

2016 SOUTHEASTERN FOREST PRIVATE LANDS PARTNERSHIP FORUM

MARCH 1, PENSACOLA, FLORIDA
SESSION RECOMMENDATIONS

2016 Report



An Important Step Forward

“We can work out 80% of our challenges if we have established relationships and can sit down to discuss issues and resolutions.”

Contents

Executive Summary	5
Pre-session Survey Highlights	6
Recommendation 1	8
Recommendation 2	10
Recommendation 3	12
Recommendation 4	14
Recommendation 5	16
Other Landowner Recommendations	18
Agency Comments	22
Session Participants	24



Executive Summary

“We need to get outside our comfort zones.”

More than 90% of the Southeast is privately owned, much of it by families with strong, long-term connections to the land. Many successful partnerships have been formed over the years between landowners, agencies and non-government agencies (NGOs), with the goal of keeping those lands working and conserving the Southeast's wildlife. Still, more can be done - communicating more effectively, increasing prescribed fire, broadening incentive programs, improving rules and incentives - that can help keep families, communities and species on the landscape.

Is there a better way to work through issues and concerns than regulation and litigation?

This was the main question Partners for Conservation (PFC) and other sponsors posed to private landowners at a recent forum. Private landowners met with leaders of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), the U.S. Department of Agriculture –Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), representatives from other public agencies and nongovernmental organizations. The forum's purpose was:

- **To raise awareness of cooperative conservation successes,**
- **Provide a place to hear landowner issues/concerns, and**
- **Develop a set of landowner-focused recommendations for improving cooperative conservation in the Southeast.**

So what happened?

The forum emphasized the overwhelming importance of private lands to Southeast conservation. Participants discussed success stories and barriers to greater cooperative conservation. There were differences of opinion, but the dialogue was respectful and focused on solutions. In the end, the forum generated a set of shared conservation goals along with implementation actions.

Landowners shared firsthand of knowledge about what programs and regulations were working. They also shared frustrations with programs and incentives that are not working as intended and the reasons why. A majority of the conversation focused on improving trust, tweaking conservation programs, and more effective communication.

What emerged was a candid, in-depth discussion about the importance of private lands to sustainable conservation. The group felt forming partnerships is easy when parties are in agreement and trust levels are high. Partnerships are more difficult, but far more valuable, for addressing controversial issues. Forming new partnerships to deal with emerging problems was a key recommendation of the forum.

The group had extensive dialog about the need for setting shared conservation goals. Team members also felt sustained, ongoing dialog is the key to achieving more effective conservation outcomes.



The landowners developed a set of recommendations for improving cooperative conservation on private lands.

Agencies listened intently, then responded. In the end, strong support emerged for moving forward with a public-private partnership. The group voted to continue the dialogue and to work towards implementation. The forum was also seen as an effective place for addressing new and emerging issues.

5 Recommendations were offered

1. Improve rules and incentives for landowners who do the right thing
2. Communicate the value of managed private working lands to society
3. Address and remove impediments to prescribed burning
4. Improve coordination and focus of the rules and incentives between federal and state agencies
5. Provide funding opportunities for a broader range of issues (e.g. addressing invasive species, fire and ecosystem restoration)

Post-session feedback was positive

80% Rated session effectiveness as very good or better

69% Agreed the session exceeded expectations

80% Agreed:

- New information was presented and discussed
- Their input will be considered
- The most important issue was discussed

94% Agreed a future event should be planned

95% Agreed:

- Participants had an opportunity to express themselves
- They left with new information and new contacts

What happens next?

- NRCS is conducting a review of program requirements
- FWS will continue private landowner dialogue on Endangered Species Act (ESA) issues
- Partners For Conservation will convene a working group to explore continuing the dialogue



Landowners Speak!

The spotlight was on landowners picking priority issues they wanted discuss.

Pre-Session Insight

A Survey of 25 Landowners

80%

Are Concerned

ESA regulation will affect
future land use and
management

90%

Agreed

Biodiversity and habitat
connectivity should receive
greater emphasis in
incentives and program
decision-making

80%

Agreed

There seem to
be widespread
misunderstandings
about the true benefits of
working forests

More than 75% of the landowner respondents reported:

- The majority of land holdings are between 250 and 5,000 acres
- They are active in management of their lands and manage for multiple uses
- Their reasons for ownership and management include timber production, biodiversity/conservation, family heritage and providing recreational opportunities

More than 60% reported rare and declining species occurring on their operations and that these species are a consideration in management decisions.

