

Society Affairs **Woodlands Award Recognizes the Best in Mined Land Reclamation**

By Robert Beamblossom

The West Virginia Division of the Society of American Foresters (WVSAF) recently honored ICG Eastern, LLC's Birch River Mine with its 2009 Woodlands Award. Presented annually at the West Virginia Mining Symposium, the award is given to a surface mining operation that creates productive and valuable forests during the reclamation process and follows the Forestry Reclamation Approach (FRA) guidelines established by the Appalachian Regional Forest Initiative (ARRI) and SAF.

"The WVSAF established the Woodlands Award in 1998 after concerns among many members that large acreages of forestland were being reclaimed to hay land, pasture, and fish and wildlife habitat as post-mine land uses, but not much of the reclaimed acreage was being planted back into productive hardwood forests," said Woodlands Award Committee Chair Tim Probert. "Several awards were being given out to companies creating all these other land uses, but there was no recognition for good reforestation practices on surface mined lands. After some discussions with the West Virginia Coal Association, WVSAF established the Woodlands Award."

Since its inception, the WVSAF's Woodlands Award Committee—composed of SAF members Tim Probert, Jim Mitchell, John Vallelonga, Doug Toothman, and Rick Pensing—has visited thousands of acres of surface mined land

being restored to productive and quality forests in the state. According to West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's figures, approximately 85 percent of the surface mine acreage currently being permitted in the state will be returned to forests after mining.

Located in Webster County, West Virginia, the Birch River Mine uses several methods to accomplish the FRA, including:

► Regrading sloped areas with only one or two passes of a bulldozer on the uppermost layer of mine soil, which creates slope stability while avoiding compaction.

► Creating side-by-side piles of mine soil about six feet high on flat areas along the tops of spoil ridges, where rock trucks have compacted the ground by transporting mine soil to valley fills. Then the piles are lightly graded by a bulldozer to knock down the higher tops and partially fill in low areas. The result is a growth medium exceeding four feet that is made up of loosely graded rocky soils that promote better root development and overall tree growth.

► Using bulldozers to "rip" flat, heavily compacted areas that had been previously regraded and seeded with groundcover, but not planted with trees. This breaks up the compacted soil and enables the planting of seedlings in the loosened mine soil, which becomes a better growing medium for the creation of productive forests.

Currently, the material used to create the final growth medium consists of native soils and other approved topsoil substitu-



Frank Shreve, (right) environmental inspector supervisor with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) Office of Surface Mining, makes a point to WVSAF Woodlands Award Committee Chair Tim Probert (center), ICG Eastern, LLC's Bill Young (left), and Wes Wayne during the committee's site visit to the Birch River surface mine operations. ICG received the award for re-establishing productive forests using the Forest Reclamation Approach during mine reclamation.

tutes, such as weathered brown sandstone. The native soils consist of O, A, B, C, and Cr horizons, which are recovered to the extent possible and placed among the bucket-dumped mine soil piles or placed along the top of sloped areas and mixed with loose mine soil material during regrading.

In addition, a native, noncompetitive

ground cover complimentary to tree growth has been adopted for use at the Birch River Mine. All areas to be reforested are reclaimed with a seed mix of weeping lovegrass, redtop, kobe lespedeza, birdfoot trefoil, perennial rye grass, and white clover at low seeding

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SAF Connects Urban and Rural Oregon Through County Leaders Forestry Tours

By Gary Springer

similar tours in Benton County in 2007 and in Linn County last year.

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ing connections between foresters and community leaders, repeat these tours and follow them up with person-to-person contacts.

► Keep speeches and indoor portions of the tours to a minimum; maximize the outdoor experience and create opportunities for one-on-one conversation, such as in the van between tour stops.

► Encourage questions, even if they are on tough topics such as clearcutting or herbicide use.

► Involve a wide spectrum of operators, landowners, and managers at stops to demonstrate the range of management common to the area and to stimulate discussion.

► Active logging operations and mills are always the best and most memorable stops.

► Focus tour stops on modern forestry advances and dispel any lingering forestry myths.

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► When planning tours pay great attention to logistics. It is common to plan too many stops. Four or five stops with lots of good discussion are better than six stops and a hurried tour. Always do a timed dry run with tour planners before setting the final itinerary.

► Find a community leader with good contacts among the target audience to help build attendance.

The members of the Mary's Peak Chapter encourage other SAF chapters to sponsor tours for community leaders in their areas. In a society increasingly disconnected from forestry, the need for these tours is obvious. Building bridges between community and forestry leaders is part of the mission of the SAF, and although it is a lot of work to produce such tours, they are a good way to energize your chapter. Just do it!

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rates. Seasonal cover crops may include winter wheat or foxtail millet. Legumes are inoculated with the appropriate specific inoculums before seeding.

ICG plants two types of trees and shrubs: early succession species for wildlife and soil stability and commercially valuable crop trees. Its planting plan requires a minimum stocking density of 500 woody plant seedlings per acre. Of these, at least 210 are required to be higher value hardwoods, and the company is currently planting northern red oak, white ash, sugar maple, black cherry, white oak, and yellow poplar. When mining is completed, reclamation activities will take place on more than 3,000 acres in an effort to create a productive forest featuring enhanced wildlife habitat.

The Woodlands Award Committee also was especially complimentary of ICG's efforts to involve the community. The company sponsored Arbor Day events in 2007 and 2008, and plans are underway for the 2009 celebration. Local fifth grade students attended these events, which included educational presentations on the history of Arbor Day, reforestation of surface mined areas using the FRA guidelines, and the efforts underway to restore the American chestnut. The students then planted oak seedlings and American chestnuts in a prepared area at the mine.

Beyond such educational programs, the company is collaborating with Jeff Skousen, a soil science professor with West Virginia University's Plant and

Soil Science Department, to conduct research comparing the infiltration rates of undisturbed ground versus reclaimed mine soils and examine the effects of rough grading and mine soil types on the growth and survival of several species.

Future research includes plans to establish plots in FRA mine soils to compare infiltration rates on low compaction sites to the other site data observed. Proposed future research includes the establishment of an experimental area to determine the best overall substrate material for tree growth on surface mines.

In addition to the Woodlands Award, ICG Eastern LLC's Birch River Complex was also honored with the 2008 Greenlands Award, which recognizes the state's top performer in the area of environmental protection and performance. The Birch River Mine Complex received the award for overall outstanding reclamation efforts at a large surface mine and its associated coal preparation and coal handling facilities.

“ICG Eastern's Birch River Complex has taken steps above and beyond what is required by state and federal regulations, and it is a true steward of the environment,” said West Virginia Coal Association President Bill Rainey. “They are greatly deserving of this award.”

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