



United States Department of Agriculture

## JOINT CHIEFS' LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP

# Connecting Forests, Creeks and People

### UPPER BLACK CREEK WATERSHED PROJECT



MISSISSIPPI



De Soto National Forest, Photo by John A. Tupy, USDA

In rural southeast Mississippi, the Upper Black Creek watershed spreads across more than 800,000 acres of rolling pastures and deep woods and into the De Soto National Forest. The area was once home to tall, fire-dependent longleaf pine trees, but a century of overharvesting and natural fire suppression has left it at risk for wildfires. Black Creek is the only federally designated Wild and Scenic River in the state, flowing not only through forests but also through communities and industrial timberland before it reaches the Pascagoula River. Along the way, the waters pick up pollution from growing communities, which impacts fisheries and other industries in the Gulf of Mexico. Healthy forests can mitigate many of the harmful effects, so the focus of this Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership (JCLRP) project was to improve the outlook for the system by working with local landowners who rely on the watershed. A legacy of collaboration between agencies, landowners and conservation organizations provided strong infrastructure that enabled meaningful and lasting results, locally and beyond.

### Upper Black Creek Watershed

## GOALS



Gopher tortoise © Marc Del Santro



**Reduce wildfire threats:** Hundreds of landowners received information and support to plant and manage longleaf pine—a strong, fire-adapted native tree. Over time, this will reduce wildfire threats while protecting water quality and investments in timber where the states natural fire most often occurs.



**Protect water quality:** The waters of Black Creek flow to the Pascagoula and then to the Gulf of Mexico, improving water filtration by eradicating invasive plants, such as cogongrass and replacing them with native plants. This protects water quality for downstream water flow systems, such as oyster reefs—an important factor to the local economy.



**Improve wildlife habitat:** Reducing hazardous fuels and treating private and public lands with controlled burns enhances habitat for wildlife, including the gopher tortoise, which is listed as endangered in Mississippi, and popular game species, such as deer.

### PROJECT IMPACT

# 360

## LANDOWNERS

This partnership supported landowners who represented about 25,000 acres. Landowners were provided technical assistance in developing forest management plans and removing invasive species, making waterways here healthier and more resilient.

Total award from the JCLRP from 2014-2016: \$6.275 million

USDA's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service are working together to improve the health of forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the two USDA agencies are restoring landscapes by reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat.

The USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.

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Wayne Ornsbey with NRCS and landowner Brent Hatten. Photo by Kavanaugh Breazeale, NRCS

Brent Hatten has lived in the deep woods of the Black Creek watershed his entire life. As a young man, his grandfather gave him 40 acres of land, and he now owns and manages 1,200 acres within the De Soto National Forest. He also worked in the forestry industry for decades, traveling far and wide to buy timber.

Maybe it is that juxtaposition of growing up, surrounded by some of the last stands of old growth longleaf pines in the country and working to harvest trees for homes and products—that gives Hatten a unique perspective. “These longleaf in my yard are probably some of the oldest in the country,” Hatten said. “I’m very attached to this land.”

With funding from the Joint Chiefs, the Natural Resources Conservation Service was able to help support Hatten’s goals to protect and restore longleaf on some of his property. “When people first saw me planting longleaf, they called me crazy,” Hatten said. Longleaf pine grows slower than species traditionally planted for timber and forest products. Yet longleaf can better withstand the fury of storms and hurricanes, which have caused extensive damage to the area, and it is a species adapted to fire so natural wildfires don’t harm it as much as other pines. “More people are planting longleaf because it grows straight and strong. It’s a higher-grade lumber so it’s worth more,” Hatten said. “The funding is an incentive to get more local people thinking about planting longleaf and managing their land better,” he further explains. Since fires and storms don’t stop at boundaries between public and private land, working to improve the entire system is essential.

For Hatten, there’s more to gain than a return on his investment. He takes great pleasure in watching the turkeys, deer and state-endangered gopher tortoises that live among the pines. “I’m 76 years old. At the end of the road, I know I’ve done things for this land, for wildlife, and that means something to me.”



Longleaf pinecone © Blake Gordon Photography

## Key Partners

Black Creek Watershed Alliance

Mississippi Association of  
Conservation Districts

Mississippi Department of  
Environmental Quality

Mississippi Forestry Commission

Mississippi Soil and Water  
Conservation Commission

The Nature Conservancy



The Nature Conservancy supports the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership through technical expertise and coordination in support of our mission to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends.

For more information, please visit  
[nrcs.usda.gov/JointChiefsReports](https://nrcs.usda.gov/JointChiefsReports)