

GEORGIA'S

FORESTRY TASK FORCE



GEORGIA FORESTRY
COMMISSION



REPORT - JANUARY 2026



FROM THE GOVERNOR

Members of the General Assembly,

Georgia's forest industry has long served as the cornerstone of our state's economy. It supports tens of thousands of hardworking families and has a significant impact on critical services to Georgians. Yet Hurricane Helene's devastation and the recent closure of four major mills have created

unprecedented challenges - threatening jobs, landowners, and entire rural communities. To address these complex setbacks, I formed a special task force, led by the Georgia Forestry Commission, that brought together experts from state agencies, academia, and stakeholders to assess threats and opportunities as we chart a strategic path forward.

This report captures their dedicated work and delivers actionable recommendations to bolster our forest products sector, diversify markets, and secure the industry's long-term sustainability. My administration stands firmly with our timber growers, loggers, mill workers, and rural families. We are steadfastly committed to partnering with all stakeholders—and with you in the General Assembly—to implement real solutions. Together we will drive the growth that keeps Georgia the best place to live, work, and raise a family.

Sincerely,

Brian P. Kemp
Governor

FROM THE STATE FORESTER

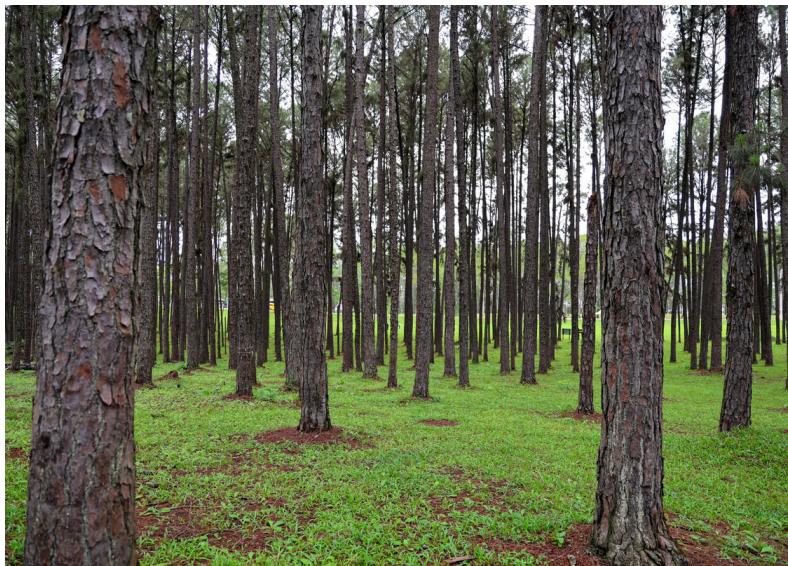
I extend my sincere thanks to the Governor and state leadership for their strong support of the forest industry and their commitment to its future. I am also deeply grateful to the Task Force members for their time, energy, and enthusiasm, and for conducting wide-ranging, thorough research spanning state and federal policies to new and emerging forest products.

This effort underscores that strengthening our forestry sector is a marathon, not a sprint. It will require focused collaboration over the next several years to witness real change. However, because of the dedication of so many, I am confident that Georgia will remain the #1 forestry state in the nation.

Johnny Sabo
Director, Georgia Forestry Commission

BACKGROUND

In August of 2025, Governor Brian Kemp directed Georgia Forestry Commission State Forester Johnny Sabo to establish a special task force to address growing challenges facing the state's forest products industry. On the heels of unprecedented destruction and economic instability caused by Hurricane Helene, four major Georgia mills were shut-down: International Paper's two mills in Riceboro and one in Savannah, along with Georgia-Pacific's containerboard mill in Cedar Springs.



Four mill closures mean the 8.3 million collective tons of timber, 4.5 million from Georgia alone, that was used to sustain them is no longer needed. TimberMart-South reports the average Georgia pine pulpwood price has fallen more than 44% since peaking at over \$13.50 per ton statewide in the 4th quarter of 2022.

These events resulted in devastating impacts on multiple fronts. The task force's mission was to develop a strategic path forward for the State of Georgia.

The Forestry Task Force brought together a number of partners with distinct and valued perspectives. They met at regular intervals over a four-month period in 2025 and included: the Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia Forestry Association, Georgia Department of Agriculture, Georgia Department of Economic Development, UGA's Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources, Georgia Tech, Abraham Baldwin Agriculture College (ABAC), the Technical College System of Georgia, and the Rural Center (Department of Agriculture). The Task Force also sought input and feedback directly from the forestry community – landowners, industry, state and federal partners, and beyond.

At each meeting, representatives from these select organizations convened to share input pertinent to their classification and relevance to the group objectives. Subject matter experts were also invited to contribute.

