helene. Man-made disturbances like a timber harvest can be carefully planned and executed, including accounting for future generations. Natural disasters, on the other hand, are unplanned and require planning on the backend that will call for active stewardship over the next ten years. There is much work to be done, but we have an opportunity to shape our forests as we help them recover.

To learn more about EcoForesters' Regeneration Plans, please reach out to [info@ecoforesters.org](mailto:info@ecoforesters.org)



# HOW IT ALL STARTED

By: Rob Lamb  
Founder of EcoForesters

After 10 years of creativity, vision, and dedication, it is time to reflect and celebrate EcoForesters' 10th birthday! Thanks to the hard work of our staff and board—and the incredible support we've received from donors, landowners, and conservation partners—EcoForesters has become an innovative leader in forest conservation and restoration. I hope this article provides a deeper understanding of why EF is an essential organization that needs your ongoing support to achieve our mission. In 2026, we will roll out our vision for the next 10 years of EF's work. If you're impressed with what we've done so far... you ain't seen nothing yet!

## Appalachian Forests: Amazing and Integral

Appalachian forests are, without a doubt, among the world's greatest natural resources. Among the oldest mountain chains in the world, our forests are a spectacular life force of green, harboring abundant wildlife and intense biodiversity, deep nutrient-rich soils, a massive source of clean and cool air, and abundant crystal clear water. Appalachian forests and harvested wood products store the equivalent of 19 years of all CO2 emissions produced across the states. Nearly 10,000 species are known to inhabit the Southern Appalachian region alone, and it hosts the highest aquatic biodiversity in North America.

Appalachian forests are the playground for millions, leading to billions of dollars in tourism and outdoor recreation, while the Appalachian forest products industry is another multi-billion-dollar business. Millions of jobs depend on a vibrant and sustainable Appalachian forest. In addition to being a main source of our income, they literally provide us with the air, water, food, and shelter we need to survive.

Putting the importance of our forests into view provides perspective on the value of EcoForesters' mission. Sustaining our forests is foundational and essential for our very survival. The work EcoForesters does each and every day, thanks to your support, helps sustain us and future generations.



## Why I Started EcoForesters

From a young age, I was able to develop a personal relationship and appreciation for these forests. What started with family backpacking trips in the North Georgia mountains ultimately led to a 2,000-mile thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2001, a master's degree in forestry in 2005, and the start of a forestry career in Western North Carolina in 2006. Until 2014, I worked as a forestry consultant for hundreds of landowners, visiting tens of thousands of acres. There, I learned firsthand the untold story of Appalachian forest degradation beneath the green forest canopy.

*"Time and time again, I saw degraded forests at risk of regenerative failure from past abuse and invasive plants and insects."*

It is easy to take Appalachian forests for granted. They've always been there, and any changes typically happen slowly and can be virtually imperceptible to us in our busy lives. But to understand trees and forests, we have to think in terms of decades and even centuries. Taking this into perspective, our forests have been resilient against massive assaults at our hands. Appalachian forests today bear the scars of mass clear-cutting at the turn of the 20th century, a legacy of high-grading and industrial forestry over the past 70 years, the introduction and spread of exotic invasive plants and diseases that have wiped out integral tree species and halted forest regeneration, and urban sprawl that fragments forests into more edge habitat of diminished health. An early EcoForesters employee coined a common saying amongst our staff these days: "Just because it's green, doesn't mean it's healthy." While each individual patch of forestland may still be full of life, when looking at Appalachian forests at a large scale of space and time, we see that our forest is losing its capacity to regenerate itself and is providing diminished benefits in wildlife habitat, biodiversity, clean air, and clean water.

I became keenly aware of this reality while working as a forestry consultant for nearly 10 years. Time and time again, I saw degraded forests at risk of regenerative failure from past abuse and invasive plants and insects. I came to understand that both the prevailing conservation mindset of preservation, as well as the for-profit forestry model, were failing forests and landowners alike, inadequately structured to meet their needs. Small private landowners own approximately 70% of Appalachian forests, yet without

public and professional support, their forestland (and the forests everyone depends on for clean air and clean water) will continue to degrade.

The days of standing by and letting "nature take its course" would not provide the outcomes we need to survive. Likewise, looking at our forests for short-term profit from forest products would continue to degrade them. Rather, we needed to invest in the restoration of forestland. We must engage as active stewards of our forests and restore forestland, acre by acre, working landowner by landowner, so that forests can regain their capacity to maximize ecological benefits for all.

The solution: a non-profit professional forestry organization with a forest conservation and restoration mission, a mission aligned with the goals of so many landowners who desire to sustainably steward their land. While there were some conservation non-profits that advocated for good forestry, few were staffed with expertise in forest management, and none were actually capable of doing the work. With no proven model for success, starting this organization would be pioneering a new, yet essential path for the future of our forests; so nearly 10 years ago, I founded EcoForesters.

