



## West Virginia Forestry Association

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2008 Quarrier Street,

### 2020 ELECTION CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

**Congratulations. You are a candidate for public office in the general election. Holding elected office is a vital part of governing our democracy. We are interested in your views and policy positions on forest related issues in West Virginia.**

**Please take the time to read and consider responding to our questionnaire. We will share your responses with our members and the general public through our website [www.wvfa.org](http://www.wvfa.org) . If you have questions, contact us at 681-265-5019 or email at [wvfa@wvfa.org](mailto:wvfa@wvfa.org)**

**Please state your name and the office for which you are a candidate:**

**Name**      **Kent Leonhardt**

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**Office**      **Commissioner of Agriculture**

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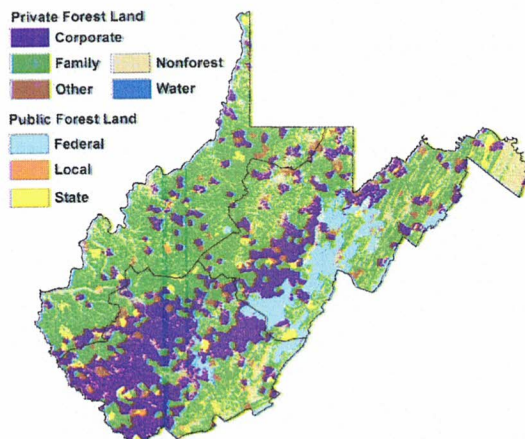
Forestry is the art and science of managing forests to produce various products and benefits for the environment and society. West Virginia employs professional foresters to manage state-owned forests, to provide oversight for private forest management, to prevent uncontrolled wildfire, and to regulate possible timber harvesting impacts.

According to the most recent independent study, the forest products industry contributes \$3.4 billion to West Virginia's economy. West Virginia citizens rely upon the Division of Forestry to protect our forests and communities from wildfires, insects, disease, and timber theft.

**1. Would you consider any changes in funding for the West Virginia Division of Forestry?**

I believe we must invest in our Division of Forestry as it is an extremely important agency to West Virginia. I do believe we should move the agency under the Department of Agriculture to find efficiencies and give the agency and its duties the proper attention they deserve. In three years as Commissioner of Agriculture, we have taken on more responsibilities and programs without huge increases to our overall budget. We are actually operating under FY 2012 levels. Bringing the DOF under the WVDA, would help administrative resources so we can put more foresters in the field.

West Virginia has 12 million acres of forests, 78% of the State, making it the third most forested State in the US. The following map shows who owns these forests. Privately owned forests dominate the landscape, with family forests, in smaller tracts comprising the largest segment. Property taxes and in the past, timber harvesting taxes, have been used to offset other tax revenues to balance State spending. Many studies have shown the impact of tax policy to forests, especially to individuals owning forest land.



**2. Would you consider changes in taxes on undeveloped forests to balance the budget in West Virginia?**

I would not make changes in taxes on undeveloped forests. There are ways to raise revenue for the agency and state without increasing taxes. For example, shortly after taking office in 2017, I immediately improved phytosanitary inspections for our logging companies, issuing 1000 more permits in the first year of implementation. This action generated more revenue for the state and forestry, in addition to growing and increasing revenue for our logging companies. I will always advocate for the Division of Forestry to be properly funded.

In general, trees are harvested for products, to improve environmental health, and to provide wildlife habitat. Removing mature trees in a stand provides the remaining trees more room to grow and reduces competition for nutrients, sunlight, and water. This reduction in competition results in healthier, vigorously growing trees, which help to keep our air and water clean.

Harvesting trees improves habitat for many wildlife species, large and small. Removing all or some of the trees in an area increases the amount of sunlight that reaches the forest floor and promotes the growth of shrubs, herbs, berries and other plants that provide both food and shelter for animals.

Trees also are harvested to make more than 5,000 products we all use every day. These products range from paper, lumber used to build houses, furniture and cabinetry, to a wide range of other products including toothpaste, ice cream, maple syrup, medicines, hair spray, chewing gum, molded plastics, soap, and shampoo. As our population grows, so does the demand for all of these products. Throughout the recent pandemic, forest products were deemed and shown to be essential to our health and well-being.

According to the most recent U.S. Forest Service inventory, West Virginia is harvesting about 50% of the annual net growth, which takes into account natural mortality, and the forests are largely older, larger trees that provide exceptional opportunities for a variety of wood products.