An additional 20% know of rare and declining species but are not aware of them in their area.

80% were concerned how state and federal regulations protective of non-hunted species, such as those with ESA status, may affect future property management.

Issues that could limit willingness or ability to work on cooperative projects include:

- Financial assistance programs that don't address landowner needs
- Lack of awareness and knowledge of available programs
- Inadequate technical assistance programs
- Processes for cost-share reimbursements
- Regulatory uncertainty
- Complexity of program rules or paperwork



Pre-session Survey Highlights of 20 Agency/Non-Government Agencies

35% were federal; 55% state, 10% NGO partners included:

Overall, they spend a lot of time (more than 75%) working directly, or supervising those who work directly, with private landowners and other large-scale collaborations.

Major barriers and constraints reported by Agency partners included:

- Paperwork limits landowner interest
- Landowner resistance to government/NGO sponsored programs
- Insufficient cost-share or incentive payment
- Time-consuming process hurdles
- Program rules don't match up well
- Employee turnover
- Lack of awareness of partners' priorities
- Interest is high but there isn't enough time to address demand

The greatest opportunities for increasing landowner program interest include:

- Non-financial incentives (e.g. more regulatory certainty for listed or potentially listed candidate species)
- Better implementation coordination among conservation agencies and organizations
- A one-stop information source for available programs
- Increase training for agency staffs on landowner outreach and communication
- Better outreach coordination among conservation agencies and organizations

The biggest time demands of this group include project review, non-regulatory coordination, public or NGO land management and research.

Regulatory actions or permitting was only cited as about 14% of time spent working directly with private landowners.

Almost half the agency/NGO respondents are landowners too and have used similar assistance they provide to their customers and clients.

Recommendation 1

Improve rules and incentives for landowners who do the right thing

What it is

- ☐ Specific end results desired for the restoration of species
- ☐ Creating more incentives; reducing disincentives
- ☐ Advance communication about consideration of rule changes
- ☐ Improving landowners' ability to plan for the future
- ☐ An improved public understanding of the value of private landowners' investments in conservation
- ☐ More flexibility to reach conservation objectives for landowners who are attempting to do the right thing

What it isn't

- ☐ Penalizing people managing the land in good faith
- ☐ Doing away with rules all together
- ☐ Creating overly specific rules for every project
- ☐ Inflexible

Recommendations

- ☐ Get landowner input before developing program rules or guidance
- ☐ Seek landowner input well in advance of Endangered Species Act listing decisions
- ☐ Seek more than just input from landowners. Inform and educate them about the intent of proposed changes
- ☐ Develop results-oriented measures and report on the impact of changes on private lands
- ☐ Recognize, and perhaps reward, landowners who have a history of doing the right thing
- ☐ Operate under a scientific, evidence-based format



“Too many rules and incentives are working at cross-purposes.”





Discussion Highlights

By the time endangered species decisions are made it is often too late to for private landowners to affect those decisions or explain impacts and outcomes. Participation and support from landowners should be enlisted much earlier in the decision-making process. Lack of early outreach is widely perceived to be unfair to landowners. FWS' approach to the law could benefit from earlier involvement of landowners and an assumption that most want to participate as conservation partners.

Communication is both a problem and the solution. One landowner notes "we can work out 80% of our challenges if we have established relationships and the ability and willingness to sit down to discuss issues and resolutions."

Fears of new regulation are preventing many landowners from participating or investing in conservation projects. More focus encouraging voluntary conservation would be welcome. Only so many rules and mandates can be absorbed by private landowners. This is not a complaint about any single agency being unreasonable. It is a statement about the accumulation of all regulation landowners must comply with and the perception it is coming from all sides.

If we can build relationships with people, then many challenges can be overcome. Mike Harris, formerly with Georgia Department of Natural Resources, was recognized for his contribution, encouragement and support for private landowners in South Georgia.