*Continued on next page.*

*Photo left bottom: Long time EcoForesters supporters Don Plants and Barb Frew with EF founder Rob Lamb in 2017.*



## HISTORY OF WNC'S FORESTS



### Late 1700's - Early 1800's

#### Early Extraction & European Settlement

Land use shifts from indigenous stewardship to Euro-American extraction, removing timber to build settlements.



### 1880's - 1920's

#### Industrial Logging Boom

Lumber shortages in the NE, along with railroad expansion, enable extensive logging in the Southern Appalachians. Old-growth stands are clear cut, shifting to early successional habitat.



### 1892-1914

#### Birthplace of Forestry and the Creation of the Biltmore School

Gifford Pinchot developed a management plan for the Biltmore Estate, serving as a national model for forest management. His successor, Carl Schenck, founded the first professional forestry school in the US. Photo Credit: Historic American Buildings Survey



### 1910's - 1930's

#### Start of Fire Suppression

USFS rangers and foresters work to slow and control both wildfire and deliberate burning. The elimination of controlled burning as a restoration practice alters the ecosystems (like oak-hickory forests) that rely on fire for regeneration.





## 1920's - 1950's

### The Loss of the American Chestnut

Chestnut blight was found in the eastern US in the 1920s, and by 1950, more than 80% of mature American chestnut trees were infected. The "redwoods of the east" are rendered functionally extinct by this blight. Photo: Chestnut Foundation



## 1950's - 1990's

### Spread of Exotic Pests

Balsam woolly adelgid was found on Mount Mitchell in 1957, severely impacting Fraser fir. In 1995, Hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) was found in NC, causing widespread hemlock mortality.



## 1960's - 2000's

### Development Pressures Shape Forest Cover

Development pressures on agricultural and forest land intensified due to increases in population and second home development, accelerating habitat fragmentation.

### EcoForesters: Years 1-10

Ten years later, I think it's safe to say that EcoForesters has been a tremendous success. Our success has not been linear, and while we've had our ups and downs, our overall growth and impact have been exponential. Our staff and subsequent impact have doubled roughly every 2 years. The results: long-term stewardship care on over 250,000 acres and with over 600 landowners, over 10,000 landowners engaged via outreach or direct consultation, invasive species controlled, and forest restoration on over 3,000 acres (including over 500 acres on permanently protected conservation lands), and a staff that has grown from 2 in 2015 to 26 in 2025.

Having multiple funding sources helps increase our stability and impact. EcoForesters channels private donations towards landscape restoration planning, stewardship on permanently protected land, and our outreach and education programs, while our direct forest stewardship work is funded by a combination of grants and investment from forest landowners themselves. When you look closely at the relative investment of funds, our impact is even more impressive. For example, \$250 would help us reach over 500 landowners, conduct stewardship planning on 10 acres, or invasive plant control on 1 acre. While permanently protecting land is an important part of overall conservation, the vast majority of forestland remains in the hands of private landowners. If conservation funding isn't adequately channeled to this land base, then the risk to the future of our forests will substantially increase.

Much of forest conservation funding today is funneled towards reducing climate change and increasing ecosystem services. Here too, EcoForesters has an outsized impact. Through internal studies and forest growth modeling, we've found that over 10-30 years, forests where we've controlled invasive plants sequester 1 additional metric ton of carbon dioxide per acre per year than if

the same forest had gone untreated. So far, the work of our forest restoration crew has led to an additional 3,000 tons per year of carbon sequestration, a number that will greatly increase in the years to come as we continue our work. Our sustainable forest management practices that mimic natural processes, promote species diversity, and retain healthier trees also lead to significantly more carbon storage. While there is currently no carbon offset market that sufficiently incentivizes landowners for this kind of work, EF is working with landowners to do the work anyway, leading to real additional carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change.

After 10 years, EcoForesters has proven it is a model organization that can sustainably grow and replicate to positively impact forests at a landscape scale, demonstrating the essential path we must take to sustain forests and the benefits that forests provide. Over the years, our effectiveness has been increasingly recognized by countless landowners, public and private conservation partners, and significant funding opportunities. As a result, EcoForesters in 2025 is a rapidly growing organization that is highly effective in leveraging available resources to achieve the greatest impact towards its mission.

***"Our staff works tirelessly because they understand the importance of our work."***

***"No individual conservationist, conservation organization, or government is going to make the difference in stemming the impact of climate change and conserving forests, biodiversity, clean water, and wildlife for future generations. It will undoubtedly be a group effort."***



### Join EcoForesters For The Next 10 Years and Beyond

The next 10 years are of outsized importance in determining the future of our planet. No individual conservationist, organization, or government is going to make the difference in stemming the impact of climate change and conserving forests, biodiversity, clean water, and wildlife for future generations. It will undoubtedly be a group effort. What I can say with the utmost confidence is that EcoForesters is a key cog towards achieving local and global conservation goals. As we celebrate our 10th birthday, our work is just beginning, and we are positioned to replicate our model and extend conservation and stewardship to make what we've achieved so far seem like a drop in the bucket.

