



Randy Marsh explains key metrics that are updated daily to showcase the team's progress.



## Careers in Forestry:

# A DAY IN THE LIFE AT COLUMBIA FOREST PRODUCTS

By Jeanne Harmor, Director of Communications, NCFCA

**T**here are many career paths individuals can pursue in forestry, and they're all vital to our industry's success. In this special issue of *TreeLine*, we connected with five passionate people in various roles at Columbia Forest Products in Old Fort, NC.

Founded in 1957, Columbia Forest Products serves as North America's leading manufacturer of hardwood plywood and hardwood veneer products, which are used to create high-quality cabinetry, fine furniture, architectural millwork, and commercial fixtures. Its employees live by what they call "S.A.W.S." values:

- Customer Service
- Absolute Integrity
- We Are Family
- Share the Success

The five individuals we spoke with represent different roles throughout the company, with various career journeys. Though their journeys differ, some common themes emerged from our conversations that are unmistakable: they love what they do, they live out Columbia Forest Products' values every day, and one could say that working at this company is quite a family affair!

### RANDY MARSH Plant Manager

Not many people can say they've been with the same company for decades, but Randy Marsh, plant manager at Columbia Forest Products, just celebrated his 39th year of service. He began working at the company straight out of high school with the encouragement of his three brothers, who helped build the company's plant in Old Fort. His career started on the floor, working various hourly positions, and he worked his way up through the ranks, engaging in safety and different project initiatives — anything he could get involved in! It was his foray into management roles that uncovered his true passions.

"When [I] was training to be a manager, I developed a passion for processes, achieving key metrics, and working with



Marsh leads a mill tour in Old Fort, NC.

others," said Marsh. "As I stepped into continuous improvement roles, I learned about LEAN processes and what it could mean for the company to adopt these processes into our daily roles."

As one of the company's first continuous improvement managers, Marsh led efforts to introduce the concept of LEAN culture within Columbia Forest Products' workforce. This management philosophy focuses on maximizing customer value by minimizing waste. Marsh's career would soon take him to several company locations across the country: he spent eight years running a mill in Chatham, VA, and another five years serving as a plant manager at the Klamath Falls, OR location. These opportunities allowed Marsh to learn how to be a better manager, meet and interact with different people across the company, and strengthen his perspective

on the culture at Columbia Forest Products, further solidifying what a great company it is to work for. He made his way back to the Old Fort mill, where he currently serves as a plant manager.

## A Typical Day as a Plant Manager

In his day-to-day, Marsh manages safety, quality, productivity, cost, and customer satisfaction. He monitors and manages key metrics for all positions, from his own to those working on the floor. His daily routine includes reviewing data and reporting from the last 24 hours, checking on the progress surrounding safety, quality, and productivity costs. He engages with his team members on the floor, confirming the data with floor leaders and employees, asking follow-up questions when necessary.

It is common practice for Marsh to lead structured communication meetings to evaluate the team's progress over the last 24 hours, the plan for the current day, as well as the next 24 hours. The goal is to ensure everyone is aligned, regardless of their role. Then, there comes time for higher-level strategies as the company looks at the next month, six months, and year.

The day wraps up with shift changes, as the company runs a seven-day operation.

"What aspects of the job do I find the most rewarding? The list is long!" said Marsh. "It's rewarding to experience successes that come from our efforts to improve safety and customer satisfaction. It's a team effort, and we share these successes as a team. Our morale is high when we succeed, and when I see the joy on my team members' faces because their ideas worked to achieve and surpass our goals, that makes me happy."

## Turning Challenges into Opportunities

Marsh credits his interest in forestry to his three brothers.

"My brothers encouraged me to take [this] path," said Marsh. "My father cut timber for a living, but I didn't know much about the industry. Once I got my foot in the door at Columbia Forest Products, I quickly became interested in the processes behind making plywood, and the skill of the many workers on my team. I quickly gained a passion and a respect for this industry."

