

# Navigating Change

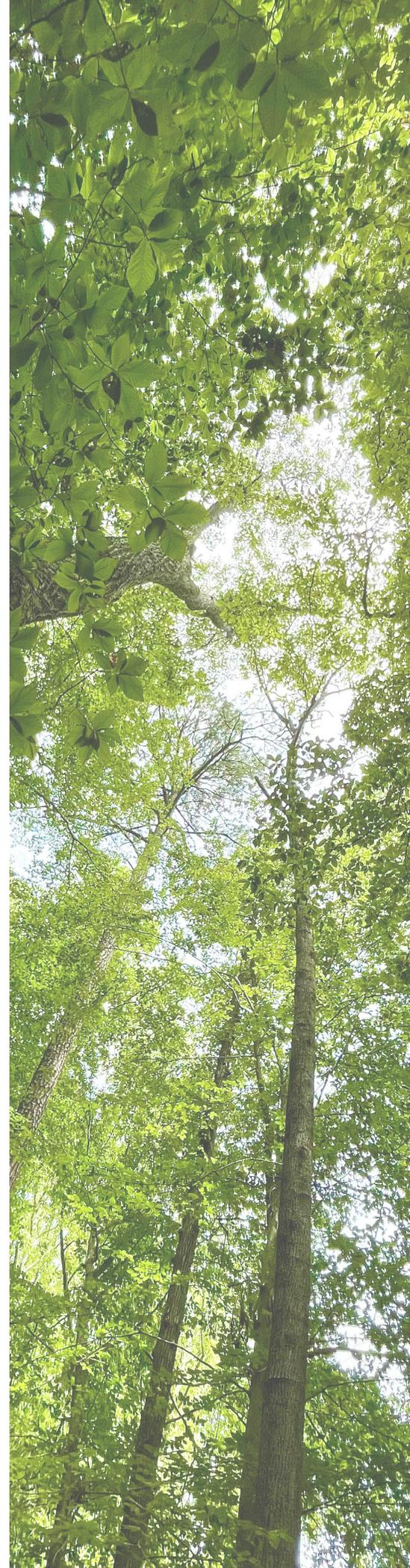
how one small business charts  
a new future after the mill closure

“Things used to look a lot different around here,” said John Fletcher as he looked out over the hum of the Suncrest Mulch production yard. It has been a little more than a year since being notified of the impending closure of the Pactiv Evergreen Canton facility. “At one time, this was a bustling enterprise,” Fletcher said, nodding toward the now scaled-back production yard.

Fletcher spent decades building a reputation in the industry by focusing on the needs of landowners and intentional timber removal strategies—both driven by generational best practices. “Timber harvesting in one’s lifetime is a one or two-time thing,” said Fletcher. “This is hardwood timber we’re talking about... You’ve got about a 70-year growing cycle.”

In the years that followed, Fletcher wasn’t shy about capitalizing on opportunities. In 2009, he expanded his operation with the purchase of a sawmill in Canton. With the help of others, a chipmill was added to the operation in Jonathan Creek. What he learned in the process was economics puts the “hard” in hardwood. “It’s brutal,” said Fletcher. “You are talking about buying timber, cutting the timber down...you may have it for one year, two years, three years on the stump before you even cut it. Then you harvest it. Then you have to saw it, dry it, hold it. Separate it.” In some cases it can be a three-year arc before any revenue comes in. Over those three years, the market can prove volatile with many moving parts.

“In the heyday of this place they (Powell Industries) were purchasing 100 loads per day, 5 days per week,” Fletcher said. Over one hundred people were contracted to bring pulp wood into his operation. They were open 24 hours per day. Fletcher looks





out over his facility, operating at a fraction of its capacity, and recounts, “We would purchase the wood and that crane mound right there (pointing to a now quiet machine)...it would be stacked full of wood... as much as we could have,” he said. “We had quotas and various things. So when I started my contract with Evergreen it was for 4,500 tons of wood a week. Delivered,” he said. “That was perfect. We had set all the numbers up (on our end) and bought the 45 acres. Everything was hunky dory.”

Enter the pandemic. As a seasoned entrepreneur, Fletcher had weathered his share of industry ups and downs. During the pandemic, Fletcher sidestepped economic disaster and figured out how to survive off “half-price” revenue. His team had committed to jobs and were determined to finish them.

While still rebuilding post-pandemic, Fletcher was hit with the closure announcement of Pactiv Evergreen in March 2023. The closure marks what he refers to as “dominos.” Fletcher believes that good forestry practices support biodiversity and forest vitality.

