

TGCC receives grant to create marketing plan for local timber

Proposed system would certify Maryland-grown wood products

GREG LARRY

GLARRY@TIMES-NEWS.COM

CUMBERLAND — The Greater Cumberland Committee has been awarded a \$175,000 grant by the Rural Maryland Council to help develop an effective marketing system for timber harvested in Maryland.

TGCC secured \$90,000 in matching cash and in-kind contributions for the effort, bringing the total project budget to \$265,000. The grant was made possible by the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund.

TGCC proposed to use the funding to promote Maryland wood products as a preferred option for commercial, institutional and retail buyers through a certified branding program. Jennifer Walsh, executive director of TGCC, said the project became an imperative after the closure of the Verso paper mill in Luke in June 2019.

“Following the Verso closure and its devastating impacts on the forest products sector in our region ... TGCC saw an opportunity to take the lead on this important and visionary proj-

ect with the goal of helping to open up Western Maryland forest product businesses to \$3 trillion in corporate investments,” she said.



JENNIFER WALSH

branding system for the supply chains for both domestic and international markets, according

to Walsh. The strategy highlights the need to build a purchasing preference for the product markets.

“We have a tremendous natural resource in Maryland with our forests,” said Daniel Rider, program supervisor for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Forest Service. “We are not running out of wood. Every year we grow two to four times more than what we harvest or what dies off naturally. There is no threat of running out

SEE TGCC — 8A

TGCC: 2-phased approach proposed for program

CONTINUED FROM 1A

of this resource. Maryland has large diameter trees of exceptionally high quality wood. Many other states don't have that resource. People are now demanding to know where their products come from."

Through studying the challenges to the effort, forestry industry advocates hope to develop a set of recommendations to support better alignment between environmental, social and governance reporting needs while maintaining the sustainability performance of Maryland's forests. The proposed project hopes to improve communication between the global business community and Maryland's responsibly managed forests.

Agricultural and Community Development Services, LLC is developing initiatives for the branding effort including identifying the key audiences involved, ultimately hoping to elevate Maryland's forest business.

"Verso was the largest buyer of timber in Maryland," said Philip Gottwals, ACDS managing director. "The closure of the mill kicked off a process for the Economic Adjustment Strategy with funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce. We wanted to try to understand it and the economic dislocation. We want to look to the future for how we might rebuild the local economy and if possible rebuilding it around the asset that made it work in the first place, which in this case was timber."

To help the industry, Gottwals said a system is needed "that ensures that consumers know that when they buy a wood product built from Maryland wood that they can be sure that is the case and not find out it was made elsewhere, such as China. It starts with the tree in the forest it is grown in. It will require an easy

way to track the timber and wood products."

An analysis of state procurement shows a 10% increase in purchases of Maryland forest products occurring under a certification and branding program would increase employment by nearly 200 jobs, produce \$37 million in manufacturing output and add \$1.2 million in state and local tax base, according to Gottwals.

A companion Maryland forest products risk analysis is being led by Josh Smith, executive director of the Western Maryland Resource Conservation and Development Council. The risk analysis project was awarded \$40,000 for fiscal year 2022 through the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund with Sarah Crowe selected as the project consultant.

To accomplish the branding program, TGCC is proposing a two-phased approach. The first would incorporate the use of two design charrettes in which members of the various supply chain will meet to discuss key elements to building a viable branding system.

These design discussions will yield the initial scope of the brand program. Phase two will utilize the services of a brand development specialist to turn the design program generated into a working brand model. The products of this phase will include development of a uniform marketing package with imaging and messaging. The draft outcomes will be circulated among the participants to ensure that the plan has investment value. When utility is confirmed, TGCC will initiate the brand development process.

Greg Larry is a reporter at the Cumberland Times-News. To reach him, call 304-639-4951, email glarry@times-news.com and follow him on Twitter.