

Background/purpose

At the beginning of the 17th century, there were an estimated 90 million acres of Longleaf pine forests with nearly 900 different plant species in the southeastern United States. Today, however, less than four percent, or 3.4 million acres, remain. Longleaf forests are home to about 100 bird species, 36 mammal species, and 170 species of reptiles and amphibians. In addition, 29 species associated with Longleaf pine forests are listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened or endangered species, such as the Red-cockaded Woodpecker.

An interdepartmental MOU among USDA, Interior and Defense identified the longleaf pine ecosystem as a priority resource concern. The Secretary of Agriculture charged USDA agencies to coordinate efforts to help forest landowners more effectively conserve the longleaf pine forest landscape. This led to USDA's establishing the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI).

NRCS is focusing its efforts to help forest landowners more effectively address Longleaf pine forest conservation issues through the LLPI. This initiative is part of NRCS' "all-lands" approach, which addresses identified priority resource concerns, including those of the Longleaf pine ecosystem. Restoring and enhancing Longleaf pine forests serves to improve critical wildlife habitat, as well as the health, sustainability and profitability of privately owned forests.



Photo courtesy Randy Browning, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Through its targeted conservation programs and services, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is helping forest landowners more effectively address Longleaf pine forest conservation issues through the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI).

Goals/objectives

A USDA interagency working group set a goal to protect, restore, or enhance an additional 4.6 million acres of Longleaf pine ecosystems in the natural Longleaf pine range by 2025. The nine states participating in the initiative include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. The initiative area includes the entire historic range of the Longleaf pine forests.

Environmental outcomes will include improving herbaceous understory conditions in Longleaf pine forests, and improving habitat conditions in existing Longleaf pine forests, as well as establishing new Longleaf pine forests.

Conservation funding/practices

NRCS has identified Longleaf pine ecosystem priority areas in nine states and will continue to refine the priority areas with help from local partners. The primary program used to support the objectives of the LLPI is NRCS' Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), which provides financial assistance to landowners to plan and implement conservation practices that improve Longleaf pine forest health and/or establish new Longleaf pine forest plantings. Since 2010, more than \$19 million of WHIP financial assistance and nearly \$2.8 million of technical assistance have been dedicated to assist landowners working to restore or enhance Longleaf pine forests.

Working directly with non-industrial, private forest landowners, NRCS uses a variety of conservation systems to restore, improve, or maintain understory and over story of Longleaf pine ecosystems. The conservation systems used include forest stand improvement, prescribed burning, restoration and management of rare or declining habitats, and tree/shrub establishment.

Participation/ Partnerships

Because most of the historic range of the Longleaf pine range is under the care of private landowners, NRCS and its partners are working directly with private forest landowners to implement conservation practices to protect, improve and restore Longleaf pine forests. State and local natural resource agencies, wildlife organizations and forest landowner organizations work with the NRCS to leverage federal funding for this initiative – making it possible for the LLPI conservation investment to reach even more landowners and more forests.

Benefits to producers

Through the LLPI, landowners can qualify for up to 75 percent payment rates to restore or enhance Longleaf pine forests. For many, these payments help reestablish Longleaf pine plantings and defray the cost of seedlings, plantings and site preparation.

Healthy Longleaf forests yield improved water quality, wildlife habitat and are more resistant to insect and disease infestation, wildfires and storm damage than other pine species. In addition, properly managed Longleaf pine forests yield good economic returns for landowners through high end Longleaf pine timber production.

Benefits to resources/ public

Implementing conservation plans on Longleaf pine forests will help improve wildlife habitat, contribute to the long-term sustainability of non-industrial, private forests which will provide environmental, economic and wildlife benefits for generations to come. In addition, healthy Longleaf pine ecosystems provide wildlife habitat for game species and non-game species alike and support – within a single square meter of forest – dozens of species of wildflowers, shrubs, grasses, and ferns.

Geography of Longleaf Pine Initiative.