Taking cropland out of production could open new incentives (e.g. Conservation Stewardship Program vs. Conservation Reserve Program). If incentives could be changed enabling landowners to get an annual payment (like CRP) for moving production toward longleaf, the conservation benefits could be huge.

A complete picture of cost-shares needs to be compiled (NRCS/State Foresters/others). Landowners would like to be able to identify multiple options for funding opportunities.

Big gaps in landowner understanding of endangered species are a problem. Preventing species from being listed should be a top priority. Outreach and education that helps landowners identify threatened and endangered species would be welcome. As one landowner said, "Most landowners wouldn't know a black pine snake if it were in their shirt."

A starting point for species identification can be found on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service website. This page lists each species, and whether it is an existing or candidate species for listing. A large list of species is being evaluated at this time. Work on a plan for addressing the rest of the species that will be addressed over the next seven years is underway. Time lines for analysis and review can be predicted and should be shared. This will help conservation partners learn about what's on the list and how their assistance might help avoiding listing.

Landowners are less opposed to the rules from any single agency than they are to the accumulated combination of all that pile up.

Recommendation 2

Communicate the value of managed working lands to society

What it is

- ☐ Stress the renewability of forests: Cutting timber isn't killing trees!
- ☐ Communicating what working lands are and what they look like
- ☐ Make working lands relevant to society
- ☐ Communicate the value of clean air, water and habitat working lands provide
- ☐ Establish a monetary value for the ecosystem services that healthy private lands provide. This number is a way to establish the societal value of private landowner investment.
- ☐ Find appropriate voices that connect with targeted audiences
- ☐ Establish additional contacts with nontraditional groups

What it isn't

- ☐ Letting land revert to an unmanaged state
- ☐ The natural state is not inherently "better," in many cases it is worse for habitat
- ☐ Being self-serving for any specific approach

Recommendations

- ☐ Continue and expand outreach efforts that communicate the conservation benefits to the local community and society
- ☐ Expand in-reach efforts within the landowner community
- ☐ Use the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture Prescribed Fire Communications Strategy for aligning messages with target audiences
- ☐ Raise awareness of private land's value to the agriculture community
- ☐ Get agreement on the value of ecosystem services provided by private landowners
- ☐ Define value in terms of tons of carbon/acre managed; value of reduced water turbidity, etc.
- ☐ Emphasize to agency staff the value of private lands and their roles as effective liaisons
- ☐ Recognize landowner willingness to work cooperatively with agencies is directly related to the quality of agency staff

“Strong emotional connections to the land are big factors for private landowners.”

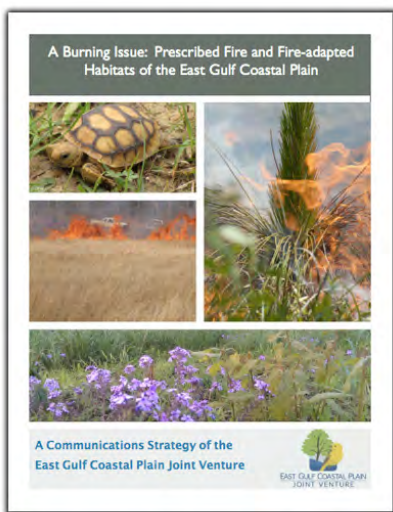


Discussion Highlights

Leadership needs to raise community awareness of land use practices.

The condition of Southeastern land shows, in far too many cases, many landowners don't care. Much land isn't getting burned. Many in the room are frustrated with neighbors who don't manage their lands. How do we get people interested in managing their land? The team discussed examples from East Texas to Alabama, agreed lack of knowledge of land management is a big challenge and that landowners who are actively managing their land need to take a bigger role in encouraging neighbors to follow their lead.

NRCS, FWS and Longleaf Alliance are collaborating to address this challenge. Clear talking points and statistics that speak to the benefits of managing the land and appropriate metrics are needed.



The East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture has a prescribed fire communications strategy that can provide guidance and messaging for these, and similar efforts. The Prescribed Fire and Fire-adapted Habitats of the East Gulf Coastal Plain document provides strategies and messaging for promoting the benefits of prescribed burning to a broad range of audiences.

It can be downloaded at: <http://tinyurl.com/zl9hmnv>.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Longleaf Alliance and others are working to raise awareness and interest in burning. If landowner cooperatives can be used to encourage neighbors to do just one management activity they will be likely to do more.