Our staff works tirelessly because they understand the importance of our work. If you are reading this article, you also understand and are committed to EF's work. And for those that don't yet know about EF, they are also a part of our greater forest ecosystem. The question is: how will we proceed? Can we sustain our forests and the benefits they provide? The answer: we can and will sustain our forests, and we will do it using EcoForesters as a model. We have a plan for the next 10 years, and it depends on your support! What part will YOU play in sustaining our forests?



## 1990's - 2000's

### Decline of Traditional Forestry and the Rise of Sustainable Forestry Practices

Loss of manufacturing and decline of mills reduces financial incentives for landowners and alters management practices. Sustainable forestry certifications gain traction.



## 2000's - 2020's

### Invasive Pest and Plant Spread

Hemlock stands continue to decline from HWA. Non-native invasive species (NNIS) spread further throughout the Southern Appalachians, altering forest ecology.



## 2015

### EcoForesters is Founded in Asheville, North Carolina



## 2016 - Present

### Wildfires, Severe Storms, and New Urgency

WNC saw major wildfires in the fall of 2016, with rising temperatures increasing wildfire coverage in recent years. In 2024, Hurricane Helene and related flooding disturbed over 800,000 acres of forest, rapidly increasing wildfire risk and NNIS spread. In the aftermath of the storm, public attention is on the health and resilience of Appalachian forests.



# ADAPTATION AFTER HURRICANE HELENE

We have all learned a great deal about surviving and adapting. Going without running water for 30+ days made everyone stop and consider basic needs that had been taken for granted. As people were accounted for and safety assured, we began to adapt to the new normal for our careers and the natural environment. Since the storm, there continues to be a greater awareness and concern for forests and streams. There wasn't necessarily a lack of awareness prior to Helene—but like other basic needs, we often take our natural resources for granted, thinking little about what it takes to maintain them. A year in, we have learned much in our continued search for solutions.

The amount of trees on the ground is astonishing. Daily commutes reveal the challenges facing landowners with downed trees in hard-to-access areas. This past spring put lipstick on the pig of jumbled timber, but leaf off will reveal what we already know: there is an unusual amount of timber on the ground that will impact forestry decisions for the next decade. So, what should we do about it?



## ACCESS

You cannot assess damage or work in an area that you can't get to. This includes old logging roads and trails that are normal vectors for non-native invasive species. Opening these areas will improve fire breaks and allow professionals to properly care for disturbed areas. Though thousands of acres will simply let nature heal over time, consideration should be given to the amount of fuel on the ground and the impacts on regeneration.

## INVASIVES RESPONSE

New plants and trees will quickly take over this new growing space. Those best adapted for growing quickly will win, unless we play favorites. Invasive plants and trees provide little benefit for wildlife and can quickly reduce biodiversity. Many will need to be tolerated as there is just too much. However, we can focus on those most dangerous to forests, like Bittersweet, which can strangle and topple trees. If you have trees down, being aware of what else is there puts you on the proper path.



## REGENERATION

What comes back? After the demise of the American Chestnut (25% of the canopy), species that were well represented took advantage of the new space. Similarly, what comes back now will depend on what is there now. Planning is needed to account for the difficulties regenerating oaks and the impact of having thousands of downed trees in productive forests. In areas of extreme disturbance and landslides, getting new plants established is paramount.

Each season will provide more data on future forest health. Our goal is to continue our assessment of the region's forests and adapt to improve forest resilience. We anticipate the recovery of our forests from Helene to define the next ten years of EcoForesters' work. Education is a core value of our mission, so sharing our findings with the public will continue. Please reach out to us if we can help you plan and adapt for your future forest.

## UPCOMING FUNDING: NC DISASTER GRANT FOR HELENE TIMBER LOSSES

A new program is being developed by the NC Forest Service that will help private landowners who experienced timber losses from Helene. Forest owners who had more than 25% of merchantable trees (defined as >12" in diameter) damaged on at least 10 acres can receive partial compensation for lost timber value. In order to get funds approved, a forester must assess the property. More details about this program, including which landowners qualify, should be released by the end of the year. EcoForesters will continue to update landowners as more information becomes available.



# BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

By: Willow McNeil  
*Development Assistant*

There is no doubt that Helene was destructive to our region and disruptive to our lives. Yet, in the weeks following the storm, it also called forth an incredible sense of community, spurring our drive to help those in need. Residents outside of WNC poured in to help in relief and recovery efforts, giving us hope that not all was lost. Neighbors banded together to share resources and care for one another, leaning on those nearby to get through the worst of times.

