



# Achieving a Dream

*By Elishia Ballentine, Editor*

**R**aised on a farm, working the land, O. M. Becton always dreamed of owning his own property. More than a personal goal, it was – and remains – the driving force in his life.

To achieve that dream, he and his family were often required to sacrifice many of the things that other people enjoyed. Crediting his wife, Carolyn, with being instrumental in the purchase of their first parcel of land back in 1965, he said they could not have bought the property if she had not contributed her teaching salary toward buying it. Becton was 25 years old at the time. The timber on the place had been heavily cut a few years earlier. Upon learning that they had paid \$250 an acre for the

property, his father told his mother, “You just as well clean out that boy’s room . . . they’re gonna be back here in the house with us in less than a year. He’s gone stone crazy . . . he’s gonna lose everything he’s got!”

Fortunately, the young couple fared a bit better than expected. Today, the Bectons own 1,100 acres in Choctaw County. Every acre was acquired by purchase, even the 80 acres of “family land” they bought from his elderly aunt. She had inherited it from her parents – his grandparents – and he felt very fortunate to buy it.

Becton stated that even though their property was first certified as a TREASURE Forest, then later as a Tree Farm, it had



not been necessary to adapt any of his land management practices or change his management goals to attain the certifications. Before he had ever heard of either program, he was already dedicated to managing the forestland according to sound principles . . . maximizing timber production while at the same time enhancing and protecting the multiple resources provided by the forest. Following these criteria earned O. M. and Carolyn the prestigious Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award in 2011.

### **Timber Production**

The primary TREASURE Forest management objective for Becton is commercial timber production. He prefers timber to be in “pure” stands, either pine or hardwood, not mixed. The management methods and goals for the two forest types are distinctly different. There are approximately 200 acres in hardwood. The balance is planted in pine, mostly loblolly. Of that, only 50 to 60 acres are managed as uneven-aged stands, primarily to take advantage of the mixed aged that was present when the property was obtained. The majority is even-age managed, from 2-3 years old up to 40 years old. There are only 50-60 acres in longleaf, all on deep sandy land where loblolly will not grow.

“Some people are of the mistaken opinion that with timberland, you cut timber, then walk away and not do anything for ten years or so, then come back and cut some more.” Becton continued, “I manage my timber like a crop, working in it all the time . . . not necessarily in the same stand, but somewhere on the property, there’s something going on, continually.”

In fact, there is no area on his property that he is not constantly working to improve. According to Becton, “I don’t believe in setting acres aside and not doing anything with them. Every acre you own should produce the maximum it can, either in timber or

for the benefit of wildlife. To really make money growing timber, you have to pay attention to detail . . . if you don’t work it, you will not reach the maximum potential in returns.”

### **Management Practices**

With the advantage of being a forester for over 40 years, Becton calls on that professional experience to achieve success on his personal forestland. Employed at MacMillan-Bloedel for nine years, then with Scotch Lumber Company for 31 years, his job was working with private landowners, assisting them in managing 250,000 acres of forestland.

A strong advocate of prescribed burning, Becton states that the practice provides numerous benefits. “Timber that has been burned allows you to see better to mark your timber, and also helps the crew to see better when cutting it. It improves wildlife habitat for deer, turkey, rabbit, and quail by producing legumes and herbaceous growth . . . food that would not be present without prescribed fire. It’s also a cheap way to control hardwood underbrush, making it more aesthetically appealing than a stand that’s grown up in brush.”

Becton noted that if you do burn regularly, when you get to the end of a rotation you have a choice . . . you can either regenerate naturally, or, clear-cut and plant. If you choose to clear-cut and plant, you’ve cut down your site-prep costs considerably because you’ve pretty much got your hardwoods under control with prescribed fire. He is not opposed to the clear-cut and plant method; in fact, he had to employ it. Most of his stands are plantations now because they were cut-over when he purchased the land years ago, and the only way to put those particular stands into production was by clear-cutting, spraying, and planting.

