

Range-Wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine



Prepared by the
Regional Working Group
for *America's Longleaf*



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“Significant Geographic Areas.” Public lands can also serve as important demonstration areas for longleaf conservation and thus showcase opportunities for private land managers.

Frequently, agencies manage programs like fire control, prescribed burning, wildlife habitat, and timber management or plant ecology as separate, segregated programs without explicitly planning and delivering program accounting for the interrelated nature of land management. Opportunities exist to better integrate programs to achieve common desired conditions, gain efficiencies, and improve program delivery within longleaf forests. Integration of programs should reflect a commonly defined set of desired conditions on a landscape or site. Program execution includes developing budgets to support necessary conservation efforts.

Many of the forests with intact groundcover exist on public lands. These areas provide important ecological values and can serve as seed sources for understory plant material and sources of donor populations of species like Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and gopher tortoises. Areas with intact groundcover need to be inventoried and managed to maintain their values and serve as sources of plants and animals for restoration.

Agencies can play an important role in stimulating or participating in local efforts involving both public and private lands to bring coordinated conservation to the ground. Most detailed inventory, implementation, and monitoring will occur at the Significant Geographic Area level through stakeholder groups working collaboratively.

Objective A Inventories and assessments are in place by agencies managing public lands suitable for longleaf conservation. Managers have assessed the current conditions of existing longleaf forests, and have developed restoration plans for those acres. Plans reflect the need to target conservation action to achieve landscape-level outcomes. Inventories capture current conditions geospatially and determine opportunities for management for longleaf forests across lands administered by multiple agencies.

Key Actions

1. *Agencies will determine ongoing and planned management and restoration on public lands. Common definitions and metrics for forest conditions will be developed and a common repository of the information will be established (See the Evaluating Conservation Outcomes section of this Conservation Plan).*

Objective B Land management agencies support longleaf conservation on public lands and support budgets via appropriate management structures to accomplish work consistent with their mission.

Key Actions

2. *Integrate public lands programs to prioritize and support longleaf conservation, particularly in the fire management, smoke management, silviculture, nursery*

operations, and invasive species control. Target outreach and communications to key policy makers and lead managers of public land programs to adopt and integrate conservation of longleaf in their programs.

3. Expand training for resource professionals in management and restoration techniques for longleaf.
4. *Place a priority on inventorying and maintaining those forests with intact ground cover.*
5. Develop public land demonstration areas for longleaf conservation and thus showcase opportunities for private land managers.
6. *Support increased public land and easement acquisitions from willing sellers, especially where such acquisitions would enable management at the landscape level.*

Objective C Public land managers in Significant Geographic Areas play a leadership role in implementing collaborative landscape planning and management of longleaf at the landscape scale.

Key Actions

7. Support local teams under *America’s Longleaf Initiative* as a structure and mechanism to guide restoration through public/private coordination within Significant Geographic Areas. Establish or expand efforts in two to four Significant Geographic Areas in the next three years in order to demonstrate implementation of and accelerate conservation efforts on the ground. Institutions such as the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCPEP) can serve as a model of public/private coordination at a sub-regional, landscape scale.
8. Work with federal agencies at the regional and/or national level to support increased and improved cooperation and coordination for planning and management. Amend policy or authorities restricting management activities across jurisdictional boundaries by public and private parties.

Private Lands Strategy

Issues, Opportunities, and Challenges:

The vast majority of forestland potentially available for restoration across the longleaf range is privately held. Increasingly, the significant holdings of the industrial timber companies have been acquired by timber investment management organizations (TIMO’s) or real estate investment trusts (REIT’s) over the past decade or so. Despite these changes, some two-thirds of the forest land in the South remains in the hands of individuals and family forest landowners also called non-industrial private forest landowners. Accordingly, the success of the Conservation Plan requires making a persuasive case for retaining and restoring longleaf with these landowners and the service and consulting foresters who serve them. Additional efforts for engaging the remaining industrial owners and the TIMO’s/REIT’s must also be pursued.



Photo by J. Bachant-Brown, Longleaf Alliance

Conservation easements (whether purchased or donated with tax credits) are effective tools in enabling private landowners to maintain forestland. Federally funded easement programs such as the Forest Legacy Program, Healthy Forest Reserve Program, and the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI) and supporting military service programs, e.g., the Army's Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB), as well as similar state programs can help ensure the long-term stewardship of significant longleaf forests. These programs usually focus on addressing development threats but some have supported longleaf conservation. Efforts to place appropriate lands under easements could be expanded and more effectively targeted to support goals of this Conservation Plan, including requiring active management and targeting toward Significant Geographic Areas.

In addition, inventories of relevant longleaf acres under conservation easements have not been conducted on a range-wide scale. Management of longleaf forests under conservation easements has not been systematically evaluated. The diverse and varied jurisdictional, mission, and administrative structures of easements in the South present substantial challenges to assess and target longleaf conservation.