The Task Force's multiple objectives were:

- Understand the forestry landscape following recent mill closures and post-Hurricane Helene.
- Identify short- and long-term threats and opportunities.
- Identify immediate priorities and action items.
- Begin developing recommendations for policy, investment, and coordination.
- Set priorities for data collection and stakeholder engagement.
- Address the human impact of industry decline, including the mental, emotional, and economic stress on workers, families, and rural communities.

For more than a century, forestry has been a robust component of Georgia's economic engine. At 24-million forested acres, growth has exceeded removals by 50% annually and easily supplied global and local markets. In 2024, the forest industry generated \$880 million in tax revenue and had a \$59.4 billion total impact on Georgia. The forest industry provided more than 57,000 direct forest sector jobs in forest management, logging, and at 192 primary wood product manufacturing facilities and 1,200 secondary mills that converted wood products to furniture, paper products, and other goods.

The announced mill closures are expected to significantly affect Georgia's economy. Georgia Tech estimates the state economy will suffer a \$2.9 billion loss due to the closures. The direct economic impact is \$1.7 billion. Direct job losses will reduce business spending, while household income declines will reduce consumer spending, leading to further losses in employment, income, and overall business activity. The loss of 1,655 direct jobs is projected to result in an additional 5,277 indirect and induced job losses, totaling 6,932 jobs affected. The estimated direct labor income loss is \$197.1 million, with an additional \$367.2 million in indirect and induced income losses.

CHALLENGES

In recent years, a number of factors have eroded the forest industry's health. Some of Georgia's pulp mills were built in the 1930s and are demonstrating their age. Seven of Georgia's eight remaining pulp mills were built prior to 1961. The eighth began operations in 1980. Foreign competitors have newer automated facilities, require fewer workers, and grow more non-native timber species on a faster rotation. New pulp mills in Asia and South America have saturated global markets for containerboard and other pulp products. US labor costs have increased. Increased paper recycling has reduced the demand for virgin pulp, the media paper market continues its sharp decline, and "right size" enhancements have reduced demand for pulp in the US. Housing starts have declined, reducing demand for lumber and panels. Some US and international export policy differences may have had a negative impact.

Announced Mill Closures – Companies	Direct Job Losses
International Paper Savannah (Chatham County)	900
International Paper (DS Smith) Riceboro, GA (Liberty County) pulp & paper mill	170
International Paper (DS Smith) Riceboro, GA (Liberty County) saw mill	50
Georgia Pacific Cedar Springs, GA (Early County) Container board (pulp & paper) mill	535
Total	1,655

Throughout its work, the Forestry Task Force learned these situations have led to greater mental health concerns among the agriculture and forestry communities. Suicide rates for loggers are now nearly four times higher than the national average. A website dedicated to mental health has been established by the Department of Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper and shared widely by the Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia Forestry Association, and numerous community resource agencies: <https://agr.georgia.gov/mental-health-agriculture>.

Another existing obstacle recognized by the task force is neighboring competition. Declining business and shutdowns have already occurred in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. With earlier market contractions and lower wood prices, these states have had a marked “jump” on the pursuit of industry businesses similar to the ones Georgia would typically seek out.

DELIVERABLES

Keeping communities abreast of the many challenging realities being faced by the forest industry and its work force has been a priority. Updates have been consistently shared through the task force’s multiple distribution channels in traditional and digital media.



The Task Force has put emphasis on critical relationships with forest landowners and initiated increased outreach regarding assistance programs that may be available. Landowner relations have been strengthened through the Fuel Mitigation (FMit) program. Over two reimbursement application periods, landowners have been matched with impacted loggers through the Georgia Master Timber Harvester program. A number of cost-share opportunities are in place, including programs for invasive insect and disease control, replanting,

and prescribed burning. Focused forest management efforts are underway to help landowners properly manage timber for their objectives.

Numerous regional presentations were held by UGA, GFA and GFC to share facts with local forest landowners, tree seedling nurseries, foresters, and logging contractors. Community education sessions addressed forest management adjustments, assistance resources, and other relevant information.

The Georgia Department of Economic Development provided the Task Force with updates regarding global outreach for the forest industry. Since 2020, 36 new forestry business and expansion projects valued at \$288,870,000 have added 671 new jobs to the sector and helped to retain an additional 2,574 jobs.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Forestry Task Force identified immediate opportunities (see “*Budget Priorities*” section) that could positively impact mill closure effects. The task force recognizes ongoing efforts by all stakeholders working to move the industry forward. Developing new markets is paramount to the viability of forest industry as well as the health and sustainability of Georgia’s forests.

