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Trees and wildlife And the benefit of buffers

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If you ask Jim Hughes of Lauderdale County, AL, what type of farming he does, his response is "trees and wildlife." That has not always been the case, however.

"I was raised on a farm, but I did not want to farm," says Hughes. Hughes was in the cattle business for 20 years. The transition from cattle to trees and wildlife was gradual.

"I did not want to go out and spend a lot of money on equipment to farm a small acreage. I started looking at practices that would benefit trees and wildlife." Installation of field borders was his first experience with a practice that enhanced wildlife habitat.

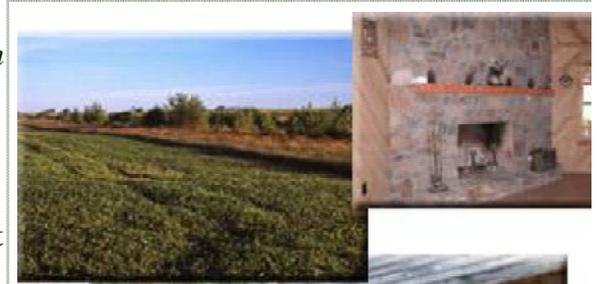
"When I was raising cattle, I was growing hay and sometimes corn. I noticed that about 15 to 20 feet from the tree line, the hay or corn just did not grow. So, I got into field borders to keep from spending money trying to grow something in the shade where the trees sucked all the moisture out of the ground. For some reason, sericea and partridge peas do fine up against those trees."

The sericea and partridge peas were an enhancement for wildlife habitat, and thus began Hughes' experience with the benefits of buffers.

Before his retirement, Hughes was Manager of the Water and Sewage Department for the city of Florence. In that position, Hughes spent his career addressing water quality issues. In his retirement, he is still focusing on water quality.

"I had some erosion on my farm. It had been a cotton farm, and the fields were planted so that the rows were as long as they could be."

To help with the erosion problem, Hughes installed terraces, and then he learned of grassed contours. "I have about 26 acres in grass contours and field buffers. On that entire 26 acres, I planted clover, lespedezas, and partridge peas-forages that would attract wildlife," Hughes said.



Installation of field borders will enhance wildlife habitat, like this example courtesy of the USDA-NRCS. The cabin is a beautiful getaway for family and friends. Rock for the fieldstone fireplace came from Colbert County

"Mr. Hughes is using grassed contours to serve a dual purpose. Not only do the contours improve the water quality by trapping the turbidity, but they also provide green fields that enhance wildlife habitat," according to Tim Albritton, State Staff Forester with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS),

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was one that meshed very well with Hughes' goals. CRP is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners. Through CRP, landowners receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource conserving covers on eligible farmland.

With assistance from CRP, Hughes has taken numerous acres out of marginal cropland or pastureland and planted trees.

"In my opinion, site preparation is critical to the success of the program," Hughes said. "When I plant trees, I want to get rid of the fescue. I do that for two reasons: One, to ensure that the trees don't have to compete with the fescue for moisture and nutrients, and, two, according to the wildlife literature I have read, fescue does not attract wildlife. Fescue is too dense and wildlife do not like it," Hughes said.

In order to ensure that the fescue is killed, Hughes sprays herbicide in the spring and again in the fall before the trees are planted.

"In the fall, we may be in a dry spell and the plant is not actively growing, so you don't get a good kill. Jim has experienced a phenomenal kill in the spring when he sprays the fescue while it is lush and really growing," said Russell Harper, Lauderdale County District Conservationist with NRCS.

The first time Hughes broadcast a spring and fall spray was 2001. "It has worked great," Hughes said.

Hughes has also installed several acres of riparian buffers along creeks adjoining his property to enhance and protect aquatic resources from adverse impacts.

"In addition to improving water quality, my ultimate goal on the riparian buffers is timber production," Hughes said. "I select the species that will be the most profitable for the commercial value of the trees. I stay with cherrybark oak and the white oak." Hughes plants bare root seedlings.

