

Sharing news, stories, and insight about the land we love



Calico Vineyard, a recently protected property in Greenville County

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## Restoring native grasses on protected property



by Lauren Muller,  
Land Stewardship  
Associate

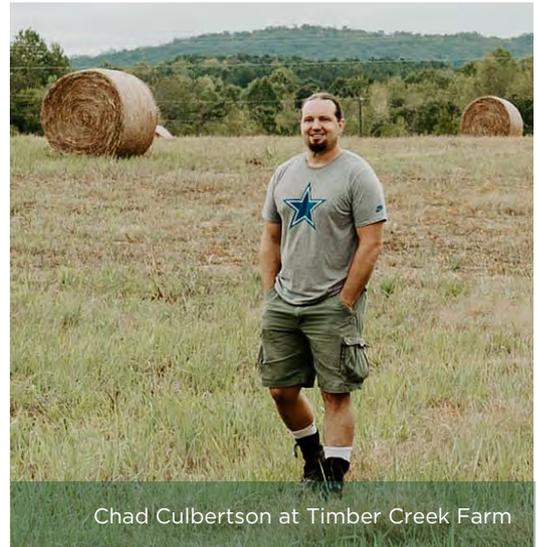
Grassland might be the hottest habitat restoration buzzword in the southeast, as landowners increasingly seek resources and advice on how to establish native grasses on their property. Some hope to attract birds, turkey, or other wildlife, while others simply appreciate the ethereal beauty of an autumn grassland when glimmering seed plumes dance in the slightest of breezes. Chad Culbertson is one such landowner, and he shares his innovative approach that combines income generation with native grass restoration on his protected property. >>



View of Timber Creek Farm, the Culbertson family's conserved land

## How did you first get interested in native grasses?

In 2009, after we put the Warrior Mountain tract under easement, we had some local experts do an endangered species survey to see if we had anything that needed serious conservation efforts. So Russell Burns and Rick Huffman came down and surveyed the whole property and gave us a really good catalog of what they saw. During that time, I got used to identifying many native plants that I wasn't familiar with before. I had already begun looking for a way to generate more revenue, and Rick mentioned producing native plant seed. He consulted with me on how to actually go about starting that work and how to make contacts with the people marketing and selling the seeds. One of the big things that Rick did was put me in touch with John Seymour of Roundstone Native Seed in Kentucky. We toured the entire operation and equipment set up. John was extremely gracious to host us and has been an incredible resource.



Chad Culbertson at Timber Creek Farm

## Describe your native grass growing operation.

Right now I have about 20 acres of Indian Grass, 20 acres of Purple Top, 10 acres of Black-eyed Susan, 14 acres of Little Bluestem and Broomsedge, and we are putting another 70 acres into a grass and pollinator mix through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program. I send the bulk seed to Roundstone, who separates, cleans, and tests the seed, and has the marketing and distribution channels.

## What are the economic opportunities for native grass seed producers?

At the time that I connected with Rick, I didn't know much about the economic value of native plants and had no idea that the native seed market even existed. I began learning how big the footprint of native seed market actually was with projects like roadside restoration projects, food plot mixes, or beautification projects. Right now, certain specialty grasses that are harder to find or grow could be quite profitable. Getting the process to be effective and efficient can be difficult. The supply/demand cycle is also hard to predict, so prices can be up or down. If it's something you'd enjoy doing, and love the work itself, it could be a good option.

## Aside from growing native grasses for seed production, what ecological benefits could a landowner expect if they began planting native grasses?

I can't believe the volume of insects that I see now — everything from mantids to grasshoppers. I've observed lots of species that I had never seen before, and I've lived here my whole life. That has caused other species up the food chain do better as well. I wouldn't say that there are noticeably more large species, like deer or turkey, but they seem to be healthier as a result. Fortunately, some of the native grasses are very easy to plant even if you have some weed pressure, as long as you aren't trying to establish a monoculture seed production field. It's also just very pretty.

## What are some lessons learned during your grass propagation journey?

Starting out, my ideas were bigger than my capacity when I began trying to produce native grass seed commercially. I should have started smaller to get familiar with the land, cultural practices, timing, and how much work it takes per acre. For example, spring and summer plantings did not work for me. I had to plant everything in the fall even though the seed was pre-stratified, or cold treated, in order to give it enough time to compete with the weeds. There are good selective herbicides for some of it, but most of the species are very sensitive to chemicals when they're young, so you have to be very careful during that first year.