The front-end costs of longleaf restoration are significant as is the need for technical assistance from those knowledgeable about longleaf systems. Many landowners would find these costs prohibitive but for some form of public support. Fortunately, an array of publicly funded landowner assistance and incentive programs also exists (many authorized in the federal Farm Bill) to improve stewardship of forestland. In some cases, actions are needed to optimize the programs' utility for the non-industrial landowners seeking to restore longleaf. Some programs are inadequately funded while others have not been designed or implemented in ways that maximize participation or effectiveness. The recent reauthorization of the federal landowner assistance programs in the Farm Bill of 2008 reflects more explicit recognition of the needs of forestland owners. Various programs

to assist in hurricane recovery also offer opportunities for financial assistance in restoring longleaf.

The State Technical Committees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are especially important insofar as they help make decisions on the priority uses of the largest such program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), as well as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and others. Neither program requires a "cropping history" for eligibility (see next paragraph), making them potentially available to a wide range of landowners interested in longleaf restoration. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife is another significant federal effort that has carried out voluntary longleaf habitat improvement action on approximately 100,000 acres of private lands since 2004. On the state level, landowner programs implemented by the state fish and wildlife agencies and the State Foresters also play key roles. All these agencies which administer the key programs are encouraged to take a number of specific actions, described below, to support landowners interested in longleaf restoration, with an emphasis on those owning land in the Significant Geographic Areas described elsewhere in this Conservation Plan.

Of particular note among the landowner assistance programs is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) administered by the USDA Farm Services Agency. Private landowners participating in CRP have committed to restoring some 300,000 acres of agricultural land to longleaf, making CRP perhaps the most significant program for longleaf restoration to date. Despite the severe limitations that the statutory requirement of "cropping history" imposes, utilizing all available acres under the continuous sign-up (Conservation Practice 36) would provide eligible landowners essential payments. (Past efforts to remove the "cropping history" requirement to enable extensive pasturelands to be eligible for enrollment in CRP have been unsuccessful.) Appropriate CRP re-enrollment policies that give priority to longleaf maintenance, improvement, and restoration are also important.

The 2008 Farm Bill also established the Forest Resource Coordinating Committee at the national level to direct and coordinate achievement of national priorities which were concurrently established in this legislation. The Secretary of Agriculture has yet to appoint its members, but it will be chaired by the Chief of the Forest Service and comprised of an important array of stakeholders representing State Foresters, State fish and wildlife agencies, non-industrial private forest landowners, forest industry, conservation organizations and others. A persuasive case can be made that achieving range-wide longleaf restoration would directly contribute to the achievement of the overall national priorities insofar as this regional effort operates at the landscape level to restore a native forest type and engages private lands to a significant degree. The Committee will provide advice on the allocation of competitive federal funds.

By May 2010, all State Foresters must prepare an assessment of forest resources along with strategies for addressing identified issues. Participating in the development of these assessments at the state level is an excellent opportunity for calling greater attention to threats to the longleaf system, as well as for enlisting the further support of State Foresters in taking positive actions consistent with the range-wide Conservation Plan. Particularly significant will be the identification by State Foresters of priority areas within each state, as well as multi-state areas that constitute regional priorities.

Many of the federal and state agencies involved in longleaf restoration also offer programs that fund cooperative conservation and innovation, often on a multi-state or landscape scale. These programs are, in addition to the landowner assistance and incentive programs, designed to support individual forest landowners. Some focus on forestland while others more broadly support habitat restoration. Examples include the Conservation Innovation Grants and Payments Program, the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (both administered by NRCS), the Cooperative Forest Innovation Partnership Grants Program (administered by the USDA Forest Service), and the State Wildlife Grants Program (administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Projects involving forest management qualify for many of these programs; having a high percentage of non-industrial private forestland involved may even make the project a priority for funding. Also, many of the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plans/Strategies from states within the longleaf range feature pine habitats, including longleaf, thus potentially creating related grant opportunities.

Objective A Conservation easements to support longleaf restoration are more effectively utilized.

Key Actions

1. ***Increase funding for easement programs that contribute to longleaf restoration and management. For other easement programs, and where compatible with the easement program mission, work with agencies and organizations to develop longleaf restoration as a goal, particularly in Significant Geographic Areas.***

2. Develop and widely disseminate a comparative summary of all conservation easement programs in a format readily understandable by individuals and family forest landowners.
3. Actively pursue targeted forest landowners for education, outreach, and solicitation of conservation easements.
4. Develop a robust system to inventory those lands under publicly held conservation easements and determine their current and potential support for active management and restoration of longleaf with particular attention to those easements within Significant Geographic Areas.

Objective B Both Farm Bill and other habitat restoration programs are fully taken advantage of to ensure that private landowners have ready access to a suite of appropriately designed and adequately funded programs providing technical advice and/or financial assistance.

