A number of Valle Crucis neighbors, living near a Christmas Tree Farm, are upset burning of trees there late last week and over issues about other use of the tract. Their angst was peaked Friday and Saturday as a large fire filled the area with choking smoke, prompting calls to local and state officials. The property is that of Carroll Garland, according to neighbors Kincheloe Hard and Paul Siegmund, who say the fire at the Dewitt Barnett Road property was causing problems especially for those with breathing issues. The Hards said they contacted both the Fire Marshal's office and the State Health office in Winston-Salem over the fire, and were told their complaints were being 'researched,' but one described the fire as if a bomb had gone off and described a 'toxic yellow smoke,' while Siegmund took pictures and submitted them to officials and GoBlueRidge.net. Neighbor Paul Siegmund said that, "Even though the fire is out, there still remains smoke from the smoldering ashes, especially in the evening and early morning when we experience a natural temperature inversion," and more smoke pictures from today were also submitted. Neighbor Faye Cooper said, "It definitely has been an issue in the Valle and also affected us personally as we have had smoke in our house as well as we are above the burn site."

Meeting with Carroll Garland today, he showed me results of an NC State study of the trees on the Valle Crucis and another tract he owns, indicating that a good number of his trees were afflicted with the same disease killing many hemlocks in the mountains, and that the only solution offered by the state was to burn the trees, which he was ordered to do. Garland said he probably lost in the neighborhood of 1000 trees to the blight, many of them larger trees, and he said he waited until a line of rain was moving in to minimize the effect on the neighbors, but had to take the action. He also pointed out that his daughter's property is the closest to the tree farm. Other matters neighbors brought up about the property included a dumpsite on the property and a waste system that is sometimes flooded by heavy rains. To those issues, Donna Lisenby of Watauga Riverkeepers responded to the neighbors that she would "investigate whether there is polluted runoff from the site into the river," and was asking for more specific data about the location of the potential runoff into the Watauga River. For now, it appears that most of the smoke that started the most recent controversy is settling, but that other issues are still being raised.

(photos; Paul Siegmund, Steve Frank)