That being said, you have to be much more thorough with the field preparation prior to planting than I was. I came in with the intention of having a very light hand and small footprint, and tried to minimize the amount of chemicals and equipment needed. But you really do have to be assertive prior to establishment. I was really surprised by the invasive weeds in the seed bank. There was so much pigweed in one field that I didn't know was there until the hay was gone. It took over the whole field in less than a month and choked out all of the Partridgepea I had planted. I should have really observed that field for a season, after the first burn down, to see exactly what would come up, and then deal with it before putting the seed in. >>

>> And you will need machinery if you're going to produce native grass seed commercially (tractor, seed drill, disks, spreader, sprayer, combine, seed stripper, drying bins, etc). That has turned out to be the area that's taken the most time and money for me. If you're trying to establish natives in a former pasture or hay field, I would do at least two herbicide burn downs a couple months apart during the summer prior to planting, followed by Panoramic/Plateau as a pre-emergent application if the species you're planting can handle it.

In other cases, you might be surprised by desired species that can emerge from the seed bank. One of our fields had been a timber plantation for the last 100 years. When we harvested the timber to begin establishing grasses a huge amount of Little Bluestem, Silky Oatgrass, Showy Tickseed and other natives popped up. It's really remarkable.

### **What are some helpful resources for landowners interested in establishing native grasses on their property?**

Most of the advice that you get from the Universities, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), or growers is spot on, and in general everything that they tell you about how to establish these plants is the best way to do it. NRCS can also be a resource for funding.

### **What is your vision for the future of native grass establishment in the upstate?**

I would hope that long term, maybe some of these grasses could be used as energy crops. Ecologically, there are opportunities for conversion of old fallow hay fields. If you get rid of the dog fennel, Johnsongrass, and Pigweed and you begin to establish Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, and other natives, you will begin to see an uptick in everything from insects to birds and larger animals. I could see that taking off in the future, ultimately improving the piedmont habitat, a patchwork of grasslands and forests, which would benefit pollinators, birds, and other wildlife.



Utilizing cattle for rotational grazing can stimulate grass development since the cattle eat the top few inches of grass, encouraging more vegetative growth.

## **Beef Cattle Production & Management Workshop**

March 19, 10am-2pm

Pelzer, SC

Interested in learning more about ecological farming and hear from one of Upstate Forever's own staff members on conservation easements? South Carolina State University is hosting a workshop where participants will learn about beef cattle production and management, silvopasture, farm insurance, vital security, and hear from Upstate Forever about conservation easements and funding opportunities for farmers.

**To register, please email [cgendusa@upstateforever.org](mailto:cgendusa@upstateforever.org)**

# Red Fox Games Combines Conservation with Paintball



by Caitlyn Gendusa,  
Land Conservation Manager

We live in a time when strip malls and other commercial businesses are the norm, so it might be surprising to hear that businesses can merge conservation and commercial use on the same property. Vaughn Smith, who protected his 120-acre property through a conservation easement with Upstate Forever in 2020, has spent the last forty years revitalizing once barren farmland and transforming it into his paintball business, Red Fox Games, in Woodruff, SC. Red Fox Games exemplifies the benefits of combining commercial use with conservation by providing visitors with an enjoyable past time while becoming more connected to the surrounding environment and forests.

When Smith purchased the property in 1980, it had been intensely farmed and then laid idle for thirty years. Farming caused tremendous erosion leading to gullies, one of which was twenty feet deep. During frequent storms, the property's tributary streams from the South Tyger River eroded topsoil into the nearby creek. To alleviate these environmental concerns, a dam was constructed in 2003. The resulting ten-acre lake has never been artificially stocked and contains large amounts of bluegill, porch bass, and other game fish — diversity likely due to the undisturbed aquatic habitat.

After addressing erosion issues, Vaughn spent the next few years cutting invasive non-native trees, such as Chinaberry. The property was terraced in some areas to eliminate the gullies, and in other areas Vaughn replanted with Loblolly pines. A testament to Vaughn's hard work restoring the natural environment occurred when a hurricane poured five inches of heavy rain and left the newly replanted property with zero washouts or erosion. >>



View of Red Fox Games paintball area constructed out of fallen or diseased trees

>> Satisfied with his restoration success, Vaughn sought a way to maintain the property's natural resources while also producing income. That was when he decided to open his paintball business, Red Fox Games. To maintain the ecological balance his restoration established, Vaughn only uses biodegradable paintball pellets and keeps customers in designated paintball fields to reduce environmental impact. Any fallen or rotten trees are reused as barricades for paintball participants. Due in part to the tremendous amount of time people are spending outdoors during the pandemic, Vaughn continues to see record numbers each year, with some years having up to 8,000 customers.

Vaughn, who grew up in the flatlands of Texas, always knew that he wanted to own forestland. Opening a business that could take advantage of the property's natural state to help pay for the property's restoration was something Vaughn did not know was possible. While Vaughn says it is disheartening to see local tracts bought up for small residential lots, he is encouraged by the number of people who visit Red Fox Farm to enjoy its surrounding nature. Thanks to the easement Vaughn established with Upstate Forever, his property's forestland is preserved in perpetuity, and visitors can enjoy this scenic paintball destination for a long time to come.