We've got to put a value on the ecosystem services our land provides. 22 million Americans can be affected by how 3.6 million acres of forestland are managed. The American Forest Foundation's recent work represents a useful starting point for developing a shared approach regarding ecosystems services.

Building and cultivating new personal relationships are effective for increasing active land management. In some cases, this will mean team members might need to get outside their comfort zones talking to unfamiliar groups or neighbors. Much progress is possible if each meeting participant will commit to attend a new meeting or conference. These contacts can bring new conservation partners together, communicate successes and increase awareness of best management practices.

Meeting attendees are becoming more connected. This group is an important hub that can develop and expand these links.

American Forest Foundation's mission is to keep family lands in forests. They are supporting efforts to get landowners on the perimeter of existing projects involved in land management.

Recommendation 3:

Address and remove impediments to prescribed burning

What it is

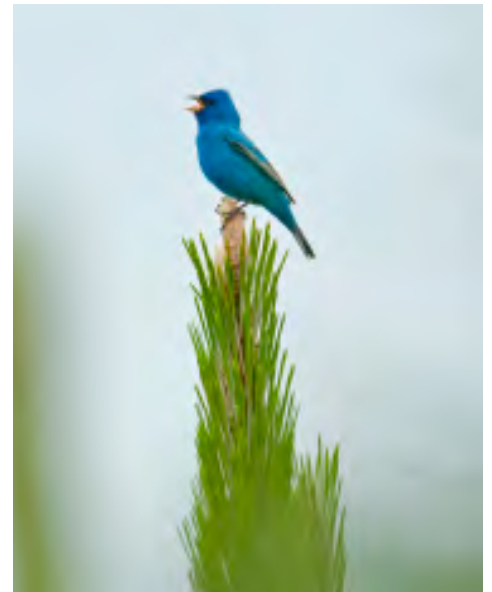
- ☐ Increasing the acres of private lands that get prescribed burning
- ☐ Improving public education about the benefits of burning
- ☐ Stressing the benefits of regular burns for managing wildfire
- ☐ Creating tiered incentives for growing and non-growing season burns
- ☐ Communicating and replicating successful prescribed burn programs
- ☐ Providing funding for expanding burn programs to new areas
- ☐ Speaking about the public health benefits of fire
- ☐ The most cost-effective management tool for managing pine stands

What it isn't

- ☐ Damaging to the land
- ☐ Burning inappropriate habitats

Recommendations

- ☐ Use and refine existing communications products (at least as starting points)
- ☐ Use southern fire exchange forum for social media and marketing
- ☐ Stress the importance of pollinators to agricultural crops
- ☐ Address liability issues by documenting the high percentage of successful burns and communicate the real risks to underwriters
- ☐ Construct cooperatives, develop mentors and provide more capacity for prescribed fire programs
- ☐ Update Smokey Bear's image



“Managing 450,000 acres in the swamp and lightning means fire isn’t an IF, but a when decision.”





Discussion Highlights

Team members have very different views on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Safe Harbor program. In the Mississippi Sand Hills it is perceived to work poorly. At Ft. Bragg, NC it is extremely popular. These differences need to be explored and better understood.

The U.S. Army's fire management at Ft. Bragg and recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) population has been a significant success. An open pine forest maintained by fire isn't just good for RCWs; it is good for soldiers training too. Cooperative partner dialogue has helped identify and eliminate disincentives for timber cutting. The program has helped private landowners who wanted to do the right thing for conservation, eliminating regulatory concerns associated with new RCWs moving onto their lands. The program has been helpful to private landowners with properties of all sizes.

At Ft. Bragg, The Army recognized a growing human population and increasing urbanization along the fence line. They took a big chance at Ft. Bragg helping The Nature Conservancy purchase conservation easements and land titles. The Army's Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program has been an effective funding mechanism for land protection.

The program allows landowners to manage timber as they see fit with fairly general restrictions for managing. According to one landowner in the room, "Most of us are happy to live with these minor restrictions." Many lands have been conserved because of the Army's interest.

Growing season burning is preferable and more effective than dormant season burning.

Consider providing some regulatory relief for experienced landowners who have a record of successful burns. Please also consider lessening the requirements for nighttime burns on smaller land plots.