However, in the early days, Marsh encountered challenges because he

decided to work at the same company as his brothers. Any success he experienced always came with the thought that he only earned it because of them. This perceived pressure empowered Marsh to be incredibly self-driven, working hard and showing up every single day with a positive attitude and willingness to learn new skills. His career journey has allowed him to learn about company finances and how to confidently speak publicly — two areas he did not have previous experience in.

"I used to struggle with public speaking," said Marsh. "As I entered management roles, I embraced the opportunity to learn new skills. Now, I am incredibly comfortable in this area and enjoy leading meetings."

## Marsh's Advice for Future Forestry Leaders

"Manufacturing careers may not seem like a top choice for today's younger generation, but they are the backbone of this country," said Marsh. "I encourage young people to learn about it and its importance and explore companies like Columbia Forest Products. We have career opportunities for people of all interests. Do your research and don't sell yourself short!" >>>

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Clockwise from far left: Betsy Cannon keeps a keen eye on operations before inspecting the finished product. She was inspired by her father to join the company.



### BETSY CANNON Green End Processing Lead

What started as an interest in law enforcement quickly took a 180-degree turn. Betsy Cannon thought that her destiny was to work for her community's police department, but the dismal job market at the time didn't inspire an interest in continuing down this path. Her father encouraged her to check out Columbia Forest Products, where he had enjoyed working in maintenance for several years. Cannon decided to follow his advice, and nine years later, she can't picture working anywhere else.

### Navigating a New Career Path

Before she started working at Columbia Forest Products, Cannon was unsure where her career was going to take her. What started as a temporary role in a

world that was brand new to her turned into a permanent situation with ample opportunities.

At first, Cannon started working on the mill's Moore Dryer, pulling eight- and four-inch strips of wood into a bin for processing. When she became pregnant, her boss shifted her to operate the Raimann saw, where small pieces of wood were produced to plug various knotholes. Over time, she found her passion working on the Green End.

"At the time, I noticed there were no women working on the Green End," said Cannon. "I shared my interest in making a shift to the Green End, and since they needed another set of hands, my manager gave me the chance. I became eager to learn how to be an operator and run the lathes, and I made it my job to overachieve and be better than the day before. My dedication to the role landed me a promotion to serve as the Green End Processing Lead after two years as a co-lathe and three years as a main operator."

### What Is a Green End Processing Lead?

In the simplest of terms, a Green End Processing Lead maintains a safe and productive day for their team members. Cannon leads a team of six people, and if there are machine malfunctions, it's her job to get the help they need to get back up and running. Quality issues need to be addressed in a timely manner, and making sure other shifts are set up for success is key to everyday operations. She runs meetings and conducts walk-throughs and checks that work orders are completed for preventative maintenance, making sure everything runs safely and efficiently, her team members are safe, and that quality wood products are leaving the building. Cannon also serves as the backup supervisor when her boss is on vacation.

### Purposeful Work

Even though a career in forestry hadn't been her plan, Cannon is content knowing she has discovered new talents in a career she loves, working at a company that doubles as a family.

"Everything about my job draws me in," said Cannon. "I enjoy being a part of Columbia Forest Products. There aren't many companies that have a true interest in their employees, especially companies of this size. In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene in 2024 it became even more apparent just how much this place treats you like family. I saw this level of kindness during my maternity leave as well — team members made donations because I had to leave work earlier than planned. It was an incredible thing to experience."

### Cannon's Advice for Future Forestry Leaders

"As you're navigating your career and an opportunity comes your way — try it. Even if you think it's something you won't be interested in," said Cannon. "You never know — you may fall in love with it!"

## NEIL SETTLEMYRE Corporate Maintenance Engineer

Neil Settlemyre just celebrated his 35th anniversary at Columbia Forest Products! What started as a part-time gig in high school turned into a family affair. Settlemyre's mother worked at the company as a purchasing agent and encouraged him to apply. It was his mother's involvement in the company and his father's experience working in the wooden furniture industry that introduced him to the world of forestry and forest products. He would soon earn his associate's degree in industrial maintenance technology from McDowell Tech Community College, and his career would bloom from there.

