

NEW CASTLE NEWS

With focus on the forest, Firth's won two environmental awards

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Troy Firth, president of the Foundation for Sustainable Forests in Sparta Township, speaks to a group of forest landowners about sustainable forest management practices at the foundation's annual Loving the Land Through Working Forests conference.

Troy Firth would probably not be the first to tell you he's won two awards. He's much more focused on the woods.

To back up this diligence, the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association granted Firth its Lifetime Conservation Achievement Award. He also recently earned a 2019 Western Pennsylvania Environmental Award from the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) and Dominion Energy.

After decades of managing woodlands and protecting the ecosystems of northwestern Pennsylvania, Firth began the Sparta Township-based Foundation for Sustainable Forests in 2004 as a way to preserve timberlands that he owned in perpetuity after his death. Firth currently serves as president of the organization.

Not long after the founding, others became interested in his sustainable methods, and the foundation grew to own and care for several different properties, many of them donated or sold for a bargain. Land under the foundation's control sees no development.

According to Executive Director Annie Socci, the foundation began offering memberships and hosting an annual conference, "Loving the Land Through Working Forests," around 2012. To date, the foundation has protected more than 1,000 acres of forested land and is nearing completion of projects totaling more than 1,000 additional acres.

Socci nominated Firth for the Environmental Award without knowing his chances but wanting to bring attention to Firth's work. Only five organizations were chosen for this recognition from a panel of independent judges, environmental experts and PEC staff members. The award came with a \$5,000 grant, which Firth confirmed would go to support the foundation.

"Troy has practiced exceptional standards of management that puts the forest first and the needs of the forest first," Socci said. "On top of having created his own style of forestry that's very unique and good for the landscape to also have the vision and donate as many resources as he has to help the Foundation for Sustainable Forests launch and succeed is just a testament to how passionate he is about the forest."

Socci explained Firth's "unique" take on forest management as "worst first forestry," an approach that removes diseased and dying trees, extracting what cash value they hold for lumber and funneling it back into the conservation and invasive species management. The thriving trees are left to grow.

"Over time, he's improving the overall health and vigor of the forest," Socci said. "This 'worst first forestry' is taking a long-term view and still allowing the landowner to get some financial return on the landscape but not at the expense of the woods itself."

One area that has benefited from Firth's style of restorative forestry is a forest near Blooming Valley, which has been under his management since 1985. The foundation uses this specific forest to showcase the long-term benefits of such an approach and also use it for educational tours.

Firth emphasized that the awards are "not important" to him. Rather, he viewed accomplishments in protecting the land as his focus. He also explained that the foundation, unlike other nonprofits or government agencies, pays its property taxes as a way to ease relationships with neighboring residents.

"We're trying to form bonds within the community," Firth said. "In our current political environment, we have very much of a left-wing, right-wing division. We're trying to bridge that gap in small measures."

Socci encouraged members of the public to attend conservation events and to learn more about how to practice forestry in sustainable ways, which often gets confused with logging, she said.

"The more that the public can understand the difference between forest management and logging, the better off our region's woods will be," Socci said. "It's literally in the name: Pennsylvania means Penn's Woods."

The awards and the grant will help to "build confidence" in their goals for the region, Socci said, reinforcing that, due to climate change and invasive species, no forest remains "untouched" by human impact.

"For both of these recognitions, it puts a relatively young and small regional land trust even more so on the map," Socci said. "We want to help other organizations that conserve natural land to manage their lands better. This, to us, is a huge testament to the legitimacy of our mission and our practices, to recognize that yes, our practices are good for the region and good for the community."

Source: http://www.ncnewsonline.com/pennsylvania/news/with-focus-on-the-forest-firth-s-won-two-environmental/article_994e48f4-a50c-59f5-850b-32936993bb66.html