Expand cooperative networks for prescribed burning equipment exchange and training. The Longleaf Stewardship Fund is supporting local burn trailers in South Carolina and the Mississippi Sand Hills. The National Wild Turkey Federation has funded a similar rig in Louisiana. A third burn rig is being worked on for Mississippi.

Could this group track how many landowners are using this equipment and how many acres are being burned? This data would be useful in measuring use, effectiveness and return on investment of these rigs. Dr. Saloom (Alabama landowner) will connect Clay Ware (FWS) and Virginia representatives to collect this data.

More assistance is needed for first-timers. This group could support creation of an online calendar of burn masters who would post schedules and invite interested landowners to participate. This would help them gain confidence, experience, and move them toward prescribed burning independence.

Help is needed with understory management. It takes more to restore understory than it does to plant trees. If the intent is managing for an ecosystem vs. only timber production, more assistance is needed. The Nature Conservancy has a staff person available for this.

More information needs to be shared about planting densities. Lower densities (300 trees/acre) look good, but have lower economic value. Through programs offered by the Longleaf Alliance, landowners have learned they can grow timber denser, manage longleaf for quality product sustainably, and have a great wildlife habitat together.

Best practices for managing longleaf pine planting densities necessary to maximize landowner priorities (e.g. timber production, wildlife habitat goals, etc.) through controlled burning, timber stand maintenance and gopher tortoise habitat development needs to be shared. Successes in South Alabama need to be expanded. NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) planting densities generally range from 464 to 605 trees/acre dependent on program goals and landowner priorities.

Prescribed burn lawsuits were discussed. While Alabama law protects the landowner if burning is being done under the correct conditions, anyone can still sue anyone. Smoke is often an issue in urban areas. Big frustrations and expenses defending this are likely to persist. Georgia law states the opposing counsel must prove gross negligence. Could this be addressed regionally or nationally? Could model legislation be introduced to make frivolous lawsuits "loser pay" if the burn was conducted properly?

Simplifying the process and increasing the payments are powerful burn incentives. After hurricanes (Ivan/Katrina) the NRCS Emergency Watershed Program included several million dollars for Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida to clean up forest debris. Landowners signed a simple 1-page form to do a burn. Burning more than quadrupled in those years.

The Alabama Forest Commission has done a great job of making burn permits available online. 1 to 3 day permits are available.

Recommendation 4

Improve the coordination and focus of rules and incentives between federal and state agencies

What it is

- ☐ Appreciating agency leaders for trying to understand our issues and concerns
- ☐ Getting more feedback from landowners and frontline experts on what they really need
- ☐ More dialogue like this that helps determine what's working in the field and what's not
- ☐ Better dialogue that leads to increased focus, agreed-to goals and improved incentives
- ☐ A way to bring more resources to the table
- ☐ Working cooperatively to develop tax incentives that encourage conservation
- ☐ Working on schedules that fit with landowner needs; fewer artificial deadlines
- ☐ Being more objective-driven, less program-driven
- ☐ Identifying and eliminating disincentives that encourage the wrong activities

What it isn't

- ☐ Requiring funds to be spent by arbitrary cutoffs (i.e. end of fiscal year)
- ☐ Consistent between federal agencies

Recommendations

- ☐ Increase landowner participation in the development and review of incentive programs
- ☐ Build on the success working with Region 4 EPA on controlled burns. (Georgia and Louisiana offer two positives examples)



“If landowners can plant and manage how they want to, the odds of success go way up for positive outcomes.”



“People need to feel comfortable with burning. It helps to walk the woods with a trusted advisor who can see things they can’t.”

Discussion Highlights

NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program is viewed positively by the landowners present. Consistent burning is beneficial to habitat and landowner perspective is relatively few restrictions are linked to this program.

NRCS’ Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) has also been extremely beneficial. It is perceived as a good group of practices. The income it provides has been very helpful to many private landowners.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife program was recognized by session panelists as a successful program because of its flexibility and attention to landowner needs.

Taking cropland out of production could open new incentives. (e.g. Conservation Stewardship Program vs. Conservation Reserve Program [CRP]). If incentives could be changed that would enable landowners to get an annual payment (like CRP) for moving production toward longleaf, significant progress might be possible.