Potential Tax Credit Program

The Georgia Forestry Association (GFA) identified an opportunity to evaluate whether certain existing state tax credit programs could be refined to better support capital-intensive forestry manufacturing and investment, particularly in rural Georgia. In its review, GFA observed that some long-standing incentives may not fully align with the timing and financing realities of large, multi-year forestry projects. A targeted, disciplined approach to improving the functionality of existing credits – without creating new programs or expanding overall fiscal exposure – could help stabilize markets, encourage reinvestment, and enhance Georgia’s competitiveness for forestry-related capital investment.

From the desk of GEORGIA HOUSE SPEAKER JON BURNS

For generations, forestry has been the backbone of economies, communities, and families across the Southeast, supporting countless jobs and generating billions in economic impact each year. Significant shifts in the market, regulatory barriers, and uncertainty in trade policies have contributed to mill closures and unprecedented challenges. We encourage you to advocate for European Union approval to use SF to fumigate SYL pine wood chips in break bulk ships for export to the EU market...Establish a 90-day notice period for tariffs that would impact the flow of forest products into or out of the US...Push for reopening the Asian market for US logs and chips. — ***Letter to Members of Georgia’s Congressional Delegation from Speakers of the House from Southeastern States***

From the desk of GEORGIA AGRICULTURE COMMISSIONER TYLER HARPER

We respectfully urge you to ensure the nation’s forestry and timber industries are included in any relief provisions to help address ongoing economic pressures and persistent unfair foreign trade practices. Persistent high interest rates have slowed housing construction and reduced demand for wood products, while supply chain disruptions continue to raise costs and complicate operations. Unfair foreign competition has further weakened markets for domestic timber, leaving wood-using mills and landowners struggling to stay afloat. Forestry and timber production are vital to our states’ rural economies [which] sustain hundreds of thousands of jobs, drive local tax bases, and support small businesses...affecting everything from family livelihoods to forest stewardship. Including forestry and timber in the agricultural assistance package would help sustain rural economies and employment, stabilize markets, and strengthen one of America’s most important renewable resource industries. — ***Letter to USDA Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins and Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent from Commissioners and Secretaries of Agriculture from the southern U.S.***

For the complete letters,
scan the QR code:



BUDGET PRIORITIES

1 Mass Timber State Office: Design and construct a mass timber county office for the Georgia Forestry Commission. \$2,636,180.

- This would be the first mass timber building built by the State of Georgia, and will serve as a pilot project for future endeavors.
- As progress is made and additional state buildings are built from mass timber, demand for products should attract a mass timber manufacturing facility to Georgia. In addition to significantly strengthening the forest industry, this would also increase availability of mass timber products for more broad-scale projects in the private sector.

2 Georgia Grown Wood Products Marketing: Provide funding to expand the Georgia Grown Wood Products marketing and communications campaign. \$660,000.

- Phase II builds on the FY25–26 launch under the Georgia Department of Agriculture’s Georgia Grown initiative, in partnership with the Georgia Forestry Commission and the Georgia Forestry Association, to strengthen Georgia’s existing forest products industry while supporting efforts to attract next-generation manufacturing investment.
- Funding will leverage Phase I materials to support economic development and keep Georgia competitive as other Southern states pursue similar investments by equipping state and local economic developers with a Forestry Investment Toolkit and sector prospectus; engaging investors and other decision-makers through targeted outreach; and sustaining year-round awareness through earned media.
- Phase II is designed to encourage private-sector participation, enabling existing industries to provide additional support to sustain programming over time.

3 Georgia Forestry Innovation Initiative: Increase funds for the Georgia Forestry Innovation Initiative in partnership with Georgia Tech to support the timber industry's expansion into emerging markets through research, product testing, and private partnerships. \$10,900,000.

- The Georgia Forestry Innovation Initiative will turn low-value wood—such as small-diameter trees and sawmill leftovers—into high-value products used in everyday goods like car coatings, plastics, and pharmaceuticals. Led by the Georgia Forestry Commission and the Center for a Renewables-Based Economy from Wood at Georgia Tech’s Renewable Bioproducts Institute, the initiative will help move proven research from the lab into real businesses operating in Georgia.
- The initiative builds on technologies developed at Georgia Tech that can convert wood into charcoal, carbon products, and chemical solvents already in demand by U.S. and global markets. The program focuses on two critical steps: pilot facilities that prove the technology works at manufacturing scale, and technology-to-business transfer that helps Georgia companies invest, hire, and produce in-state.
- State funding would be split between these two product areas and paired with private-sector funds to reduce risk and encourage business investment. The long-term goal is to establish multiple manufacturing sites across Georgia, strengthening the state’s position as a national leader in forestry and advanced manufacturing.

GEORGIA FORESTRY
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THANK YOU TO ALL OUR PARTNERS



Warnell School of Forestry
& Natural Resources
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