The residents of Bull Creek Valley are a model example of these community bonds. Located in East Buncombe County, this area was one of the hardest hit in the storm, with thousands of acres of forests decimated and access to the community washed out. With no ability to reach outside help, neighbors came together to respond to the storm. In just two days, they had set up a community kitchen and a medical triage team in a neighbor's barn and had organized regular safety checks. They were even meeting daily for potluck lunches, sharing experiences and consolation. Dr. Laura Lengnick, a member of the Bull Creek Valley neighborhood, stated in an interview with the Practicing Gospel podcast, "We didn't have a plan, we didn't know what we were doing, so we were inventing along the way. We had a lot of really talented people bringing lots of different skills, and we figured it out." By leveraging the strengths of each member, they had formed their own disaster response team, weathering the storm's aftermath together.



As the members of Bull Creek Valley settled into this new reality, they began the process of better understanding what their neighborhood and individuals needed. To do this, they conducted a survey, coming away with four priorities: clean up, debris removal and use, non-native invasive plant removal, and wildfire preparation. By collaborating with local organizations, the neighborhood conducted multiple "Learning in Community" sessions, teaching residents how to address these issues with their own abilities. In Bull Creek and beyond, Helene had called attention to persistent forestry issues that were worsened by storm damage. Non-native invasive species, in particular, were prepared to take advantage of new light in disturbed areas, and the Bull Creek members had identified NNIS control as a major concern. In May, EcoForesters participated in their invasives-focused community learning session, giving participants a hands-on demonstration of proper treatment techniques and equipping them with the skills needed for continued restoration work.

One year after the storm, Bull Creek Valley residents are still regularly coming together—even forming new initiatives like a community garden. Though the neighborhood's organization after Helene was inspiring, Dr. Lengnick poses the question—"If we'd had a plan, how much easier [would all of this] have been?" To build resilience within our communities, we must maintain these neighborhood bonds and be proactive in our disaster response. Creating a plan for future weather events, forming an NNIS control (or natural resource) committee to organize work days, and finding ways to continue meeting—all of these actions will strengthen our responses to future events, and the WNC community as a whole.





# REBUILDING NATURE

By: Drake Fowler  
NC Arboretum Executive Director

## A VISION FOR REFORESTATION AT THE NORTH CAROLINA ARBORETUM

As the Executive Director of the North Carolina Arboretum, I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact of Hurricane Helene, which struck in September 2024. The storm brought down over 10,000 trees and caused significant ecological disruption across our beloved 434-acre garden and conservation site nestled within Pisgah National Forest. The extensive damage led to prolonged trail closures and a sharp decline in visitor numbers. However, even in the face of such devastation, we found hope and resilience through collaboration.

In response to the challenges posed by Hurricane Helene, we launched a comprehensive recovery initiative that brought together our dedicated Arboretum staff, federal agencies, academic experts, nonprofit organizations, and, most importantly, EcoForesters. This collaborative approach has been vital in developing a reforestation and site restoration plan aimed at revitalizing the damaged areas of the Arboretum.

Utilizing advanced technologies such as aerial drone footage and NDVI satellite imagery, we identified eight priority zones for restoration. Each zone was thoroughly evaluated for its unique site conditions and ecological significance. The expertise of EcoForesters proved invaluable in this process; their specialized knowledge in sustainable forestry practices and ecological restoration provided us with essential guidance on species selection, management strategies, and restoration techniques tailored to the specific needs of each zone.



Our plan emphasizes the selection of native species, sustainable landscape design, and community involvement. We believe that the restoration process should not only heal the land but also engage the public in ecological stewardship. The collaborative nature of this initiative has been a cornerstone of our success. We hope to bring the final plan to the public on Arbor Day 2026, along with workshops and talks that further define aspects of the plan.

The journey began with a kickoff meeting in January 2025, where we gathered to discuss our initial steps for recovery. With drone footage revealing the extent of the damage and satellite maps illustrating the landscape before and after the hurricane, we set out to create a comprehensive forest restoration plan. This plan will consider ecological factors, aesthetics, and educational opportunities, all of which are integral to our mission.

As we progressed, it became clear that each impacted area required tailored goals. For instance, while the entrance area of the Arboretum focused on aesthetics, other zones prioritized ecological restoration and biodiversity. EcoForesters played a significant role in this adaptive decision-making process, providing insights on how different tree species would thrive in specific conditions and effective strategies for managing invasive species. These goals will guide EcoForesters as they compose the final forestry plan.

This case study serves as a model for storm recovery and ecological restoration in public green spaces across the Southeastern U.S. The collaborative spirit we've fostered demonstrates the power of community engagement in ecological restoration. With ongoing monitoring and additional projects on the horizon, the North Carolina Arboretum is poised to emerge stronger and more resilient than ever. As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our mission to connect people with plants, foster environmental education, and promote sustainable development. Our partnership with EcoForesters exemplifies the importance of expert knowledge in nurturing the land back to health. Together, we are not just restoring our Arboretum; we are setting a standard for resilience and ecological stewardship that will benefit generations to come.