Tax issues are important considerations when making management decisions. Casualty losses and how long-term capital gains on those losses are treated after 30 years of growth are two big concerns for landowners.

Some legislators have discussed deleting itemized expenses from the tax code. Landowners felt it would be tragic if this occurred. How this will be treated will depend on the next Congress and President. If longleaf can’t be converted to some other use, the Internal Revenue Service claims no profit motive exists. This is an issue some private landowners believe should be re-examined.



Recommendation 5

Provide funding for a broader array of issues

What it is

- ☐ Increasing flexibility to address priority management needs
- ☐ Identifying new sources of cooperative funding
- ☐ More creativity to focus on local solutions and more/faster adoption of successes
- ☐ New funding resources for understory management (and advice on best practices)
- ☐ Increasing funding for science-based research on priority issues
- ☐ Adding value to our national defense and military bases

What it isn't

- ☐ An unfocused grab bag of pet projects
- ☐ A substitute for a good management plan

Recommendations

- ☐ Prioritize investments where they will have the greatest ecosystem benefit
- ☐ Link our messages to climate change benefits

“We can achieve a lot for the benefit of fish and wildlife if we focus on improving conservation outcomes.”





Discussion Highlights

Prescribed fire is our biggest challenge. Limitations on prescribed fire expertise, inadequate equipment, and liability limit the ability to burn more acres. Budgets and cost-share programs across the Southeast have been cut or lost entirely. The Forest Service once paid 80% of the cost of planting longleaf. That program has been decimated. This team can provide personal contact with legislators and industry perspective to support restoration of programs and funding.

Coordination, implementation and lack of funding are problems. Many programs are available for private landowners, but funding can be inconsistent. Cost share availability and project rankings for EQIP-funded longleaf planting densities have varied between NRCS offices. More cooperation and coordination at higher levels is needed.

State laws and incentives for conservation easements that allow for agriculture and timber have come and gone. North Carolina had a great program that just sunsetted. Virginia and South Carolina are the only states with known transferrable features that enable property owners who are land rich but cash poor an option for selling credits.

More cooperation between agencies and utilities is needed to fight the spread of invasives. County commissions in Alabama and Mississippi are doing the best job they can spraying for cogongrass on public right of ways. Southern Company and Mississippi Power are both actively fighting invasives. This is a major effort.

The Forest Service routinely treats connected lands for invasives. For property owners with land adjacent to National Forests there are some opportunities for provisional assistance.

Most landowners are extremely interested in education and opening properties to schools and universities. They want to be welcoming to learning, improving and sharing best practices.

Should state wildlife action plans be linked to this conversation? State wildlife grants provide funds for species of greatest conservation need. These can include species the state identifies independently. This has been a great process for engaging stakeholders. While underfunded to do all the work that needs to be done, it is a good framework for linking partners to identify areas and practices to focus action on.

NRCS is working with states to use their identification of Conservation Opportunity Areas (COAs) to inform development of priority areas for the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife partnership. COAs are geographic areas where there is a high concentration of species of concern and once identified, states will use these to focus conservation efforts across ecoregions and nationally to track the progress of State Wildlife Action Plan implementation. Likewise, NRCS is discussing with the states how USDA program work in COAs could further the wildlife conservation goals of the states.



Other Landowner Recommendations

Develop the next generation of conservation leaders

There is a shortage of qualified foresters and biologists. Landowners can't find qualified staff and/or university graduates to hire. This team can play a bigger role identifying promising youth in the community, providing entry-level internships and jobs and encouraging them to enroll in forestry and wildlife schools. Our bench of future land managers is pretty thin and won't improve without active support and engagement.

Potential ideas discussed included:

- Get involved with local school boards to help ensure the impact of farms and forestry are included in public education curriculum
- Efforts to educate students about the value of working forests and where our food comes from need support from this group. The infrastructure to get K-5 students on field trips to working forest/farms is in place
- Alabama has a successful Treasure Forest program where county representatives visit 5th grade classes
- Vocational agriculture programs in school systems should be a priority for team members to support
- These decisions are made at the local school board level

Agencies need an enhanced educational component that helps them understand the economic concerns of landowners.

