

# Case Study

## Urban Forestry Brings Environmental & Economic Benefits Poplar Tree Farm, Elkhart, Indiana



**Project Summary** | A team representing non-profit, government and industry sectors is working together to transform a vacant former industrial site in Elkhart, Indiana, into a profitable tree farm and nursery.

The 3.5-acre corner lot has been vacant for more than 50 years and is considered a local eyesore with soil that is only suitable for a commercial or industrial reuse. As a result of the project, the property has been transformed into a poplar tree farm, which will provide both economic and environmental benefits to the local community.

**Economic Benefits** — The new poplar tree farm will provide an affordable, local, and sustainable source of wood for local manufacturers. Poplar wood is a desirable alternative for several reasons. 1) It grows fast (10 years versus 20-30 years for

other species), yielding products sooner and more frequently. 2) It is lightweight and easier for manufacturers to harvest and process. 3) It is a local resource, which allows businesses to cut down on transportation costs (one local RV manufacturer currently imports its poplar from Europe and Asia).

**Environmental Benefits** — In addition to a reduction in transportation related carbon emission, the local poplar trees will provide natural “ecosystem services” to the site, e.g., preventing soil erosion, removing contaminants, and sequestering carbon. Poplar trees are known for their phyto-remediation benefits. Removing contaminants is especially important to the soil on this property, the site of a former railroad roundhouse. While it has been remediated to a commercial standard, the poplar trees can further clean the soil so that it may one day be eligible for residential status.

Sustainable Reuse of  
Brownfields | May 2011



## By the Numbers

### Sites: 2

The trees were planted on two sites in Elkhart County. The main site is at the former brownfield at the corner of Wagner and Sixth Streets in the City of Elkhart. A second nursery site is a private property in nearby New Paris, Indiana.

### Years Vacant: 50

The Wagner Street property has been vacant for 50 years and was a former railyard.

### Total Acres: 5

3.5 acres in Elkhart  
1.5 acres in New Paris

### Trees Planted: 6,531

In May 2011, 2,175 young trees and 4,356 nursery cuttings were planted.

### Potential Trees: 69,000

Within three years, the initial tree nurseries will produce 69,000 new nursery cuttings – enough to seed 95 acres of additional property. That presents an exciting opportunity to scale up the project and jumpstart a new local industry.

### Imports: 20 million

Currently, Elkhart County alone imports 20 million wood panels annually.

**Conditions for Success** | The engaged, diverse team of project stakeholders and the low project costs were essential to this project's success.

### Industry Partner:

**Genesis Products, Inc.**, a local wood product manufacturer that specializes in lightweight cabinets and finishes for the RV industry, came up with the idea to grow poplars on local properties. They also paid for the trees and cuttings that were planted in May 2011. Genesis is currently importing its hybrid poplar plywood from overseas.

### Government Partner:

**City of Elkhart, Indiana**, owned the Wagner Street property and coordinated with Elkhart County to ensure that all the permitting was completed without difficulties.

### Non-Profit Partner:

**Delta Redevelopment Institute** provided planning and technical assistance, including recruitment and retention of a forestry consultant with expertise in domestic hybrid poplar cultivation. Delta's work was funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization.

### Non-Profit Partner:

**Faith Mission** assisted with the initial site preparation (removing rocks and other debris) and planting of the Wagner site and will continue to provide maintenance in cooperation with the City of Elkhart. Faith Mission is a local social services agency that works with disadvantaged people.

**More Information** | For more information or to schedule a site visit, contact Elkhart County planner Laura Coyne at (574) 875-3347 or City of Elkhart Brownfield Coordinator Denny Correll at (574) 291-5471. For more information about Delta Institute, visit [www.delta-institute.org](http://www.delta-institute.org).



These nursery cuttings will become harvestable poplar trees in approximately 10 years, depending on conditions. Each cutting can yield at least 10 more cuttings within three years.



The trees and nursery cuttings were planted May 17-19, 2011, at the Wagner Street property in Elkhart. Additional planting was conducted on the New Paris property the following week.



Within 14 days of planting, the nursery cuttings grew significantly.



Support provided by the US EPA Office of  
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in the sustainable reuse of brownfields.