Settlemyre started in the maintenance department and worked his way up the career ladder, serving in various roles and learning as much as possible about the industry. Today, he serves as a corporate maintenance engineer at the Old Fort location, working at the mill for three weeks and traveling for one week every month.

### A Typical Day as a Corporate Maintenance Engineer

The majority of Settlemyre's work is on the electrical side, managing the automation for the mill's various equipment and machine control systems. He works alongside six engineers in the company — two in North Carolina, one in Oregon, two in Wisconsin, and one in West Virginia.

A typical day includes regrouping with the maintenance crew to uncover any electrical issues experienced that day and checking in on the list of projects that must be completed, such as installing a new panel saw. Settlemyre gathers the intel he needs from various managers on the floor and always helps with problems as they arise. It isn't uncommon for him to write programs for new machines, too. He recently wrote the program for a Programmable Logic Controller.

Settlemyre has developed quite a passion for his role and finds the work incredibly rewarding.

"I enjoy what I do, especially getting to watch a project from start to finish," he said. "To watch a log come in and see it leave as a piece of plywood is exciting. If you don't work at a plant, you cannot comprehend the intricate process that goes into this. To know I helped contribute to creating a product that will be used out in the community is an awesome feeling."

### Giving Back to the Community

In addition to his role at Columbia Forest Products, Settlemyre also serves as the local fire chief at the PG Volunteer Fire Department. Each week he spends one day there, with full support from Columbia Forest Products.

"[It's] a part of my DNA at this point," said Settlemyre. "I joined the fire department with some friends about 30 years ago, and we're all still there. My desire to help people has always stuck with me — you could say it runs in the family. My son is a state trooper, my daughter is an animal services director, and my wife is a teacher. Public service runs in our veins."

### Settlemyre's Advice for Future Forestry Leaders

"Anything with a technical background is a great way to go," said Settlemyre. "We need to get more people interested in this — it's a great career path, especially with all the introductions of new technology."

*Neil Settlemyre works daily to ensure the mill's machines are operating smoothly.*





## MAKAYLA KINSER Timber Accountant

Makayla Kinser grew up in Burnsville, NC and aspired to work in healthcare management. She went to Appalachian State University, graduating in 2019 with a B.S. in healthcare management. Her career began as a business office coordinator at a local nursing home, where she oversaw accounts, coverage for patients, etc. She quickly realized that this environment was not for her! Luckily, a spot opened at Columbia Forest Products in 2023. That is the year Kinser took a leap of faith and started a new career.

Kinser knew about Columbia Forest Products because her father, Michael Wiseman, worked there. She never thought she would pursue a career in forest products, but the company's positive reputation preceded them.

"Columbia Forest Products has a fantastic reputation with a focus on strong family values," said Kinser. "My father experienced this first-hand. The company also has a scholarship program, which I was fortunate to benefit from to help with my schooling. When I decided to make a career change, I wanted to give back to a company that had given so much to me and my family. Starting my journey at Columbia Forest Products felt like coming home."

### What Does a Timber Accountant Do?

Timber accountants are responsible for ensuring vendors are paid accurately and timely, keeping track of tracts sold, setting up contracts, purchasing

incoming stumpage logs, monitoring and reporting log inventory, and tracking timberland investments.

We asked Kinser what a typical day looks like in her role.

"Each day I come in and get my to-do list," said Kinser. "Today I need to verify yesterday's load, review all the tickets for each load received, and make sure they're correct. I also process the sawmill sales, enter checks, and reconcile timber accounts for last period's activity, file vendor statements, and contact vendors for payment. Every day is different!"

### Appreciation for the Industry

Everyone has their reasons for why they find their job so rewarding. Beyond the day-to-day, Kinser discovered a deeper appreciation for the loggers after the tragic events of Hurricane Helene in 2024.