*Photo above: Drake Fowler, Andy Tait and NC Arboretum staff discuss the historic damage caused by Hurricane Helene.*



# 2025 ECOFORESTERS AWARD WINNERS

## ECOFORESTER OF THE YEAR

Erik Bendix & Meredith Balgley

EcoForester of the Year, is given to a model landowner who exemplifies active stewardship. This year's recipients are Erik Bendix and Meredith Balgley, forest landowners in the Bull Creek Community. Erik and Meredith bought their forest over 40 years ago, horse logging in order to build their current home. Since then, they have been very active in managing their land, paying particular attention to the non-native invasive species on their property! Like much of Bull Creek, their forest sustained heavy damage from Helene. Since the storm, Erik and Meredith have been actively pursuing remedies to address the acres of downed trees on their land.



## LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Gary Kaufman

In commemoration of his accomplishments as a Botanist and Plant Ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service, we award Gary Kauffman with our 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award. Gary began working for the USFS in 1992 as the Nantahala National Forest botanist, eventually becoming the botanist/ecologist program manager for the National Forests in North Carolina until his retirement in January of 2025. He oversaw the botany and invasive plant programs across 1.3 million acres of National Forests, from the mountains to the coastal plains. His expertise includes forest planning, sustainability analyses of harvested botanical products like ginseng, the maintenance and restoration of rare plants and communities, and non-native invasive plant management. His work played a crucial role in the restoration and conservation of NC's beloved National Forests.



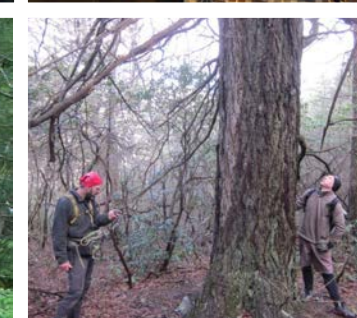
## ROOT CAUSE AWARD The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina

In the aftermath of Helene, our community was in great need of repair and restoration. As organizations and nonprofits began taking action, the need for immediate financial support was apparent. For their exemplary actions in supporting these recovery initiatives, our 2025 Root Cause award goes to the Community Foundation of Western NC (CFWNC). Since October 4th, CFWNC has distributed more than \$38 million to the community through their Emergency and Disaster Response Fund. Funding has supported housing repair, food and supply distribution, local schools, forest restoration, trail cleanup, and more. CFWNC has continued to support long-term recovery efforts and have been an essential part of Western NC's reconstruction after the storm.





*Celebrating 10 years*  
of education and stewardship





# FORESTRY: RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

By: Andy Tait  
Senior Forestry Director

We are at a very unique place and point in time in western NC post-Helene. 800,000 acres of forest were damaged by the hurricane, and we are just now beginning the long recovery process for our natural areas. Since the storm, EcoForesters staff has been working with landowners to assess and address restoration challenges—both new and old. Our forests were already facing ongoing challenges like development, unsustainable logging, fire suppression, lack of oak regeneration, and climate change. Now, with the forest damage wreaked by Helene, all of these obstacles are harder to surmount. At the same time, the government agencies tasked with funding and overseeing the programs to support this restoration are dealing with major restructuring as well as reductions in staff and/or funding.

We must value and properly resource these agencies managing this essential work, not just further burden them—especially here and now. Final assessments are still being done on the impact Helene had on our forests, not to mention our waterways. We have large areas of bare soil needing stabilization and revegetation before they erode further or are overtaken by non-native invasive plants that rapidly infest disturbed areas. Similarly, in the middle of woods where trees were felled or uprooted, invasives will quickly capture the new growing space, outcompeting and even killing native trees trying to regenerate.

*“Without re-opening blocked forest roads and clearing some of the downed wood, we can’t stop wildfires from spreading, control invasive plants, tend the young forest, or plant where needed.”*



Yet there will also be opportunities as forests regrow. Early successional (i.e., young) forests were an underrepresented habitat type that many animals needed. Due to Helene, we now have plenty of regrowing forests, and we can make them better for wildlife and humans. We can have a hand in shaping our new young forests by selecting the most desirable trees to favor (like oaks, which are the keystone species for wildlife, well-adapted to climate change, fire-tolerant, and a very valuable timber tree) to create a more diverse and resilient future forest to withstand more severe weather and potential wildfires.

However, with all the forest damage, we need to first re-establish access to our woods so we can do the necessary work to restore them. Without re-opening blocked forest roads and clearing some of the downed wood, we can’t stop wildfires from spreading, control invasive plants, tend the young forest, or plant where needed.

The Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) is the main funding mechanism to allow us to regain access to do the forest restoration work. Government agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the NC Forest Service bear the responsibility of funding and leading most of the above work, which will likely go on for at least a decade. Agencies and programs like the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and Landscape Scale Restoration Program have always provided funding to help farmers and forestland owners improve their lands for the public benefits they provide: from clean air and water, to carbon storage, to wildlife habitat, to products and simple beauty. As short-term emergency response programs like FEMA and EFRP go away, ongoing support for and from the agencies and programs that have always provided the ability to fund this expensive and time-sensitive work will be even more essential. Therefore, it is essential right now that in areas impacted by Helene these federal and state funds and agency staff are not cut, but sustained and bolstered to see the recovery through.

