Effective engagement can lead landowners to longleaf restoration.

As part of the American Forest Foundation’s (AFF) continual efforts to create innovative solutions to engage family forest landowners in forest management, AFF conducted a specific study about landowner’s understanding, knowledge and behaviors around longleaf restoration. We found broad interest and support for restoring longleaf habitat in the southern United States. The results show the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) is an effective tool in sustaining engagement with landowners which lead to positive conservation outcomes on the ground. Non-Tree Farmers want to restore longleaf, but don’t feel they have the tools and resources they need. AFF has developed innovative targeted outreach campaigns to non-Tree Farmers that have shown they can successfully move these landowners to on-the-ground conservation activities. The Foundation is well positioned to spearhead longleaf outreach projects with private landowners throughout the South.

**KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY**

**Landowners should take action to restore the native longleaf ecosystem**

- There was broad support from landowners in the South for this statement. 65% of Tree Farmers agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 64% of non-Tree Farmers agree or strongly agree.

**Tree Farmers (certified by the American Tree Farm System) are more knowledgeable about longleaf restoration.**

- A little more than half (52.8%) of Tree Farmers consider themselves moderately to extremely knowledgeable on longleaf restoration. Compared to 26.2% of non-Tree Farmers.

**Tree Farmers are currently restoring more longleaf pine**

- A majority (55%) of Tree Farmers surveyed, compared to 30% of non-Tree Farmers, were currently restoring longleaf pine on their land. In fact, in total, these Tree Farmers have already restored 37,000 acres of longleaf.

**Non-Tree Farmers don’t have the tools they need**

- Both populations believe that landowners should take actions to restore native longleaf, but only 36.2% of the non-Tree Farmers believed they had the tools and resources to restore longleaf. This data underscores the value of ATFS in facilitating on-going landowner engagement on issues such as longleaf restoration.
A Tree Farmer’s Perspective

Salem Saloom, a Tree Farmer from south Alabama, has had a love of the outdoors, trees and wildlife since he was a young boy. Once grown and married, Salem and his wife Dianne purchased their first 158-acre piece of timberland, with hopes of growing timber and enjoying the wildlife. Unfortunately, the Saloom’s vision and activities were interrupted when Hurricane Ivan, a category 3 hurricane, hit their land in 2004. The storm and winds upended the majority of the loblolly and slash pine on the property. All that remained were a few older longleaf pine trees scattered across the land. Salem had grown up seeing longleaf pine all his life, but until the storm hit, never really appreciated it. Seeing the toughness of the tree firsthand, he began to do a bit of research. Longleaf pine was historically prevalent across the South. It provided vital habitat for the critters he loved like turkey, but also for many others – the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and the threatened gopher tortoise.

Upon learning about its benefits, the Salooms decided there was great value in restoring longleaf pine for wildlife and more. Longleaf would create a forest that would be better able to withstand future hurricanes, and provide the needed habitat for many of the wildlife species they cared about. And it would still provide the high valued wood fiber they could sell as timber. They set to work.

Today, now owning more than 2,200 acres, the Salooms have planted more than half of their property in longleaf. Some of the trees are already 10 years old. They continue to maintain the health of their longleaf pine, using prescribed burns to create the fresh ground growth the wildlife depends on for food. They plan to continue to plant more in the future. Because of their efforts, Salem and his wife can report they have healthy populations of turkey, quail and deer as well as several gopher tortoises and gopher tortoise nests on their land, where before they had none.

Salem, Dianne and their son, Patrick, were awarded the National Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year in 2010, recognized by the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) for their exceptional stewardship. Salem and Dianne are both strong advocates for the American Tree Farm System community. They often meet with landowners, walk their land, talk to them about ATFS and encourage them to get involved with Tree Farm and its partners, who work on restoring longleaf habitat throughout the South.

ATFS is an internationally-endorsed recognition and certification program that provides family and private forest owners with support and tools through a community, helping them to keep their forests healthy and sustainable. It is administered by AFF, and implemented on the ground by state committee. Tree Farmers can have their management certified as sustainable through a rigorous third-party process.
AFF has been pioneering targeted outreach to engage landowners and successfully move them to activities on the ground around important conservation outcomes.

