

# Feature Story

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## Purvis Tree Farmer Uses NRCS to Restore Longleaf Forest

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*Purvis, Miss.* — Landowner Orby Wright is not shy when it comes to bragging on the strength of longleaf pine trees. “They’re a strong species,” said Wright, who owns a 2,000-acre tree farm in south Mississippi. Studies show the rare pine tree stood up to the forces of Hurricane Katrina 48 percent better than the tree’s loblolly cousins, he said. Longleaf pines are 6 percent denser than a loblolly pine, and their strong bark make them fire tolerant.

But despite their strength, the longleaf pine forest is a threatened ecosystem, with just thousands of acres today. Longleaf once dominated the Southern landscape, spanning from Virginia to east Texas, covering 90 million acres. As this ecosystem disappears, it threatens many important and endangered species, like the gopher tortoise.

The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) wants to restore longleaf habitats to their former glory with the help of landowners like Wright. The Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) offered by NRCS allows Wright to manage his tall stands of longleaf pines and the blanket of legumes and forbes across the forest floor of his Quail Hollow Ranch.

“Mr. Wright is managing and restoring what is the fastest declining ecosystem in the South,” NRCS soil conservationist Lane Kimbrough said. “The longleaf forests are home to gopher tortoise and other endangered species.”

Wright purchased the land four years ago from a pecan company, which used the land mainly for growing pecans. Since then, he has planted new longleaf pines as well as managed the existing longleaf pines on the property.

HFRP has helped Wright create fire lanes and carry out prescribed burns. Burning the forest floor creates ample food for wildlife, including the new, young growth preferred by gopher tortoises. “The numbers of gopher tortoises are definitely going up,” Kimbrough said, saying the tortoises’ burrows can be found throughout the longleafs.

Destruction of longleaf pine forests has put the gopher tortoise and many other animals and plants in a precarious position. More than 300 different vertebrate and invertebrate species rely on burrows dug by gopher tortoises for homes. Timbering and human development has reduced longleaf pine stands during the past three centuries.

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Longleaf pine habitat can contain as many as 300 different species of groundcover plants per acre, and approximately 60 percent of the amphibian and reptile species found in the Southeast. Additionally, this forested habitat is home to at least 122 endangered or threatened plant and animal species.

Wright was one of the first Mississippians to enroll in NRCS' HFRP program. Kimbrough said he sees Wright's efforts as a hope for more longleaf pine restoration. "A lot of people come here and see what Mr. Wright has done, and they want to do the same thing on their land," Kimbrough said.

So far, NRCS programs have helped restore 1,641 acres of longleaf pines in Mississippi. The agency has also helped prescribed burning carried out on 1,812 acres. In 2010, Lamar County, where this farm is located, had the most restored longleaf pines at 669 acres.

### **About the Longleaf Pine Initiative:**

Mississippi is one of nine states included in the Longleaf Pine Initiative. Others are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

Approved participants will receive financial assistance for implementing conservation practices including planting longleaf pine, installing firebreaks, conducting prescribed burning and controlling invasive plants.

For more information on NRCS' Healthy Forest Reserve Program, visit your local USDA Service Center or visit [www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov).

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*(Above) NRCS Soil Conservationist Lane Kimbrough and landowner Orby Wright examine the growth of legumes in a longleaf pine stand in Lamar County.*

*Photo by Justin Fritscher, NRCS Mississippi*