



An inmate construction and horticulture program has **INCREASED THE EFFICIENCY** and **REDUCED THE COST** of building boating access areas **ACROSS THE STATE.**

# WISE GUYS



It's a challenge to think this 6,000-square-foot aluminum building once stood empty. Today it's abuzz with activity: saws sawing, hammers hammering, drills drilling. Soon the stacks of neatly sawed wood at one end of the shop will be docks and piers, ready for installation at one of North Carolina's boating access areas or public fishing areas.

"We have a lot of work going on in here, and it's very efficient," said Sam Seamster, who oversees the manufacturing facility at Dan River Prison Work Farm. "Basically, when we got here, there was not a thing in this building. We had to set up a shop environment, and everything we set up here, the inmates did. The inmates did the work."

As it happens, Dan River inmates are doing a lot of work for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Through the 4-year-old Wildlife Inmate Service program, or WISE, inmates build docks and piers that are installed across the state.

They also cultivate trees, shrubs and small plants, which are sold to schools, municipalities and other public agencies. Finally, a handful of highly skilled inmates work in WISE's sign shop, making the diamond-shaped logo signs seen at boating access areas across the state, along with other custom signs.

It's an average Tuesday morning, and a dozen inmates in white shirts and green trousers file off a bus into the barn-like structure. Without hesitation, they pick up tools and begin assembling what looks like a floating dock. Laughter erupts every few minutes as they nail boards together, saw and drill.

Chris Heath is one of the inmates. A carpenter for 17 years, he knew on his first day at Dan River that he wanted to take part in WISE. "It makes the time go by faster, for one thing," said Heath, who has since been released. "The first thing my father said to me when I came here was, 'Keep

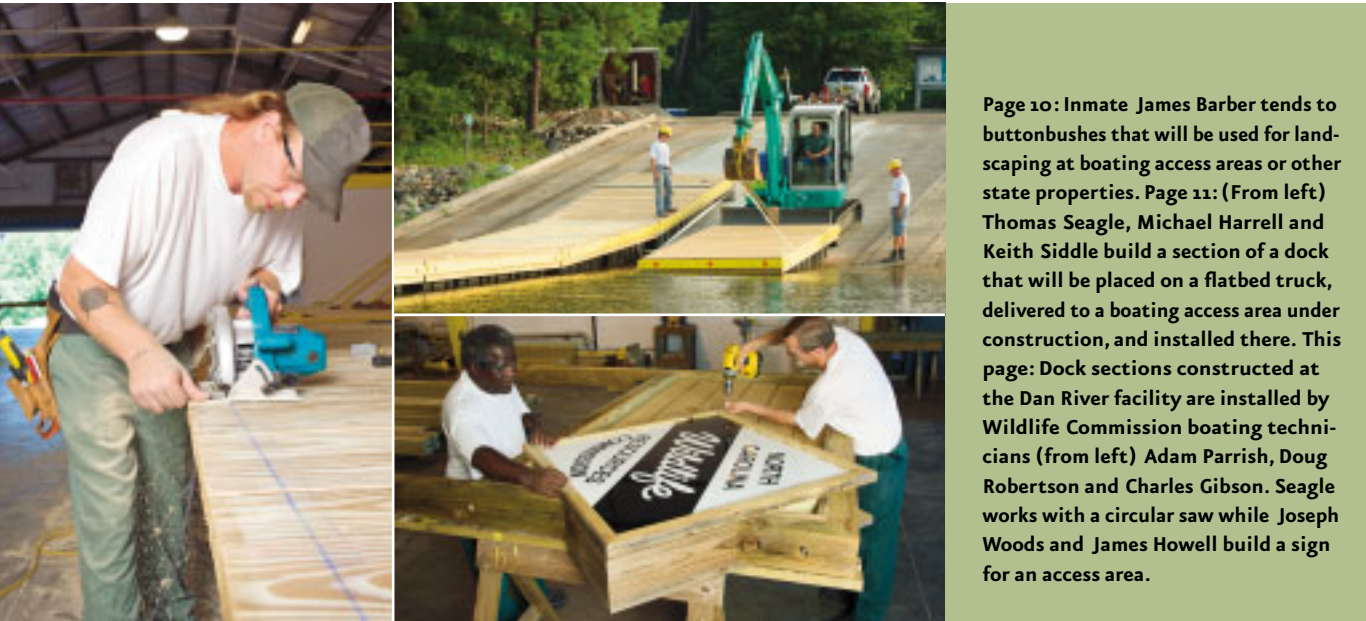
WRITTEN BY CAROLYN RICKARD  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW



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**“They’ll end up learning a lot about framing, for instance, that they can use when they are released.”**

— Sam Seamster, WISe facilities manager



**Page 10:** Inmate James Barber tends to buttonbushes that will be used for landscaping at boating access areas or other state properties. **Page 11:** (From left) Thomas Seagle, Michael Harrell and Keith Siddle build a section of a dock that will be placed on a flatbed truck, delivered to a boating access area under construction, and installed there. This page: Dock sections constructed at the Dan River facility are installed by Wildlife Commission boating technicians (from left) Adam Parrish, Doug Robertson and Charles Gibson. Seagle works with a circular saw while Joseph Woods and James Howell build a sign for an access area.

your calluses up.’ And I haven’t gotten rusty, that’s for sure.”