One example is our work in the Cumberland Plateau, a region that spans from northern Alabama and Georgia up through Tennessee and Kentucky. Shortleaf pine, Pinus Echinata, is a native species to the Cumberland Plateau, however, over the past five decades, it has been in decline due to fire exclusion and regeneration of the more commercially viable Loblolly Pine. In 1972, there were 1.7 million acres of shortleaf in Alabama, whereas in 2013 there were fewer than 200,000 acres – a staggering 88% decrease.

Although cost-share funding for woodland owners to plant shortleaf has been available for years through NRCS, there was just one single application filed since 2000. To facilitate the use of these cost-share dollars and increase the number of filings, AFF reached out to state, federal and private organizations to gauge interest in a project focusing on engaging landowners across the landscape around shortleaf pine restoration. Within a matter of weeks, a partnership was formed and funding was made available by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), NRCS and International Paper.

AFF, alongside its state and private organizations, has been working closely since 2014 as the My Alabama Woods team. Together, My Alabama Woods has reached more than 12,000 landowners, met personally with nearly 400 interested individuals, and restored over 3,000 acres of Shortleaf pine.

Eighteen NRCS contracts were filed as a direct result of the team’s work throughout 2015 as My Alabama Woods communicated the true value of cost-share programs just like this one. These programs empower landowners to provide the clean water, wildlife habitat and sustainable wood supplies all Americans rely upon – in this case through targeted shortleaf pine restoration. AFF has already started similar programs within the historic range of longleaf.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF LONGLEAF PINE FOR AT-RISK WILDLIFE**

Longleaf pine was historically prevalent across the Southeast, spreading across 90 million acres, providing vital habitat for the diverse wildlife species that occupied its forests. It was also a key source of wood fiber for community needs like telephone poles and lumber. Since the late 1800’s though, this pine species has been in decline due to a compounding of historical occurrences – the suppression of natural fire, the influx of settlers, conversion of forests to agriculture land and other uses, and more. In fact, as of 1996, only 3 million acres of longleaf pine were known in existence.

The loss of longleaf pine has had a ripple effect on wildlife species that depend on fire maintained ecosystems. Several species are now at-risk due to loss of fire dependent habitat, including the gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker and black pine snake. Restoration of the longleaf ecosystem could significantly support these species and help prevent others from being listed.
Methodology:
VIA DIRECT MAIL, AFF SURVEYED:

- Tree Farmers in the American Tree Farm System (ATFS), living within the longleaf range in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Virginia.

- Non-Tree Farmers or landowners not in the American Tree Farm System, from 16 counties in the Piney Woods of Mississippi, a key landscape for longleaf pine.

AFF received 900 responses, or a 13.2% aggregate response rate, with Tree Farmers responding at the highest rate. This research conducted by the American Forest Foundation in 2016.

Conclusion

Tree Farmers are part of a community that enables them to be tapped into experts and tools around longleaf restoration, and thus they have been able to get the information they need and have access to resources, including financial assistance. They have a better understanding of the benefits of longleaf restoration on their land and they have the confidence to conduct activities on the ground to accomplish their goals related to longleaf habitat. Their network helps them find and take advantage of financial assistance available, including those activities needed to establish and maintain longleaf. This survey shows that Tree Farmer engaged in the ATFS network, which includes partner organizations, government agencies, forestry associations, foresters and other landowners, leads to more restoration on the ground.

While non-Tree Farmers believe that longleaf should be restored, they do not necessarily have the confidence or understanding to begin the restoration process on their land. They don’t currently have the knowledge about what restoration entails to begin actions on the ground. They are not engaged with the resources they need to begin this work at the same level that Tree Farmers are. They are much less familiar with agencies that provide technical and financial assistance, making it harder for them access the tools they need. A program dedicated to engaging these landowners with the resources available to them, could have a positive impact and move them from understanding the benefits of longleaf to actually taking action on their land.

AFF has successfully developed landscape conservation projects that lead landowners to actions on the ground related to important conservation outcomes. This survey re-affirms the importance of these types of targeted landowner engagement programs and the value of the American Tree Farm System in sustaining that engagement.

For more information about this research project, please contact Caroline Kuebler, Senior Manager Woodland Owners Engagement, ckuebler@forestfoundation.org

For more information about AFF’s work in the South around longleaf restoration, please contact Chris Erwin, Southern Director of Conservation, cerwin@forestfoundation.org

Visit www.forestfoundation.org for more additional resources and learnings on family forest owners.