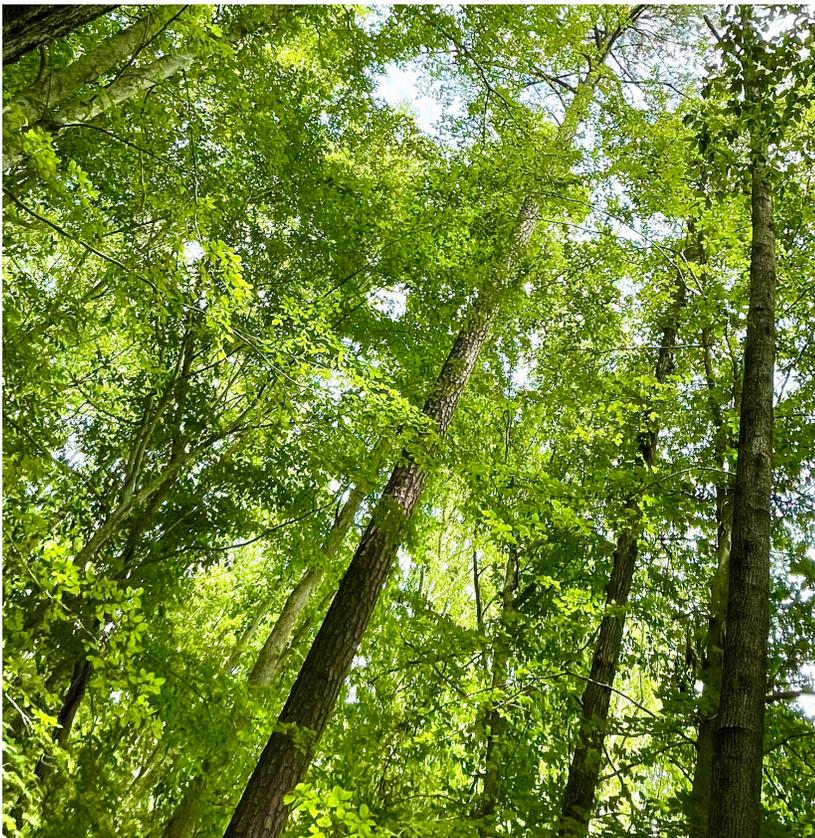
The bigger conversation around the interconnectedness of the ecosystem, of which the economy of jobs is but one part, is a story worth understanding. “Loss of habitat for wildlife,” emphasized Fletcher. “Absent of thinning, thick overstory and overgrowth of laurel hells is choking out sunlight in the understory...all but eliminating essential food sources for everything from birds to elk.” Ultimately his extensive experience in forestry leads him to conclude that overgrowth becomes “stagnant of life.”

Fletcher’s bigger concern is the potential for increased forest fires.

“The role that Evergreen played was they took the pulp wood,” he said. “It’s the worst wood that is easiest to catch forest fires.”

Then there’s the economy of jobs—from loss of timber income to landowners to hundreds of loggers out of work, and businesses like Fletcher’s on the brink of shuttering their doors.

Post-pandemic and still wading through the afterburn of Pactiv Evergreen’s closure, Fletcher has no time for pessimism. “For the last year since Evergreen closed I have had to try and figure out how to use our mill to make a ‘product’ because chips is not mulch. Chips are chips. People don’t want to put chips out...they want to put out a mulch.”



## Support.

*The United States Forestry Service (USFS) has pivoted to meet the new reality for the regional stakeholders.*

*The USFS is investing in rural economies by continuing to grow markets for forest products through sustainable forest management while reducing wildfire risk, fighting climate change, and accelerating economic development.*

*The efforts by the USFS have aided forestry professionals, like John, to change directions in the aftermath of multiple economic challenges.*

*Learn more: [fs.usda.gov](https://fs.usda.gov)*

Mulch? How did Fletcher navigate to producing mulch?

Looking out over his operation, Fletcher thoughtfully considered the now quiet production wing and team of four (where twenty-four seasoned workers once stood) before explaining, “We have always been in the mulch business...but it was all bark premium mulch that was a byproduct...because what I sent to Evergreen had to be 98% bark-free.” Now, for Fletcher, mulch is **THE** product. He explained, “I’ve had to cook up...it’s like baking...I’ve had to figure out the recipe to use our chipper to pound this into a certain product, re-pound it, color it with the right color that people like.”

Easily excited by the idea of “pivoting” Fletcher explained his experimentation process to hit upon the exact formula for creating premium mulch. “I didn’t want to do a ‘stump-dump’ like others because they can have dirt, nails, etc in their material,” Fletcher said. “We’re producing a virgin, clean material and that’s what we aim to create. It’s the real deal.”



Fletcher feels passionate about his new direction citing the importance of keeping the logger alive, and forestry alive amid an uncertain future.

In the aftermath of economic uncertainty, Fletcher still considers himself an optimist. He frequently gets asked, “What if a recession happens, where’s this going to go?” His response? “Well, I’m almost certain I have been in ‘recession.’ I have been in ‘depression.’ I’ve been as beaten down as it gets.”

Where does he see Suncrest Mulch growing and going? “I hope we’re selling colored mulch hand over fist (retail and wholesale) because we’re now one of the only producers within a 150-mile radius,” said Fletcher. “I want to grow this into a business where we can keep the loggers alive and grow it a little

bit at a time. We’re thinking through what the next generation of locally produced, premium mulch retail looks like.”

What marks John Fletcher as a true optimist? Fletcher isn’t dismantling all the equipment and counting himself out just yet. “This is a brand new situation born out of necessity,” he said. “What I think is going to help us is the *GO LOCAL, GROW LOCAL* consumer spirit. And the fact that we’re saving these forestry jobs.” While Fletcher is realistic about the broader impact closures like Pactiv Evergreen has had on his industry, he walks past the remnants of what was and sees possibilities for the future. Possibilities for what could be.

—Feature & photos by *Tina Masciarelli*,  
Marketing Manager for Haywood County  
Community and Economic Development

## Contact.

### Suncrest Mulch Yard in Waynesville:

118 Ferguson Rd  
Waynesville, NC 28785  
(828) 926-0848

#### *DAYS/HOURS*

Monday-Friday: 7:30am-4:00pm  
Saturday (March-September): 7:30am-1:00pm

### Suncrest Mulch & More in Candler:

6 Dogwood Rd  
Candler, NC 28715  
(828) 778-2298

#### *DAYS/HOURS*

Monday-Friday: 8:00am-5:00pm  
Saturday (March-September): 8:00am-2:30pm

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