Continued public support for government funding to at least maintain these agencies locally and help from regional forestry and environmental organizations will be needed to offset the extensive costs of regaining access to and restoring our natural areas. Local foundations and donors like the Community Foundation for Western NC have stepped up funding to help meet this ongoing need. There is



also a need for more companies that can do the needed wood removal (i.e., loggers) and markets to sell this valuable commodity to—both of which have been in steady decline. Furthermore, we need more people trained in invasive plant control and other forest improvement work.

With a concerted, sustained collaborative effort of government, private funders, non-profits, forest workers, and forest landowners, Helene-impacted forests can come back even healthier, stronger, and more diverse. But it will take an investment of significant resources here, now, and for the next decade into the public, non-profit, and private forestry sectors.

## CHALLENGES FACING FUNDING

Funding has always been one of the biggest hurdles facing forest restoration, with barriers to funding increasing in the last few years. The loss of federal support to agencies such as the USDA limits available programs for forest landowners, thinning their ability to pay for planning and stewardship. The NC Forest Service is currently dealing with position vacancies, adding to the work of their current staff and reducing work capacity. Local forest product markets have also diminished, particularly with the closure of the Canton paper mill in 2023. Though other markets are emerging (such as carbon and biochar), the need for funding is much more immediate.

The unforeseen damage and associated costs from Helene have exacerbated this need. Downed trees have created a great loss of future timber revenue for many forest owners, and the window to salvage timber is quickly closing (with few professionals available to conduct a salvage harvest). These downed trees have also created the perfect opportunity for non-native invasive species to spread. Proper treatment of these infestations, along with forest stand improvement work to encourage regeneration of desirable tree species, will be essential in promoting forest health and resilience. It is crucial that we continue to find ways to fund this necessary work and reduce the financial burden placed on rural forest owners.







# WITH YOUR HELP FORESTS WILL RECOVER

They say money doesn't grow on trees: but in Western North Carolina, our forests have always been our truest form of wealth.

For generations, Appalachian forests have sheltered wildlife, filtered our water, shaded our homes, and fueled local economies. When Hurricane Helene tore through our region, it didn't just topple trees—it disrupted a wealth of natural capital that our communities depend on. Now, we face a choice: let these forests struggle on their own, or invest wisely to restore them.

Every tree planted, every acre treated for invasives, and every hillside stabilized is like putting a dollar back into the account of our future. In a way, by restoring forests, we are planting “money trees”—growing assets that will pay back tenfold through cleaner air, stronger wildlife habitat, and resilience in our communities and local economies.

But restoration takes resources, and this important work cannot wait.

### With Your Support, We Can:

- Help regenerate thousands of native trees, rebuilding the canopy lost to Helene
- Protect streams from further erosion and flooding with healthy forest buffers
- Support local restoration crews and nurseries, keeping dollars circulating locally

Your donation is an investment towards the future of our region. When you contribute \$100, you're not just giving today; you're planting the seeds of a forest that will support our communities for generations to come.

While money may not grow on trees, they certainly grow value for us all. Will you help us replant that wealth?

Please make your gift today and help EcoForesters turn the devastation of Helene into an opportunity to plant resilience, renewal, and hope.

## MEMBERSHIP HIKE

On a beautiful summer morning in Old Fort, NC, forestry director Andy Tait walked EcoForesters members through the unique forest characteristics on the Meadows Loop trail. This 1-mile trail, which borders Curtis Creek, boasts a surprising amount of biodiversity in its short distance, from wildflower meadows to a wetland ecosystem. With his expertise, Andy pointed out things you might miss on first glance—like a basswood tree peppered with holes from a yellow-bellied sapsucker, or a young oak tree fighting for a share of sunlight. He also identified non-native invasive plant species, giving tips on how to distinguish them from native plants. Throughout the walk, attendees learned about how this ecosystem was impacted by Helene, including the damage mitigation provided by the floodplain forest.

This hike is a part of EcoForesters' new membership program, designed to give back to our supporters and recognize their commitment to conservation. Held on both public and private lands and led by our seasoned forestry staff, these hikes provide attendees with a deeper understanding of Appalachian forest ecosystems and the work we do to restore them. Back in March of this year, we hosted our first-ever member hike on Bluebird Lane Farms, graciously hosted by landowners Jeff and Jeannine Buscher! Led by forester Joey Borders, we walked through areas where our staff has conducted invasive plant control and forest stand improvement work, and learned from Jeff about the Buschers' plans for further restoration. It was a great opportunity to view EcoForesters' work in action, and what a model landowner's forest looks like with proper stewardship.

