

Another Conservation Success Story...

Bleckley County, Georgia

April 2010

Conservation, a Must on a Tree Farm

Wanda and Earl Barrs of Cochran, GA are the Region V winner for the Governor's Award for Environmental Conservation Excellence for 2010. Wanda and Earl are the owners and operators of Gully Branch Farm, a 1,500 acre tree farm in Bleckley County.

The Gully Branch Tree Farm holds a unique spot in the history of the Barrs family. Earl's family first settled the land in the late 1800s. His great grandparents share-cropped the land and raised their family there. Earl's grandfather, James, was born on that farm. In the 1930s the land was up for sale for nine bales of cotton. Unfortunately, the family was unable to purchase it.

In the mid 1980s, Earl and Wanda were able to purchase 411 acres of the original farmland from a timber company that had purchased the farm in the 1950s. Now, expanded to 1,500 acres, the tree farm is a distinctive blend of heritage, venue for education, and personal experience for the Barrs' role as private landowners.

Earl describes Gully Branch as a "work in progress," and it is, just that. After acquiring the land from the timber company, the Barrs spent countless hours, endless energy, and ample resources to transform the industrially managed land into an esteemed, family-managed tree farm. Acres of topsoil piled high in windrows from the previous industrial owner were redistributed to yield more productive viewing and wildlife food plots, as well as acres of better quality soils.

Gully Branch showcases trees of a variety of ages – from nine years old up to one hundred –plus. The main products produced are pine pulpwood, chip-n-saw and sawtimber. Over the past 23 years, the Barrs have managed Gully Branch for optimal production and have done so with best conservation practices



Sign at the entrance to the farm.



Wanda and Earl Barrs

in an effort to minimize erosion, support water quality and enhance bio-diversity.

Gully Branch Farm is an excellent wildlife habitat. Earl and Wanda participate in National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs such as Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) for forestry. As part of these programs, prescribed burning has been carried out on a scheduled basis. Through the EQIP program, Gully Branch Farm pine stands have been thinned to a level less than the normal economic basal area. The purpose of this thinning is to help open the canopy and provide more browse for improved wildlife habitat.

Earl describes Gully Branch as a "work in progress."

The Barrs are working to begin implementation of a small acreage of the farm in silvopasture, participating in the EQIP grazing land program. For this project, they are establishing pasture in a pine forest that has been thinned to a very low basal area. Plans include the incorporation of a beef cattle operation, with the goal being to grow cattle and timber on the same acreage.

Earl Barrs, a leader in the forestry community, is a member of the Georgia Forestry Association's Board of Directors. He also is a board member of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Currently, he is working with leaders in power production and biomass research to promote a strong partnership for developing alternative uses for the tremendous supply of pulp wood generated in Georgia.

One of the unique aspects of the farm is its use as an education and outreach center focusing on conservation, sustainability and education. Since 1994, more than 7,000 youth and

adults from across the state have participated in hands-on learning activities as a part of field trips to Gully Branch.

Wanda is a trained Project Learning Tree facilitator using the farm and forest as a resource for training students and educators in the areas of forestry, environmental and conservation education.

In 2006, Gully Branch was awarded the BASF Outstanding Achievement in Sustainable Forestry award. Earl and Wanda were named Tree Farmers of the Year in 2009 by the American Tree Farm System and American Forest Foundation.

Among their many accomplishments, they have also been chosen as the 2009 Conservationist of the Year Award for Bleckley County by the Central Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District.

The couple has two grown children, Andy Barrs and Meredith Potter and son-in-law, Philip Potter. Sharing their parents' appreciation of the land, all are very active helping with Gully Branch Farm.

As a family, the Barrs plan to continue managing their property as a working tree farm, hopefully for generations to come.



Earl Barrs explains his farm's operation during a tour.



A flock of turkeys roaming Gully Branch Tree Farm.

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