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# Symbol of resilience headed to DC

NC farmers see hope in Christmas tree White House picked

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NEWLAND, N.C. — The Cartner family had known since last year that one of its farm's Christmas trees would be headed to the White House this winter.

But then Hurricane Helene struck, unleashing a deadly deluge across western North Carolina, including Avery County, where Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm has operated for decades. Though the farm lost thousands of trees to a mudslide, many more survived, including a 20-foot conical tree that dwarfs most of the others on the sprawling farm.

That one will soon be cut down, lifted by a crane and put on a truck bound for the nation's capital.

"We wanted to really be an uplifting symbol for the other farmers and other people in western North Carolina that have experienced so many losses," said Sam Cartner Jr., one of three brothers who owns the farm.

From the back of the farm property, where the White House tree is located, it's hard to see the extent of Helene's damage. Countless rows of dark green trees stand in formation, contrasting against the lighter, mossy green shade of the rolling hills. It's mostly quiet, aside from chirping birds and rustling leaves.

As Cartner ventures back to the front of the property in his SUV, the damage from Helene comes into view. A section of one of the grassy hills looks like it was clawed out to expose the brown earth beneath it — the aftermath of a mudslide that took out 5,000 to 6,000 trees, Cartner said. Luckily, those trees were smaller and not market-size, meaning it wasn't an immediate problem for this harvest season,



Sam Cartner Jr., co-owner of Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm, measures the official White House Christmas tree Nov. 13 in Newland, N.C. ERIK VERDUZCO/AP

he said.

Culverts and gullies on the property were also washed out from the storm, making access to certain parts of the farm treacherous. It took a few weeks to fill in the dirt roads twisting through the farm, Cartner said, but it could have been much worse.

"We're looking forward to a relatively normal harvest," Cartner said.

The biggest challenge for Christmas tree farmers across western North Carolina has been fixing infrastructure on their property, including roads, said Jennifer Greene, North Carolina Christmas Tree Association executive director.

Despite tree losses on some farms, Greene said farmers across the region — who harvest 4 million to 5 million Christmas trees annually — are persever-

ing. She doesn't anticipate Helene's damage drastically affecting this harvest season, but it's still uncertain how the devastation will affect future seasons.

"They're resourceful, and you know, so they're going to find a way, you know, to make it happen," Greene said of the area's Christmas tree farmers. "I mean, they have to."

Cartner's parents, Sam and Margaret Cartner, founded the farm in 1959, where they grew Fraser firs, a tree species indigenous to the Appalachians. They later passed the farm on to Cartner Jr. and his two brothers.

The farm started off small, raising cows, cabbage and beans alongside the Fraser firs, Cartner said. Family members initially planted their trees on the steepest field because they didn't want to use up their best

land for them, Cartner said.

Now, Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm has grown to about 500 planted acres. Most of the farm's business is selling wholesale to independent garden centers and stores around the country.

The family's staffing operation is also much larger, as the farm employs temporary workers from Mexico to continue the year-round duties of maintaining the land. The task in recent days has been loading trees of various sizes into trailers ready to ship.

"We say we've touched a tree over 100 times by the time it gets to the consumer, and that's all manual labor," Cartner said.

All of that work led to Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm being named the 2024 grand champion at the National Christmas Tree Association's contest.

Winning the competition traditionally means the champion will supply the White House's official Christmas tree that year.

The tree selected by White House staff is about 25 years old and weighs 400 to 500 pounds — so heavy that a crane will be brought in to bring the tree to its transport truck ahead of its travels to Washington. Its "wonderful verdant color" and short limbs were just a few reasons Cartner listed off that may have drawn White House staffers to the tree, in addition to meeting certain size requirements for display.

Cartner and his family will present the tree to first lady Jill Biden in front of the White House. Then, Cartner said the family plans to return in December to see it decorated in the White House's Blue Room.

While the buzz about the White House Christmas tree has been exciting, Cartner said he will be "glad to have all this behind us." It's been a tough year because of Helene, and harvest season is difficult enough as is, he said.

"You've got to cut and ship that number of trees in two to three weeks, you put a hurricane on top of that, White House tree and all the activities, it gets almost overwhelming," he said.

And work has begun for next year.

The farm has some obstacles to overcome, including finding places to buy seedlings after Helene devastated some greenhouses. There's also paperwork to fill out for workers to return to the farm next season, as well as several orders to place for fertilizer and insecticide.