Bob Williams, certified forester, does restoration work in northern California.
PHOTO: PINE CREEK FORESTRY LLC

Biomass and Forest Restoration: Perfect Together

BY BOB WILLIAMS

Making good use of trees, one of the planet's most renewable, organic resources, can help resolve many of our concerns regarding sustainable economies and the environment. But some folks—those who believe we should never cut a tree—are simply are not seeing the trees for the forest.

When we consider the degraded condition of tens of millions of acres of neglected forests across North America, as well as the decline of many of our important forest ecosystems such as the long leaf pine, shortleaf pine, and Atlantic white cedar ecosystems, it's clear we need to get busy with restoring these forests back to their optimum health and ecological integrity.

It's true that past misuse or abuse of forests, along with a mistaken long-term fire exclusion policy, have resulted in many forests being in very poor condition today.

However, science and research are showing us that most forest ecosystems respond well to restoration efforts.

Restoration requires us to examine the ecological processes that allow these forests to sustain and regenerate themselves. This ecological forest management approach does not focus on the optimum economic return, but instead, it focuses on the optimum ecological return.

On the other hand, production-oriented forest management has a primary focus on economic value combined with environmental values. Both approaches should remain available to land and resource managers to achieve different desired outcomes, whether it be financial or ecological.

Restoration forest management limits economic return, and getting the work done requires a creative approach. This approach typically requires the removal of low-grade

trees or species of little economic value. These less desirable species have replaced the desired natural species of some imperiled forest ecosystems such as the longleaf and shortleaf pines and Atlantic white cedar. In many cases, fire suppression or interruption of the natural fire regimes has allowed more competitive, less desirable tree species to dominate and suppress the native forest ecosystem. Thus, significant tree removal is needed to restore these forests to optimum ecological conditions. In most cases, it is taxpayers' dollars that fund the work, but not enough is done to make real landscape level forest restoration effective or meaningful in the long term.

The use of woody biomass from these degraded forest ecosystems is essential. The biomass industry needs to step up and begin to understand the critically important role it can and should play in major forest restoration efforts needed across North America. In a very short time, the results of these types of forest management properties will dramatically demonstrate their importance. Moving our forest ecosystems back to a state that assures the sustainability of their ecological integrity is a win-win for all who care about forests and our planet.

Some people don't seem to understand this, and many in the biomass industry would be wise to look at this approach. The volume of wood fiber available is staggering and will compete with the production-oriented alternative if given a chance.

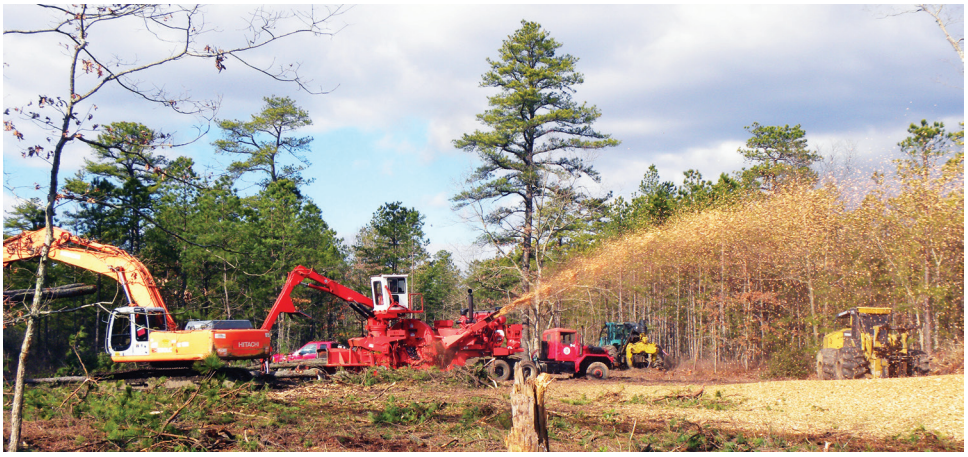
Here in southern New Jersey, we have as much as 500,000 acres of forest in need of restoration with regard to wildfire prevention, habitat restoration and ecosystem restoration. All this needed work has nothing to do with timber or wood production, as some environmentalists would claim.

We hear a lot about sustainability, climate change and renewable resources, yet here in New Jersey, our large retail centers sell tens of thousands of cords of firewood that is shipped in from eastern Europe, while our forests suffer from a lack of market to get needed work done.

A healthy, natural forest ecosystem is not exclusive of a viable wood fiber industry—it just depends on how, when and where trees are utilized.

Our forests need help, and they need it now. The continued benign neglect and the illusion of preservation only ensures the continued decline of critically important forest ecosystems and the continued increase in catastrophic, uncontrolled wildfire.

Biomass markets need to play the vital role they can in forest restoration efforts across North American and the world. Trees are the answer.



Forest restoration activities are performed in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, which consists of 1.1 million acres and stretches across seven counties in New Jersey.
PHOTO: PINE CREEK FORESTRY LLC

Author: Robert Williams
Certified Forester, Pine Creek Forestry LLC
bob@pinecreekforestry.com