As we look forward to 2026 and beyond, we're excited to plan more ways to connect with our members and find more sites to explore together. Interested in attending one of our upcoming hikes? We'd love for you to join us! A \$35 donation makes you an EcoForesters member, granting you access to our guided hikes (and more). Your support helps us continue to restore Helene-damaged forests, provide resources and education to rural landowners in WNC, and add capacity to our partners' conservation efforts.



## BECOME AN ECOFORESTERS MEMBER TODAY!

### \$35 TRILLIUM MEMBERS:

- An EcoForesters sticker and fridge magnet
- Recognition in our annual report and our Spring edition of The EcoForester
- One invite to all guided hikes

### \$75 RHODODENDRON MEMBERS:

- All of the benefits of the previous level, plus
- Household invites to guided hikes

### \$150 DOGWOOD MEMBERS:

- All of the benefits of the previous levels, plus
- 1 invite to our donor-only annual celebration

### \$500 RED MAPLE MEMBERS:

- All of the benefits of the previous levels, plus
- 2 invites to donor-only annual gala
- Name recognition as sponsors for special events

### \$1000 OAK MEMBERS:

- All of the benefits of the previous levels, plus
- 2 invites to donor-only annual gala
- Name recognition as sponsors for special events

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM GO TO: [WWW.ECOFORESTERS.ORG/MEMBERSHIP](http://WWW.ECOFORESTERS.ORG/MEMBERSHIP)



# WILDLIFE HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT UPDATE

*“Habitat maintenance will continue for the next decade as we monitor how forests respond to a disturbance of Helene’s magnitude.”*

Halfway through our project to help restore important wildlife habitat in select counties, more early successional forest has been created in Western North Carolina since the big cuts of the early 1900s. While this open, forested habitat is much desired by a suite of wildlife species, it was unplanned for and in danger of becoming riddled with non-native invasive plants. Fortunately, the main funder of this project, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), agreed that we should pivot and address this challenge.

Since Helene, we have been addressing storm-damaged forests in the seventeen counties that the NC Forest Service assessed in the Forest Damage Appraisal after the storm. This includes mitigating wildfire risk posed by downed trees, accounting for non-native plants and trees that are present, and considering the next generation of trees that are most likely to grow in these areas. Once this important field work is accomplished, we can begin the process of sharing tools (and funding) with landowners to help with forest restoration.

This habitat “maintenance” will continue for the next decade as we monitor how forests respond to a disturbance of Helene’s magnitude. Though funding from NFWF is scheduled to end in May of 2026, our work in this area will not. Wildlife habitat is just one more ecosystem service that we have come to expect and that forests provide our region. The time to invest resources in young forests is now, and our children and grandchildren will thank us for it.



## ECOFORESTER’S FOREST RESTORATION CREW

By: Pat Barcas  
*Forest Restoration Technician*

### HOW WE’VE EVOLVED AND WHAT WE’VE DONE AFTER HURRICANE HELENE

The forest restoration crew comprises a good chunk of the staff of EcoForesters. They are responsible for field operations such as invasive species removal, forest stand improvement, trail building, and, after Helene, trail and land clearing and erosion control. Over the past ten years, the restoration crew has evolved significantly—from a small crew with a small scope of operations, to a large crew operating out of three trucks and a new UTV for hauling gear and delivering herbicide to large problem areas.

Helene introduced many opportunities for restoration: bare soil was exposed, and trees were downed and tossed in front of trails. As any local can attest, it was a mess, and habitats needed help.

At a property that EcoForesters has worked on for years in Yancey County, a debris flow was measured at 4,900 feet long, leaving a long scar down the mountain—rocks tossed aside, the bedrock exposed. There was much work to be done, but the landowner, Russ Oates, was organized, up for the challenge, and had a plan. Thankfully, his house and his tree planting project were left intact from the wicked rain event.

Hundreds of trees in the path of the debris flow, however, were tossed aside on the steep property, widening the shaded mountain stream into a light brown canyon. The light was let in, creating an opportunity for regrowth, but it was important to act quickly before undesirable species moved in.



This spring, EcoForesters crews implemented a plan to plant different species of rye grass on the exposed dirt, controlling erosion and getting a base layer of vegetation down. All of the soil was covered in seed, all the way to the steep, rocky top of the flow. This winter, hundreds of oaks and hickories will be planted, replacing the trees lost and hopefully restoring the habitat.

In Fairview, a similar situation unfolded at a rich cove forest property. EcoForesters’ crews had been treating the steep property for years and had made great headway, with hardly any invasives remaining. But Helene caused several moderate debris flows that exposed the dirt.

After an assessment and mapping of the problem areas, the strategy decided upon was to cover the debris flows in eco-friendly Coir matting, an erosion control solution that is made from coconut husks. The mats resemble cargo nets and are staked into the earth, where they are covered in seeds and biodegrade over the years. Installing the matting turned the bare earth patches, susceptible to more erosion and invasive infestation, into a stakehold of desirable plants that will re-stabilize the slope.

One year after the devastation of Helene, the challenges are still unfolding, and the aftermath is still being studied. EcoForesters is committed to evolving and facing these challenges.





