

Local industrialist Tom O'Hanlan, left, and Rolling Stones keyboard player Chuck Leavell at O'Hanlan's tree farm. RON BARNETT

Stones' Leavell visits Pickens tree farm

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More than 50 visitors from European Union nations, and a conservationist who is better known as the keyboard player for The Rolling Stones, rolled into Pickens County on to take a look at Mill Pine Plantation as part of a Bioenergy Study Tour organized by the U.S. Department of Energy.

The group visited the tree farm of local industrialist Tom O'Hanlan to learn about how Southeastern forests are managed, as their countries look to buy wood pellets from American growers to use in European coal-fired power plants that are being converted to reduce their carbon footprint.

They wanted to make sure the tree farmers they're buying from aren't damaging the environment, according to Scott Jones of the Forest Landowners Association, which set up the tour sites.

"It's been very interesting to see how trees are grown in this area and how the land is taken care of," said Inge Stuupak, a researcher from the University of Copenhagen.

"It's amazing to see how they have improved productivity over the years and still maintaining the land."

Denmark imports about half the wood pellets it needs for generating power, she said, and will need more from the United States as it moves toward fulfilling the European Union mandate of using 20 percent renewable resources by 2020.

Derek Dougherty of Dougherty & Dougherty Forestry Services from Danielsville, Georgia, told the group that through improved management practices, the yield of biomass on Southeastern forest lands per acre has doubled in the past 20 years.

Chuck Leavell, who just finished a tour of South America and Cuba with The Rolling Stones and owns 2,900 acres of forest land near Macon, Georgia, said he was happy to take part in the Bioenergy Study Tour, which coincided with his visit to Greenville for a program at the Upcountry History Museum organized by his friend, O'Hanlan.

"We both have the same ethic. We believe that trees are a true renewable resource. We think long term. We're very excited about the prospect of biomass," Leavell told *The Greenville News*.

The use of wood pellets for producing electricity hasn't caught on in the United States, he said, in part because the Environmental Protection Agency hasn't ruled wood to be a completely renewable resource.

"I think that's wrong, and I think in time EPA will come around," he said.

"It is truly a renewable resource and for us, it gives us another market for our wood, and that's very important for the landowner," he said of the Europeans' interest in American wood pellets.

Leavell, who has played backup for Eric Clapton, George Harri-

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son, The Allman Brothers Band and others in addition to the Stones, said his interest in forestry came about in part because of the instrument he plays.

"One of the things that made me interested was thinking about where does that wonderful instrument that's given me so much joy and a great career come from? Well it comes from the resource of wood," he said.

Forestry also worked well as a use for the 1,000 acres his wife inherited from her grandmother in 1981.

"I realized that if I wanted to follow my career as a musician, things like cattle farming and row cropping would be very difficult," he said. "I became fascinated with forestry, thinking long term."

In 2001, he wrote a book called "Forever Green: The History and Hope of the American Forest." It has been translated and released in Germany and Austria.

He and his wife Rose Lane were named National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year in 1999 for the management of their forestland, Charlane Plantation.

The Bioenergy Study Tour, which started at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, made stops at a switchgrass production facility in Tennessee before coming to Pickens County. The group then headed for the Savannah River Site in Aiken County, and were scheduled to visit coastal tree farms with a final destination in Savannah, Georgia.



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Chuck Leavell, left, joins a bioenergy tour at the farm of Tom O'Hanlan, center, with sustainable energy experts.