In addition to the docks, the inmates do custom work. They’ve built wildlife observation piers for Jordan Lake and Lake Raleigh. They also build gazebos and information kiosks, along with smaller items such as birdhouses and a speaker’s podium.

“A lot of times we’ll get an inmate in here who has manual dexterity but doesn’t know a lot about carpentry,” Seamster said. “They’ll end up learning a lot about framing, for instance, that they can use when they are released.”

The work not only helps the inmates, it’s a boon for the Wildlife Commission’s Division of Engineering Services, which has the lofty goal of building dozens of new boating access areas and renovating many of the more than 200 areas that already exist. A dock would take two workers two weeks or so to build on-site. But with 10 to 13 inmates working at one time, a dock can be built at the manufacturing facility and on its way to a site in a fraction of that time. The speedy work allowed the commission to build or renovate more than 20 boating access areas over the winter of 2009.

“It’s very efficient,” Seamster said. “They start with the basic framing toward one end of the building, and as they move closer to having

it done, they move the dock closer to the door. When it gets to the door, it’s ready to be loaded up and go to a site.” The docks are built upside down so the workers can affix floats to the bottom.

Some 17 percent of inmates at the minimum-security Caswell County facility enter the WISe program, usually in the months immediately before their release. And since the workshop sits outside Dan River’s high, locked fences, only the best-behaved prisoners have the opportunity. Certain crimes, such as rape or assault on a female, will immediately disqualify a prisoner, said Jerry Powell, the correctional officer assigned to guard the workers. Often, prisoners with previous experience in carpentry are chosen.

For the prisoners, the program serves as an incentive of sorts for good behavior—before they even begin building or planting. “We try to select the best and bring them down here,” Powell said. “They are able to get off the unit and start a product and see a finished product. They also get time off their sentence, and it gives them a sense of teamwork.”

If the inmates show drafting talent, they can work in the Dan River sign shop. Two inmates work at any given time, creating aluminum signs using computer programs, a vinyl cutter and other equipment. The inmates can make a sign within two weeks, and for 25 percent less than

the commission could buy it from an outside source. Products range from the “No Wake Zone” signs seen on waterways to the “Handicapped Parking” signs in parking lots.

In the horticulture program, inmates grow 33 species of plants from all three regions of North Carolina. The commission uses some of the plants to landscape buildings, boating access areas and similar sites, and uses others for stream restoration projects. The rest are sold to outside agencies.

The first week of horticulture training takes place in a classroom inside the prison’s walls. Then Powell and the prisoners board a bus and travel down the dirt roads of the Dan River property to get their hands dirty in the fields. There, pots holding young trees stand in neat rows with irrigation tubes running between them. By this fall, all 6,000 plants the inmates grow will be either sold or used by the commission.

In 2008–09, WISe horticulture used or sold 2,500 plants ranging from river birches to silky dogwoods. All are grown at the Dan River site, in acres of fields outside the prison fence, from bare rootstock from various sources including the Division of Forest Resources. Cultivating genetically native plants, which are unavailable in needed quantities from commercial sources, has been key to the program’s success. Instructor Sam Cobb works for Piedmont Community College, which

partners with the N.C. Department of Correction to offer the 280-hour continuing education horticulture class at Dan River. “We experiment a lot, trying different methods and seeing what works and what doesn’t work,” Cobb said.

Last year the students experimented with persimmon seeds, which have a hard seed coat and can’t be grown without altering the seed coat to allow water in. Cobb gathered seeds found in fox droppings, since the animal’s digestive processes soften the seed coat. The inmates manually filed other persimmon seeds and compared them to see which ones grew better. The inmates also planted and cared for 300 button bushes from seeds and planted a vegetable garden last summer, which yielded watermelons, cantaloupes, corn, cucumbers and squash. The inmates ate their harvest.

There is evidence that WISe might help prisoners once they are released. Heath, the former inmate in the carpentry program, said he planned to seek work building decks and boat docks on Jordan Lake. And Cobb said his horticulture students try to find jobs working with plants. “I’ve gotten letters from inmates asking to use me as a reference,” he said. “They wanted to get a job in a nursery.”

Carolyn Rickard is a public information officer with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.



**Dwight Martin creates a sign in the prison’s sign shop while Joshua Lewis cuts board for dock sections. Terrel Jefferson pots maple seedlings before placing them outside for cultivation.**