A crash course is needed to prepare new leaders and managers to fill the shoes of those who will be retiring. Recruiting new forestry management leaders is an urgent need. We aren't effectively introducing these people to what we do. How will they learn about the policies, people and relationships?

We have some of the best forestry schools in the Southeast, but if this group doesn't support them they are going to fade away. Efforts to recruit promising students to attend forestry school need to be supported.

This group should consider establishing regional forestry intern programs. Offer to pay housing, food and expenses for a summer program to work on tree farms. It could provide low-cost staff that would nurture future growth. Remember that what works for rural students will be different for urban students. Don't assume only rural students are interested in forestry.

Could we encourage young forest landowners to network with agencies and state government or speak at future meetings?

Could Georgia's timber tax be part of a solution to some of the funding challenges discussed?



Encourage the right spirit of intent through more personal contact

A can-do spirit of cooperation is important. The importance of positive relationships in being able to take on big challenges can't be overstated. It's amazing what happens when we get to know each other and when these connections are in place.

Relationships are the key. Relationships with regional forestry commissions, NRCS, the Longleaf Alliance, American Forest Foundation and FWS are strong and improving. Relationships need to be strengthened with landowners who don't take advantage of NRCS incentive programs. More outreach is needed to broaden landowner participation.

Knowledgeable field people make a huge difference. Great researchers and biologists don't always have great people skills. Agencies will find doors open to field staff who understand the needs and expectations of private landowners and the value of collaboration.

Building personal relationships is the key to getting over challenges. As an example, the now retired manager of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge took time to make personal contact with property owners next to the refuge, to learn about their business and build personal relationships with each one of them. More of this kind of contact is needed. A little additional management training can make a big difference.

Participants need to get outside their comfort zones. Success comes from linking new communities with similar interests. Members of this group can help others get started with prescribed burning by sharing expertise and equipment. Get to know other landowners in your region. Offer expertise and assistance that helps them do their first burns safely and effectively.

Participants were challenged to attend at least one new meeting or conference to expand our circle. Doing this will bring new conservation partners together and expand knowledge of programs that are working in the region. Get to know their family connections, cultivate new relationships and be active understanding the challenges others are facing.

Participants were encouraged to know their State Foresters. Call them and find out how this group can help them.

The Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners (GOAL) has been a notable success in south Georgia and north Florida. Members use a lot of fire for property management. Managing 450,000 acres in the swamp and lightning means fire isn't an IF, but a when decision.

The Institute for Georgia Environmental Leadership is one success story where people from very different backgrounds have been brought together to work cooperatively.

The success of all these efforts is linked to trust and relationships.

Launch a cooperative pilot (e.g. black pine snake)

Landowners in Southern Mississippi and Alabama are concerned about the black pine snake being listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Across a wide area of southern Mississippi landowners are being prevented from converting from one type of forest to another.

This deserves a closer look. If there was a case for the Fish & Wildlife Service to consider they might have gotten something wrong, this might be it. A single species can drastically affect a landowner's ability to manage land. This could prevent converting forest to pasture without FWS permission. From landowner's perspective this is a significant restriction.



This clarification was offered by the FWS:

The Black Pine Snake 4(d) Rule identifies the regulatory exemptions under which consultation with the Service is not required.

Activities that convert areas planted or that have natural longleaf pine (with 51% dominance) to other habitats or cover are not exempted from consultation with the Service. This was based on the best available science on the biological needs for the species. **This does not mean that habitat cannot be converted; it only requires a consultation with the Service.**

Since what is required is a consultation with the Service, one potential solution is to develop a conservation plan for the species that includes, for example, management of Longleaf Pine (LLP), restoration of LLP and even some conversion of LLP to other habitat types.

This conservation plan could be implemented at a larger scale (e.g., watershed, state, or even at the entire species range level) and we may want to do it through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Once this plan is developed, under Endangered Species Act (ESA) authorities, the Service then can do an internal consultation on it, identify the level of potential incidental take and pass this to the people implementing the conservation plan.





“We believe encouraging more voluntary conservation will be vastly more successful than more regulation.”



The Agencies Respond

Leo Miranda FWS

We need to keep working on communication across the board. This open dialogue on what's working and what we need to improve has been great. We can't help fix problems we're not aware of. This group is a great sounding board for good ideas and getting feedback from from each of you on rules and best management practices. If we need to make some changes, we'll do it.