Key Actions

5. ***Encourage federal and state agencies, (e.g., State Technical Committees), that provide technical assistance and cost-share to forest landowners to increase support for landowners (especially those in the Significant Geographic Areas) willing (a) to improve poor quality longleaf stands through thinning and burning, (b) to convert forests back to longleaf on appropriate sites and (c) to plant new acres of longleaf trees and restore understories.***
6. ***Take full advantage of the many opportunities for longleaf restoration under the Conservation Reserve Program, including continuous sign-up and re-enrollment policies.***
7. With the ultimate goal of “more boots on the ground,” increase funding to those state and federal agencies and private entities essential to educating landowners and encouraging their participation in longleaf restoration activities, and ensure their longleaf conservation expertise by providing enhanced training to their natural resource professionals.
8. Because the array of state, federal, and privately funded programs is often confusing and daunting to landowners, develop a targeted education and outreach effort within the Significant Geographic Areas to match landowners with assistance programs. On a region-wide basis offer a clearinghouse or other means to assist all landowners in better accessing programs. The matrix of programs developed by NRCS/FWS in Florida is an excellent start on an important tool, and should be updated and widely circulated.
9. Develop alternative means of assisting landowners in meeting the cost-share and/or matching requirements in various programs as these can pose a substantial financial challenge to landowners and conservation groups interested in longleaf. Options include raising funds from the private sector, from state and local governments and, to the extent permitted by law, from other federal agencies.

10. Ensure that landowners are aware of available regulatory assurances and “safe harbor” agreements that are designed to protect them from any “take” issues under the Endangered Species Act. Continue to improve these programs from landowners’ perspectives and for enhanced benefits to protected and candidate species.
11. *Develop a comprehensive database capturing in a spatially explicit manner the longleaf-related activities of all federal and state agencies administering landowner assistance as a means of promoting coordination and measuring success within the Significant Geographic Areas and across the range. If feasible, include restoration activities sponsored by non-governmental organizations and other private entities, for example, the plantings funded by the outstanding partnership between the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Southern Company.*

Objective C The newly created Forest Resource Coordinating Committee (yet to be appointed) is engaged in order to promote national interest in longleaf.

Key Actions

12. Inform the Secretary of Agriculture who will establish the committee of the benefits of having person(s) knowledgeable in longleaf restoration issues serve. Coordinate with the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF), the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) and others to seek early opportunities to inform the full Committee about the longleaf restoration efforts, including the ways in which the regional effort could contribute to achievement of national priorities, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation, and providing habitat for “at-risk” species.

Objective D Longleaf conservation is fully considered in the State Forest Resource Assessments, response strategies and identification of priority areas.

Key Actions

13. *Engage immediately with the Southern Group of State Foresters and the USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, in efforts to prepare for the upcoming development of assessments and strategies in individual states.*
14. *Encourage longleaf advocates to participate on a state-by-state basis in the development of the assessments and strategies to ensure that threats to longleaf are identified, that the Significant Geographic Areas identified in this Conservation Plan are considered as priority areas in the assessments and strategies for supporting longleaf restoration are included.*
15. Support State Foresters who develop assessments and strategies consistent with longleaf restoration in securing competitive funding to enable their planned activities.
16. Where state assessments and strategies encourage

longleaf restoration, support their use by State Technical Committees in prioritizing eligibility for conservation program participation by forest landowners.

Objective E State wildlife agencies are engaged to highlight and accelerate implementation of the longleaf-related components of the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plans/Strategies (CWCP/S) within single states and across the region.

Key Actions

17. *Gain a more in-depth understanding of the longleaf restoration activities called for in CWCP/S's across the range.*
18. *Work with both the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and individual state agencies to identify common priorities.*

Objective F Multiple programs are tapped that support cooperative conservation efforts and/or innovative approaches to support local implementation efforts as well as the range-wide *America's Longleaf* Initiative.

Key Actions

19. Identify all potentially useful federal and state programs that support cooperative conservation efforts and/or innovative approaches that will contribute to implementation of this Conservation Plan.
20. Identify the best “matches” between the available funding programs and the various activities called for at both the local and range-wide level under this Conservation Plan for range-wide application, and assist local area efforts in identifying applicable funding sources.
21. Encourage and support partners in the *America's Longleaf* in applying for and securing funding for cooperative and/or innovative approaches.

Objective G Interest and opportunities for longleaf management are identified within the TIMO/REIT community.

Key Actions

22. *Engage with the industrial forestry community and with timber TIMO's and REIT's to share this Conservation Plan and determine which elements may be adopted or otherwise engaged in by them. Cooperative activities already underway with some TIMO's/REIT's include inventory of significant ecological sites, agreements to share natural resources databases, and identifying significant sites for conservation status, easements, land transfers and acquisition, as well as for mitigation and mitigation banking.*