West Virginia relies heavily on wood processing facilities in surrounding states. For example, there is no paper mill in the State, no large biomass energy facility, and no large furniture or cabinet manufacturers. In fact, there are large parts of southern West Virginia where despite large tracts of over mature forests there is an obvious lack of wood consuming/processing facilities.

- 3. With all these benefits from harvesting trees in West Virginia, what policy initiatives would you support to promote more harvesting, including harvesting on state forest and parks, value added manufacturing, and securing additional markets for West Virginia forest products?**

I support increased and improved harvesting within state forests, but I do not support the harvesting of trees within our state parks. We are under harvesting throughout the state, so there is no need to harvest in state parks. The negative impacts on tourism are not worth the minimal income that could potentially derive from these harvests. Old-growth trees support non-game species, attracting thousands of birders to our state every year. Our state parks provide forest succession and other wildlife education to everyone across West Virginia. We should continue to protect this vital asset and public support backs up this position.

West Virginia is faced with grave fiscal challenges to provide basic government services, pay for pension obligations, and invest in improving infrastructure, roads, bridges, and possibly remote access to technology, health care, and privately owned infrastructure like railroads. Rural communities depend on natural resource industries to move cattle, milk, coal, gas, wood to processing facilities that require good roads capable of handling large loads. Using additional axles on trucks has proven to lessen damage by reducing the number of trips and improving efficiency.

- 4. Would you support increasing funding to rebuild rural roads and increase weight limits on Interstate highways conditioned upon additional axles to 94,000 lbs.?**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I supported the increased weight limits for food transportation. This resulted in the importation of more raw milk for processing and the relief to our initial milk shortages in grocery stores. I would support increased funding for rural roads and increased weight limits on highways.

The forest products supply chain requires a skilled, trained workforce working safely in a variety of conditions. Despite wages being among the highest for these workers, the workforce is aging. There is no vocational training for loggers, wood products equipment, and other forest related professions, some of which need a 2 or 4 year advanced degree in West Virginia. Forestry and wood science programs at West Virginia University and Glenville State College have diminished in scope and size.

- 5. Would you support establishing a vocational program for logging and expanding the forestry program at State universities and colleges?**

As Commissioner of Agriculture, I have worked to improve the working relationships with our institutes of higher learning. I was on the search committee for the Dean of WVU Extension and my deputy was on for the Dean of WVU Davis College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Design. We currently have agreements with WV State University promoting research in Agriculture. I believe we can continue to expand this outreach and should continue to foster vocational programs.

The forest products industry is unique in that it utilizes its own manufacturing by-products for many other uses. When a log is converted to lumber, other products including sawdust, bark, chips and slabs are produced and nearly 100% utilized. Bark and sawdust are generally used for mulch, bedding materials and for nursery use, while chips primarily go into paper making. Many wood by-products that aren't used for these purposes are converted to energy by burning them. In many instances, forest product manufacturing facilities produce enough electricity by burning these products to run their entire operations, and still have enough electricity left to sell back to the power companies! Renewable energy is an important national security concern for having a diversity of energy sources. Some forms of renewables (solar, wind) have flourished with incentives.

**6. Do you support incentives to increase biomass energy used as a renewable resource in West Virginia?**

I have been a supporter of these programs and have personally met with potential biomass producers hoping to encourage their investment in West Virginia. Anything West Virginia and the United States can do to become energy independent is good for our state and country.

Forest industries include many types of manufacturing and even recreational users that depend on the mixture of public and private forests we have in West Virginia. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability that all forest related businesses lack access to the capital to invest in new equipment. West Virginia's tax on capital equipment further discourages investors from buying new equipment and simply encourages fixing older equipment that may be less safe and less efficient to operate.

**7. Would you support reducing or eliminating the business equipment inventory tax?**

Absolutely support the repeal of the business inventory tax. We must continue to review all taxes and their impacts on the business climate of our state.

The House of Delegates passed a study resolution in 2020 to understand what is driving loggers insurance rates higher and specifically to look at the "Mandolidis" provisions of law. A Mandolidis case is also known as a deliberate intent case and refers to a situation where the employer intentionally places the employee in a dangerous working condition – unknown to the worker, but known to the employer. The forest industry is vulnerable to many of these cases because despite safety training and education, proper equipment, working in the forests and wood processing has inherent risks.

**8. What specific policies and reforms would you support to reduce business owners' risk from lawsuits using the "Mandolidis" provision?**

As a State Senator, I supported the legal reforms that removed West Virginia from the "Judicial Hell Hole List." The strengthening of definitions and the imposition of liability limits are two ways to improve the situation. Language in bills is extremely important and should be carefully reviewed in our State Code for improvement.