**Red Fox Games was put into a conservation easement with Upstate Forever in 2021. To visit the property, visit [redfoxgames.com](http://redfoxgames.com) to schedule a paintball session.**



At the event, Calico Vineyard owners Steve and Lantie Sandlin were given an award for their dedication to land conservation from SC Senator Tom Corbin.

## Host a Landowner Outreach Event at Your Property

Upstate Forever recently hosted a landowner outreach event at Calico Vineyard, now protected by a conservation easement. Landowner outreach events are a great way to build community support for land conservation. At this event in Tigerville, pictured above, folks heard from Upstate Forever and the SC Conservation Bank on easement funding opportunities as well as cost share programs through Upstate Forever's Clean Water program. To host a similar event in your neighborhood, please contact [landtrust@upstateforever.org](mailto:landtrust@upstateforever.org).

# New team members

## Please join us in welcoming Land Conservation Operations Associate Alison Miller and Land Stewardship Manager Sean Cobourn!



A New England native, Alison Miller's love of nature started with annual family camping trips as a child and has followed her through all five states that she has called 'home.' This affinity grew even stronger after she got a taste of land management as a volunteer with the Colorado 14ers Initiative while she was a student at the High Mountain Institute in Leadville, CO. Alison is a graduate of St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY, and a current MBA candidate at Clemson University.

Alison comes to Upstate Forever as a former paralegal and legal program coordinator. She provides process and project management support for both the Outreach and Stewardship sides of the Land Conservation team.

In her free time Alison can be found anywhere outside with her family — hiking, paddleboarding, snow skiing, or even picnicking in one of Greenville's beautiful parks!

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Sean Cobourn has called the Upstate home for half of his life and has been an outdoor recreationalist and advocate since his youth. Sean has served on the Board of Directors for The Access Fund, a national climbing advocacy group, and its regional counterpart, the Carolina Climbers Coalition, where he spearheaded land purchases to help build Chimney Rock State Park and Laurel Knob, the tallest cliff in Eastern America. Sean is transitioning to Upstate Forever after a thirty year career as an attorney where he helped hundreds of clients solve their legal issues.

Sean lives in Gramling, at the foot of his favorite mountains, the Blue Ridge. He is the proud father of twin daughters who are senior student athletes at Spartanburg Day School. In his free time, Sean enjoys rock climbing, mountain biking, whitewater paddling, and caving.



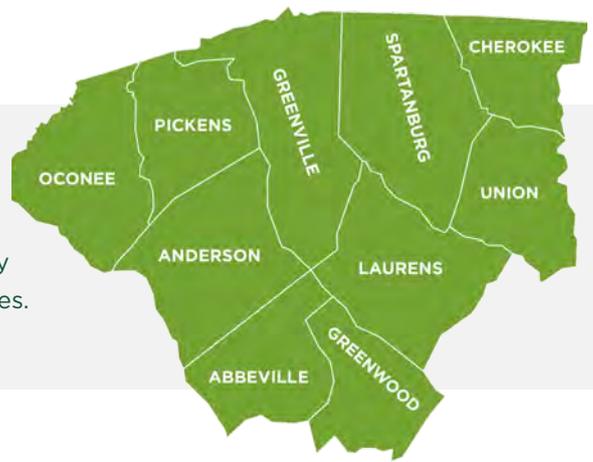
## Help protect more Upstate land

Do you know someone who owns land in the 10-county Upstate SC region who would like to learn more about permanently protecting their land through a voluntary conservation easement? We would love to share more information on the benefits of conserving land. Funding and tax incentives are available.

**Contact us: [landtrust@upstateforever.org](mailto:landtrust@upstateforever.org) | (864) 250-0500**

# Newly Protected Properties

Upstate Forever protects nearly 30,000 acres in the ten county Upstate region. See below for our recent conservation successes.



## Bent Ear Farm

Greenwood County

418 acres of field and timber forest located between the towns of Ware Shoals and Hodges, SC, in northeastern Greenwood County



## Calico Vineyard

Greenville County

A 113-acre family-owned vineyard where grapes, berries, and a variety of muscadines are grown and distributed to local restaurants

Project funded in part by the SC Conservation Bank and Greenville Women Giving.



## Warrior Mountain

Laurens County

An amendment of 21 additional forested acres that features an iconic granite monadnock with scenic views of Little Knob/ Warrior Mountain



## December Hill Farm

Anderson County

An amendment of 453 acres of row crop and pastureland owned by multi-generational family farmers



## Gobblers Roost

Laurens & Newberry County

1,020 acres of field and timber forest located near the towns of Joanna and Kinards, SC

Project funded in part by the SC Conservation Bank and Upstate Land Conservation Fund.



## Taychoedah

Oconee County

42 acres of forestland located just south of Highway 11 near Lake Keowee and the town of Salem

Project funded in part by the Oconee County Conservation Bank.



UPSTATE  
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A few of the many scenes from Upstate Forever's conservation easements. Through our Land Conservation program, we have protected nearly 30,000 acres in the Upstate.