Installation of riparian buffers is another practice that plays right into Hughes' goal of timber and wildlife. "Anytime you are growing trees, you are increasing the potential for wildlife habitat," Hughes said.

"Wildlife habitat is probably an overlooked benefit of riparian buffers," Albritton said. "A lot of the publications about buffers focus on the water quality issues and sediment filtering, and now they are even mentioning carbon sequestration. In Alabama, wildlife habitat enhancement is one of the primary benefits of riparian buffers."

Mr. Hughes appreciates the cost-share assistance provided by federal programs, but he also goes beyond those practices. "In some areas, I have broadcast some wheat after the trees have been planted. I learned that the wheat does a good job of suppressing weeds. I plant the wheat for two reasons: In the winter the wheat provides green grazing for the deer, and then in the spring the grain is available for the birds. We can't prove it, but if deer have something else to graze, they probably won't browse the tree seedlings."

Hughes leases a portion of his land for hunting. He is convinced that the conservation practices he is using make his land more profitable as hunting land.

"On the 175- acre farm that I lease for hunting, I have about 17 acres in riparian zone and 15 acres in grassed contours, and then I'm putting 22 acres in pine/hardwood combination. It's a real plus to have 175 acres of hunting land with 15 acres of green fields-the edge effect. If you use your contours with the right plantings, you can make green fields out of grassed contours," Hughes said.

"There can be substantial return on just leasing land for hunting. It's something that the landowner should not ignore when considering management practices." Albritton said.

Hughes believes that his land has several pluses when it comes to hunting. "Frequently, hunting land is timber land. That landowner is in the business to cut timber and make a finished product, and hunting rights are just a little sideline. In that situation, there is no guarantee of the condition of the land at hunting time. I have mature hardwoods, select cut land, and some two-year old trees coming on. On my farm, a hunter is leasing a farm that has everything for wildlife."

Hughes wants to ensure that he, his family, and friends also have adequate recreational facilities. "When I was in the cattle business, I used one farm for hay production. Since I sold the cattle, I just work the entire farm for wildlife enhancement. There I plant sunflowers, milo, browntop millet, and wheat. I may have 30 to 40 acres of wheat and just leave it there for the wildlife," Hughes said.

Not only has he enhanced the land for recreational wildlife, he has also built a hunting lodge. When he sold his cattle, he made a deal with a friend who likes to barter.

"I traded him my cattle trailer and a ton truck for sawing lumber to build a cabin," Hughes said. The poplar logs were cut from Hughes' property and, with help on the massive fireplace, he built the cabin himself. Rock for the fieldstone fireplace came from Colbert County. The cabin is a beautiful get-away for family and friends.

When it comes to water quality, Hughes believes that buffers will definitely help improve the quality of the water. "I notice on the farm that the run off is a lot clearer now than when it was just terraced and everything was plowed. The biggest problem with the Cypress Creek Watershed, the source of drinking water for the city of Florence and most of Lauderdale County, is the rapid change in the turbidity of the water. With the buffers installed, they trap a lot of that turbidity," Hughes said. Cypress Creek has a high hydraulic rating. Because of the terrain of the surrounding area, water arrives very quickly. "You can almost see the change from clear to dingy," Harper added.

Hughes is a real ambassador for the benefits of buffers. "Jim has experienced the value of buffers and he encourages others to take a look at the program," according to Harper. "I've taken advantage of about every federal program that will help me accomplish my goal of timber and wildlife. I have grass contours, riparian zones, and regular CRP land.

"I will not realize the value of the timber grown on the riparian buffers that I have installed, but hopefully my grandchildren will. The folks at the Service Center have been very cooperative in helping me accomplish my goals," Hughes said.

"The federal government likes to push these programs for environmental benefits. It's great to hear a first-hand account of the benefits to the landowner. Mr. Hughes has installed many acres of buffers. According to Mr. Hughes, these conservation practices not only protect the environment but also provide financial benefits to the landowner," Albritton said.

Trees and wildlife -it's been a good combination for Jim Hughes. When he finds something that works, he likes to stay with it.

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