

The Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative: Captilizing on Sustainable Forestry

By: **Harry Groot, CEO and President of the Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative** and
David Robertson, Director of the Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative

The Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative is an innovative approach to sustainable and profitable forestry on private lands in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Cooperative was incorporated in 2004 and its primary operating region is the headwaters of the James, Roanoke, and New River watersheds.

The Cooperative will begin recruiting new members and investors in Spring 2006. Members must be residents of Virginia and own at least ten acres of forestland; investors need only be VA residents or businesses. The Cooperative helps its members practice profitable sustainable forestry by managing harvesting, processing, manufacturing, marketing and selling of forest products, all according to the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a nonprofit organization committed to the responsible management of the world's forests. The Cooperative's purposes are to support the sustainable forestry practices of its Members by providing a way to make those practices economically viable and to educate landowners.

The Cooperative is positioned to capitalize on a recent surge in the demand for FSC-certified wood products arising from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program of the US Green Building Council and state and federal mandates requiring "green" construction. A point system is used to certify building projects as sustainable. Points are awarded for actions such as using FSC-certified wood products and products produced within a 500-mile transportation radius. The Cooperative is located within 500 miles of most eastern seaboard, Southern and mid-Atlantic metropolitan areas, which comprise over half of the US population. As one of only a few businesses marketing certified forest products in the region, the Cooperative plans to capitalize on its access to these underserved markets.

Membership is especially attractive for forest landowners committed to long-term growth in the value of their forest. Harvesting to maximize the long-term value of the forest requires more initial resources - time, money, specialized equipment and techniques - than conventional "liquidation" harvesting. Obtaining and maintaining FSC certification requires expenditures not typical of conventional commodity market-driven forest product systems. However, many conventional forestry practices do not consider, or consider only minimally, indirect or non-economic costs and benefits, such as:

- aesthetics of the forest in which the landowner lives and/or recreates;
- clean water resulting from sound forest practices;
- enhanced wildlife and habitat creation or maintenance; and
- steady income generation as opposed to one-time liquidations.

Practicing sustainable forestry in cooperation with other owners of FSC-certified forests also introduces the opportunity to move forest products to market in an integrated system, without middlemen, allowing the landowners to improve their ultimate economic return and offset increased costs. This return is expected to increase as the Cooperative achieves economies of scale associated with a robust membership and the associated ongoing cycles of harvest, production, sales and marketing.

For more information or to join the Blue Ridge Forestry Cooperative, please contact Harry Groot, harry@nextgenwoods.com, 540-639-3077 or visit our website at www.publicecology.org/brfc.