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However, in stands he has harvested in the past ten years, he has been able to use natural regeneration by cutting timber in the autumn after good seed fall.

Conducting his own prescribed burns, Becton laughingly said he was known locally as a “fire bug” because of the frequency of his burns! He performs the initial burn at eight to ten years, then again in two- to three-year cycles after that. The stands are commercially thinned at age 12-14, then every four to five years thereafter, up to 30 years. His goal is two burns between each thinning, with four or five thinnings by age 40. It may not be necessary to thin again before the final harvest when the trees are between 40 and 50 years old.

Marking timber is another practice Becton enjoys doing for himself. Every tree cut from his forestland is marked. “A stand of good quality trees is the result of timber marking,” he stated. “It’s more profitable, particularly on longer rotations when trying to grow poles and high quality saw timber. Before cutting trees, I recommend hiring an experienced timber marker versus ‘operator-select’ cuts, because the operator can’t always see well from the cutting machine. Tree selection is critical. You have to select the right trees to leave. If you take out the wrong ones, you’ll cut profits considerably.”

### Wildlife

Becton’s secondary objective as a TREASURE Forest landowner is wildlife habitat management. In pine stands, as previously mentioned, he feels strongly that there is nothing any more important for game than prescribed fire. “If a landowner could carry out only ONE practice for wildlife enhancement, it would be burning,” he said.

To emphasize this point, he noted that wildlife had definitely improved since they first purchased the land. Opening it up by burning and thinning has not only improved habitat, but also

increased numbers of animals, particularly deer, rabbit, quail, and turkey. Remarking on the quantity he said, “We can’t have a garden without fencing out the deer. If you planted a pea on the porch, they’d come up on the porch and eat it!”

Another practice includes improvement cuttings in streamside management zones (SMZs), primarily to enhance mast-bearing trees for wildlife. Also, in seeding the roads with bahia grass to prevent washing, he has discovered the bonus benefit that it feeds the turkeys. Finally, he plants food plots, mainly to concentrate game for hunting. Becton has a son and three grandsons who enjoy coming all the way from Mississippi to hunt with him!

### Education

Having worked in the forest products industry for many years, Becton is well versed in educating school children, as well as adults, about the important role forestry plays in Alabama. He is able to explain all facets of forestry production and the forest industry, as well as conservation of natural resources. During his forestry career, he conducted numerous tours on “lots of other people’s lands.” Now that he’s retired, he gets to showcase his own land! As a long-time member of Choctaw County’s chapter of the Alabama Natural Resources Council, he has made the property available to various groups for tours.

For several years, the Bectons have opened their doors to fifth graders from schools around the county for “Classroom in the Forest” presentations. He says he is amazed at the number of students – even from rural areas – who think it’s wrong to cut trees. He makes it his mission to teach them the facts, explaining that Choctaw County depends on the timber industry! Additionally, the property has provided an ideal location for several FFA and 4-H forestry judging teams.

Demonstrating a wide range of management practices, the Becton family has also hosted a number of landowner tours. He strives to impress upon his fellow landowners that you can make money growing timber! With a smile on his face, Becton says, “I may be married to the land, but I’m *not* married to the trees . . . I love to cut timber!”

Other advice he offers landowners is that if they are not comfortable in managing the land themselves, they should hire a consulting forester to advise them before cutting timber. “It’s too late after the fact. If you don’t know what you’re doing, don’t sell timber without first talking with a forester – whether they’re with the Alabama Forestry Commission, industrial, or private consultant.”

One final tip Becton strongly recommends to landowners, whether big or small, is to take advantage of cost-share programs whenever they are available.

### True Treasure

When asked why he works so hard and puts so much effort into the property, Becton replied, “I do it because I enjoy it. Managing timber is where I get my satisfaction. Buying and selling land has never been my objective, as it is with many folks. Being certified as a TREASURE Forest or Tree Farm – even being recognized as a Helene Mosley property – all of that is great, but I didn’t manage my land with any of those things in mind. I manage it because that’s just what I do. Managing my timber . . . that’s what makes it a treasure to me!”