Consistency across programs within our agencies was a great topic to hear about. Understanding why some have great experiences and others might not is important. We need to identify the implementable action items from our priorities and jump on them quickly. This will be helpful to everyone in the room. It's a great thing for each of you to share time from your lives and businesses. It's obvious you all care. Quick actions and successes will drive momentum.

Luther Jones, USDA NRCS

I have enjoyed being here today. Thanks to the planning committee. You have put on an outstanding forum! We appreciate hearing comments from the landowners here today. We are listening and are looking for ways to improve. The timing of this discussion was excellent

because we're revising longleaf pine plans right now. I'm excited about some of the ideas that came forward. NRCS is working hard to prioritize how the funds we have are connected to great outcomes. Being able to tell the story of why we're doing what we are is important. We want to make good investments. This is helping us tell a better story. I heard very helpful recommendations today. Thanks. If you feel like you aren't getting the service you expect please let us know. There are always ways to make things better. We all need to continue the dialogue and think about how to partner more effectively to get more conservation on the ground. It's always a pleasure to be among friends. Thank you for this opportunity.

Cindy Dohner FWS

This forum has been so valuable to me. I can only do my job better by hearing your challenges and impediments. Quite a few new issues surfaced today. Thanks for the time you've taken to be here. Communication is both the problem and the solution. Some of these are quick wins. Everything we tackle needs to be in partnership with this group. Working on rule-making and incentives will only improve if you continue to be involved. Your input has been valuable to me. I hope this is just the beginning of the dialogue.



Ryan Orndorff, Department of Defense

Thanks for the invitation to be here. What we've learned implementing this program in 88 projects across 23 states is we get the best outcomes when we work in partnerships and are open about the outcomes we expect. We want programs that are attractive and amenable to landowners we're trying to work with. Working within the landscapes around our bases to identify common vision is critical. Looking at the problems we're trying to solve and aligning the right tools in the most efficient manner possible will help sustain working lands, establish corridors of connectivity and protect ecosystem services. We face statutory limitations in how we can work together and match federal funds. They're big challenges, but we aren't afraid of them. Fire, invasives and other items have and will continue to be big priorities for us. In the Southeast we are so dependent on the priorities of private landowners. We're committed to communicating, listening and being able to meet in the middle as best we can.

Bridgett Costanzo: USDA NRCS

The capacity and good will of all present and ability to share strong opinions today was very helpful. I believe in this process and I see a lot of reasons for optimism. We can achieve a lot together in the next 5-10 years for the benefit of fish and wildlife. We need to focus more on incentives and existing economic disincentives to private landowners. The ecosystem service concept still hasn't taken hold, but I see great opportunities for us to explore this as a group.

Sergio Pierluzzi, FWS

Thanks to all who came, especially landowners who took time from their families and communities. I enjoyed the opportunity to interact with old friends and new. I hope nobody questions the value of you being here. We're extremely proud of the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and what's been accomplished in the Southeast. We learned a lot today that will challenge us to do even more. Please stay involved to keep the dialogue moving. Thanks for your participation.

“We can't fix a problem if we're not aware of it. Thank you!”

Session Participants

We have a commitment to move forward with this public-private partnership to address some of the challenges discussed

Panelists

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Reese Thompson

Wesley Langdale
Judd Brooke

Rick Studenmund

Landowners

ALABAMA

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Paul Langford
Gail Jones
Doug Lurie
Jerry McAllister
Greer Radcliff
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Diane Saloom
Mark Bailey
Steve Lemay
Cal Moore
Lamar Dewberry
Felicia Dewberry
Sue Jimmerson
Dr. Robert Parker
Karen Albritton
Mike Older

COLORADO

Russell Davis

FLORIDA

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Mickey Parker

GEORGIA

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Reese Thompson, Jr.
Wesley Langdale
Ad Platt
Rick Pritchett

MISSISSIPPI

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Jim Currie

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Rick Studenmund
Sam Erby, Jr.

SOUTH CAROLINA

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Susan Polinsky
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TEXAS

Amanda Haralson



Agency/NGOs

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Boyd Christenberry

Department of
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