

Another StrikeForce Conservation Success Story...

Coffee County, Georgia

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Wingate Family Commits Hundreds of Acres to WRP

By Amelia Hines, Public Affairs Specialist Assistant Athens

The Wingate family is serious when it comes to preserving natural resources on their land and continuing a legacy of conservation that spans generations.

The family recently entered a Wetland Reserves Program (WRP) agreement with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that placed more than 1400 acres into permanent conservation easement that spans three different counties: Berrien, Coffee, and Irwin.

WRP is a voluntary program that assists landowners in restoring, protecting, and enhancing wetlands on eligible private or tribal lands while maximizing wildlife habitat benefits.

The emphasis of WRP is to protect, restore, and enhance functions and values of wetland ecosystems on privately owned lands to attain habitat for migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife and protection and improvement of water quality.

Under WRP, 752 acres of hydric soils have been classified as wetlands and will be restored. Another 703 acres are upland and are considered WRP buffer acres.

The agreement also involved the re-establishment of longleaf and slash pine on several acres, the construction of seven stream crossings, and light and heavy site preparation.



Boundary markers like the sign shown above designate the land currently under WRP.

Each of the practices implemented through WRP will perpetuate wildlife native to the area such as the indigo snake, gopher tortoise, and wood stork.

NRCS District Conservationist Zack Railey has worked with the Wingates on the project and explained that “they still own the land. We’re just doing the restoration and improving habitat. They give us the rights to implement the practices.”

The family patriarch, Billy Wingate, has been farming the property



Jeff Rockwell with GFC (left), Billy Wingate (center) and NRCS District Conservationist Zack Railey (right)

WRP easement,” Jeff Rockwell with GFC said.

While the collaborative effort has taken time and patience, Wingate believes it will all be worth it.

“It’s good now that this land won’t be developed in any way.”—Billy Wingate

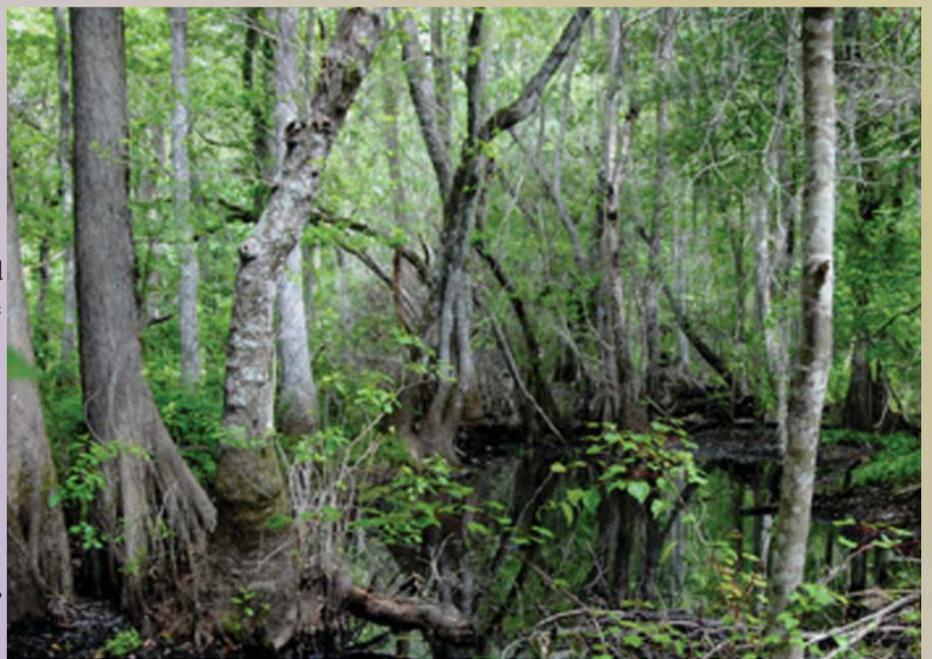
“We can continue to grow timber and pass it on to our grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. It’s good now that this land won’t be developed in any way. It will be for hunting, wildlife, and recreational purposes,” Wingate said. Coffee County is a designated StrikeForce county in Georgia. The USDA StrikeForce Initiative is designated to help relieve persistent poverty in high-poverty counties like Berrien and Irwin Counties.

since 1970. His grandfather moved to the area in the 1930s.

He said that he and his sisters “wanted to keep it in the family; great wetlands for hunting and fishing potential. It seemed like a good deal for us,” Wingate said.

The Wingates aren’t new to dedicating land to easement programs. Will Wingate, Billy Wingate’s oldest son, works for the Georgia Conservancy and is behind the family’s first venture into permanent easements with the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC).

In fact the GFC’s 889 acres of conservation easement borders the land that the Wingates have under WRP. “Partnership is a big thing. This isn’t the only contract where our easement borders a



A portion of wetland on the Wingate family’s sizeable property.

Seven Rivers Resource Conservation and Development Council



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