## WOMEN IN ECOFORESTERS

By: Pat Barcas  
*Forest Restoration Technician*

Women in North America are making large strides in forest land ownership, land management decisions, and natural resource careers. According to ForestHer, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting, educating, and empowering a community of women landowners and natural resources professionals to engage in forest conservation and stewardship in North Carolina, the percentage of family forest ownership where a woman is the primary decision maker doubled from 2006 to 2013, and numbers continue to rise. These women make decisions for 44 million acres of North America's family forest land.

Yet this number still only makes up 16% of family forests—and according to the Society of American Foresters, women make up just 16% of forestry and conservation professionals in the US. With twelve women EcoForesters staff members (46% of staff!) ranging from forestry management, grant writing, GIS map making, to forest restoration technicians, the organization is well positioned to manage the needs of this shifting demographic and see forest management decisions from a woman's perspective.

Krishun Karau, Forest Stewardship Director, said lady landowners are welcome at EcoForesters and should not be intimidated when asking for help.

"I try to assure people, 'It's daunting for everybody.' Specifically, land and invasive plant management. It's science and ecology, that sort of stuff can be over everybody's head," she said. "My advice is to get out there and get comfortable with your land. If you have the means, hike around, get yourself familiar with the plants."

According to the National Association of State Foresters, women began making inroads into forestry during World War II, when they stood in for men on fire crews and cruised timber as well. But it wasn't until 1978 that women were officially allowed to work for the US Forest Service. In 2007, the Forest Service named its first female chief, Gail Kimbell.

"If you have the physical ability to get outside, I don't think you should be dissuaded by your gender or your sex," said Karau. "A lot of the tools we use at EcoForesters can be used by anyone as long as you are able-bodied."

Kelly Waldron, Assistant Stewardship Director, spoke a little on the challenges she faced at the start of her career. "There were a couple instances early on in conservation work where a couple of folks underestimated how strong my back was. [I was determined] to prove them wrong when it came to lugging locust logs from some trail building."

Karau acknowledged that there may not be so much as a physical barrier to using tools such as chainsaws and backpack sprayers for a female-identifying person. "It's like an invisible barrier of maybe not feeling welcome, or feeling like I don't want to ask a dumb question or be spoken down to. It's a matter of finding people who are patient and who are willing to teach you, regardless of your gender."

On a personal level, Karau oversees the field crew at EcoForesters, managing schedules, performing forestry consultations, running educational workshops, and joining the crew to perform all

the services that EcoForesters offers. She said she does see the field of forestry as changing and becoming more accepting of female-identifying people.

"I feel lucky to have had an overall positive experience working in natural resources," said Karau, who went to college from 2008-2012. "It wasn't that long ago, but it was mostly men in my program for natural resources. For me, it was a rise to the challenge type thing: I can do this too. It has been an uncommon thing for me to feel like I was being dismissed because I'm a woman. There's a sense that you have to prove yourself, and you have less of a margin for error because you don't want to perpetuate the stereotype that women are incapable of doing this work."

Karau lauded all the EcoForesters work partners who have helped restore local forest habitats. "This industry has become more accepting toward women, and I don't get that feeling [of being dismissed] that often anymore. With EcoForesters, all of the project partners and landowners I've worked with have been really awesome and inclusive. Folks are just generally happy to have someone come to their property and talk to them about the things they care about."

Resources are on the rise for female-identifying landowners. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is an agency of the US Department of Agriculture that provides assistance to farmers and other landowners. The NRCS offers an Environmental



Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), which has a higher reimbursement rate for historically underserved populations, and female landowners fall under that category.

"It's awesome, the government is looking to help people who haven't historically had a leg up in terms of land ownership," said Karau.

For women looking to enter the conservation field, or become more active in their forestland, Waldron says to just go for it! "Take any opportunity to get out in the field and try various types of conservation work. Be curious! Ask questions! Who cares if you're 17, or 37, or 62? We need [more] active stewards, because it takes a village."

Sources: Women Owning Woodlands Network, ForestHer, and Skills Academy for Women.

*Photo page left: Stewardship Director, Krishun Karau, looking out over the Blue Ridge Mountains.*

*Photo left top: Forest Restoration Technician, Annabelle Carr, bucking up a fallen tree.*

*Photo left bottom: Krishun Karau holding a snake skin found while working in the woods.*

*Photo right top: Forest Restoration Technician, Lily Serrao, hiking through a clients property.*

*Photo right bottom: Forestry Associate, Samantha Trueman, measuring the diameter of a tree.*







## OUR MISSION

EcoForesters is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional forestry organization dedicated to restoring and conserving our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.

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## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

This is more than a forest restoration effort, it is an investment in the ecological, economic, and cultural future of the Appalachian region. With your support, EcoForesters has been able to continue to help create a legacy of healthy forests, empowered landowners, and resilient communities. Thank you!

## SCAN TO DONATE

