

Another Conservation Success Story...

Emanuel County, Georgia

August 2010

Small Farmer Says Preserving Longleaf Pines a Calling

Long before the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) developed the Longleaf Pine Initiative under its Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Bennett

“Well to be a good soil steward, you have to be concerned about losing top soil and other issues. The land is more than your friend, it’s your livelihood.”-Bennett Whitfield

Whitfield was growing the pine seedlings on a 6-acre plot of land.

Longleaf pine trees are a native species to the Southeastern United States.

As more rural areas experienced development over the years, the trees were cut down, eradicated, and were replaced by farmland and buildings.

The Longleaf Pine Initiative offers landowners and farmers a cost-share agreement to plant the tree species from Virginia to Texas.

Longleaf Pine forests are rich in biodiversity. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is dependent



These are just a few of the 8 million longleaf pine seedlings that are growing in the Whitfield Nursery in Swainsboro.

on Longleaf Pine forests, and is now endangered as a result of this decline.

Longleaf Pines seeds are large and nutritious, forming a significant food source for birds (notably the Brown-headed Nuthatch) and other wildlife.

The Red Hills Region of Florida and Georgia is home to some of the best preserved stands of Longleaf Pine.

In Emanuel County Georgia, Bennett Whitfield has been growing longleaf pine seedlings on his family’s land since 1996.

“I thought growing a tree would be a piece of cake.” Contrary to what Whitfield believed, growing a tree from the seed up was tough work.

Over the years he’s battled pH problems, worms, insects, and weeds.

Now that Whitfield has been able to establish a stable longleaf pine nursery, during growing season the farm holds up to 8 million seedlings.

Eight million seedlings can cover 16,000 acres of land. “It’s taken 14 years to get here.”

Many of the seedlings grown on the Swainsboro farm are sold to landowners who participate in the Longleaf Pine Initiative.

“Our programs wouldn’t work as well without people like Bennett who are out there farming these trees,” District Conservationist Sidney Lanier explained.

Even though he’s gotten the nursery off the ground and profitable, Whitfield has fought problems with erosion on his land.

“Well to be a good soil steward, you have to be concerned about losing top soil and other issues. The land is more than your friend, it’s your livelihood.”

After Whitfield was awarded an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) agreement, District Conservationist, Sidney Lanier was able to aid Whitfield in controlling soil erosion on his

farmland.

Sub-surface draining and terraces were installed on the farm to reduce soil erosion.



Bennett Whitfield (left) and District Conservationist Sidney Lanier (right) have worked together conserving resources on Whitfield’s land for several years.

“Water accumulates on slopes. Terraces break that slope by serving as little banks that direct water into woods or grass waterways.

They save the field from erosion,” Lanier explained.

Whitfield’s irrigation system also needed some work.

The center-pivot irrigation system was retro-fitted and is now a low-pressure system that is more efficient and uses less water.

Whitfield said, “EQIP is a tool for upgrade and modernization to keep up with changes in the economy and weather.

In the end, it helps us to be soil stewards.”

Whitfield said because of the EQIP funds and technical assistance provided through the NRCS, water quality has improved on the farm now that erosion has been controlled.

He is also able to use fewer chemicals and herbicides.

As a third generation farmer, Whitfield said he plans on continuing to improve on what he’s doing.



Whitfield inspects a 15-month-old seedling.

Whitfield is a supervisor on the Ochopee River Soil and Water Conservation District.

Pine Country Resource Conservation & Development
912-529-6652

 **NRCS** Natural Resources Conservation Service
478-237-8037

Ochopee Soil And Water Conservation District

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