"Everyone knows the reputation of loggers," said Kinser. "[They're] hard-working, salt-of-the-earth people. From near and far, [they] rushed to be a part of the recovery efforts with their time and equipment, which wouldn't have been available otherwise. Many people were able to get help and other essential resources due to the loggers' ability to quickly clear and repair an area. It is rewarding to know that I can be a resource for these loggers and work for a company that makes it a priority to appreciate those who are at the very beginning of our supply chain."

Aside from her appreciation for loggers, Kinser finds her career rewarding because she loves the finance and accounting field. She enjoys breaking down data sets so that they are easy for



*Clockwise from top left: Makayla Kinser gets ready for the day. She appreciates team collaboration! Kinser's father, Michael Wiseman, has worked at Columbia Forest Products for 31 years, and currently serves as their rolling stock supervisor.*

others to understand. She's also extremely appreciative of her team.

"In accounting, there is always room for error — hit a wrong button, submit wrong information, etc.," said Kinser. "If I make an error, a team member is bound to catch it, which I am grateful for. I appreciate my team and all the help they've provided me from the beginning."

### Kinser's Advice for Future Forestry Leaders

"Don't think that forestry is just boots-on-the-ground work, as there are many avenues you can pursue," said Kinser. "If you have a particular skill or a niche, forestry has a place for you!"

## DAVID HAMES Maintenance Manager

David Hames earned a degree in business administration from McDowell Tech Community College. His career began as a general contractor, where he built houses and restaurants for about 12 years. He eventually decided to make a change. He knew about Columbia Forest Products because his brother worked third shift and many of his friends worked there, too. They encouraged him to explore career opportunities there, and before he knew it, he was starting a new role on the production floor.

“Coming from a contractor background, I was used to working on building timelines,” said Hames. “When I started working at Columbia Forest Products, I had to shift my mindset to a production-based role, where safety is paramount working in a mill. I had to adjust my approach by taking my time to ensure everyone was safe. It didn’t take long to find my rhythm, and eight years later, I’m glad I took the leap to try something new.”

Hames would soon serve as a team leader and then a value stream manager, and then ultimately transition to maintenance.

## A Day in the Life of a Maintenance Manager

In Hames’ day-to-day, he is always making sure the production side has everything they need to run their machines successfully. He is responsible for keeping the facilities running and maintained, ordering parts, managing the stockroom, facility maintenance, and more. His maintenance duties include ordering parts to address machine breakdowns and keeping machinery parts stocked so repairs can be quick and efficient. He is also a good steward of the company’s budget, spending money wisely while controlling the up time for machines and ensuring the right people are being staffed to complete the job.

His mornings include meeting with his managers, evaluating and addressing machine maintenance requests, approving upcoming purchase orders, and reviewing purchase requisitions from managers. He then meets with production managers to review their collective needs and evaluates production performance from the last 24

hours. Every day he spends time in each machine center, inspects the work being completed in the log yard and facilities, and makes it a point to meet with vendors and contractors visiting the mill.

## A Passion for Rewarding Work

After eight years of service at Columbia Forest Products, Hames reflects on what makes his work the most rewarding.

“I love the people, and I work with a great team,” said Hames. “This is the best group of people I have ever worked with in my career, and we all get along. Everyone wants what is best for the company, and that drives our dedication to living out our core values and mission statement every day.”

And, according to Hames, he feels like he is working for a company that truly cares about its community and treats its employees like family.

“When Hurricane Helene hit last year, [the company] paid us even when we couldn’t come to work,” said Hames. “We spent two weeks loading up company trucks with supplies and getting them to people in the community. I witnessed CEOs sweeping up mud, handing out goods, and truly being there for their employees. If they can be there for me, I want to be there for them.”

## Hames’ Advice for Future Forestry Leaders

“Find something that you enjoy doing,” said Hames. “I enjoyed working with wood and building as a teenager, and that inspired me to work in contracting, which isn’t much different. I’m working with plywood now instead of 2x4s. You’ll never dislike your job if you enjoy what you’re doing.” ■



David Hames (right) meets with team members to inspect the day's work and review their needs.

