Maryland officials and volunteer organizations are trying to get landowners, like this one in Carroll County, to plant trees along the creeks that flow into the Gunpowder River in Baltimore County. **FILE**

Plant trees, save the brook trout, save the planet

Dan Rodricks

One day this summer, shortly after noon, the angle of the sun must have been just right: It allowed Ben Harris to see shadows inside dozens of protective tree tubes that he and Amish farm boys had stuck in a meadow in April.

The shadows excited him.

"I like what I'm seeing," Harris called out. "This looks very encouraging!"

Dressed for work in khakis and a T-shirt, Harris stepped down from where we had just parked — on River Road in Grantsville, Garrett County – and he craned his neck into the five-foot tubes to assess the progress of trees he and the Amish lads had planted.

The shadows had been those of green leaves.

"Lots of leaves!" Harris called out, expressing the glee of a young farmer seeing his hard work sprout through soil.

Though Harris is not a farmer, his job puts him in contact with them and other landowners in Maryland's westernmost county. He manages Trout Unlimited's project to improve habitat and water quality for native brook trout—a beautiful fish that has managed to survive 300 years of human invasion, from colonial settlements through coal mining, suburbanization, and now the climate crisis.

Our remaining native brook trout populations are primarily in Garrett County and in the Gunpowder Falls watershed northwest of Baltimore. They have been imperiled by the loss of habitat and by the centuries-long degradation of the little veins of water that flowed through dense forest before farmers cleared land for crops.

The big concern now is the effect of climate change on water temperatures. Brook trout need cold water. They need to be able to migrate to it during the hottest times of the year. They need to be able to spawn without abnormal flooding blowing out their redds.

About 40% of Maryland's brook trout waters are on privately owned land. So Harris' duties include convincing people to plant more trees along the creeks, licks and runs that flow through their properties. A healthy and full tree canopy can help offset Code Red temperatures.

The Amish farmer on River Road, along the Casselman River, was glad to get what Harris offered — hundreds of maple trees for his maple sugar operation, fencing to keep his cows off a small creek, and more trees in the lower part of his property near the river. All Harris had to do was guarantee that the trees were privately funded — from the local chapter of Trout Unlimited and other organizations — and not in any direct way connected to government. (While they pay taxes, the Amish prefer not to receive benefits from government programs.)

The farmer's two sons helped Harris do the spring plantings. The tubes protect the trees from deer. Some of the landowners he's approached find the tubes unsightly, Harris says, but, if all goes well, they can usually be removed after three years.

The trees on the Amish property will reforest a section of land where a small creek flows to the Casselman. The creek provides summer passage for the brook trout to areas upstream where they find cool water from springs. (Brook trout survival typically requires water temperatures below 68 degrees.)

Planting trees has a huge effect on just about everything.

"It's good for the birds," Harris says. "It's good for bugs, good for fish, good for water temperature. There's all kinds of things that trees do that nothing else does. ... The best thing you can do, from a habitat standpoint, is plant trees."

And there are funds available for that, Harris says.

Even so, as he and volunteers with the Upper Gunpowder Falls Brook Trout Conservation Partnership have learned, some landowners prefer big lawns or open fields mowed right up to the banks of a stream.

Driving through Carroll County, I came across the South Branch of the Gunpowder Falls and could not believe what I was seeing — a property that looked like a golf course, except it wasn't a golf course. It was a vast field without a single tree. The South Branch coursed through the property, completely exposed to the summer sun.

Some people find this sort of landscape beautiful. I think it's an awful waste, a lost opportunity to improve water quality and habitat for the brook trout. It also represents hundreds of gallons of fossil fuels burned to keep the place mowed.

You can't force people into being good stewards of their land. But you can at least try to convince them of the value of planting trees. That's what volunteers with the Upper Gunpowder project have been doing for several years because the basin north and west of Prettyboy Reservoir supports the second-highest number of brook trout in the state, about 25% of the Maryland population.

River Valley Ranch, the summer youth camp and retreat in Carroll County, got into the act with a grant from the state in 2019. The Gunpowder flows right through the place and Muddy Creek meets it there. Grave Run is nearby. The project resulted in plantings along the stream banks to reduce erosion and improve habitat for brook trout.

But there's a lot more to be done throughout the vast Gunpowder watershed. A lot of landowners need to plant trees. Autumn is a good time for that. Plant trees, save the brookies, save the planet. I think I just wrote the bumper sticker.