

Landowner manages longleaf pine with company's support

By David Beasley

WEDNESDAY, JULY 20, 2016 - Reese Thompson's South Georgia farm looks much as it did hundreds of years ago, with stands of longleaf pines and a teeming habitat of gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, bobwhite quail, wild flowers and a vast assortment of other plants and animals on the forest floor.

The Wheeler County land has been in Thompson's family for six generations and he has kept much of it in longleaf pines, which once covered what is now the southern United States.



Reese Thompson on his longleaf pine tree farm in Wheeler County.

"This is my slice of heaven," said Thompson, 62, a former board member of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and owner of several thousand acres south of the town of Glenwood.

He shows a visitor a stand of longleafs with some trees that are more than a century old. Native wiregrass covers the ground, providing food for the gopher tortoises that burrow deep into the sandy soil. The burrows in turn provide homes for indigo snakes and dozens of other forms of wildlife.



Watch a video of Reese Thompson talk about his longleaf pine tree farm.

Beneath the longleafs, insect-eating pitcher plants thrive as do colorful wildflowers and other plants.

It would be much easier for Thompson to clear-cut the longleafs and plant other species of trees such as slash, loblolly or sand pine as many farmers have. But those trees, which are not native to this dry, sandy site, have more branches than longleafs, blocking sunlight and killing the wiregrass, leaving no home for the amazingly diverse ecosystem on the ground, including the gopher tortoise and indigo, now classified as threatened species.

"I could come in here, clear cut all this and get my hands on some quick cash, maybe go to the beach for a couple of years and enjoy the good life," Thompson said. "But then, what would I have?"

Thompson still manages to operate his farm profitably by thinning his longleafs but not clear-cutting them, harvesting pine straw from some of the younger stands, and leasing some of his acreage to a hunting club.

Commodity vs. community

Over the years, Thompson's view of land management has been transformed. He sees trees not as just a commodity but as part of a community that includes other plants and animals.

Georgia Power wildlife biologist Jim Ozier, who formerly held a similar position with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, helped shape Thompson's vision for his land.

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Longleaf pine *continued*



Longleaf pine

While still at DNR, Ozier was visiting Thompson to monitor a single remaining red-cockaded woodpecker. While following the endangered bird through the open pines they spotted a large diamondback rattler easing toward a tortoise burrow. Reese killed the snake out of concern for his own safety.

"Why did you do that?" Ozier asked him, stressing the snake's importance to the ecosystem and the very low probability of anyone being bitten. Thompson has never killed another snake.

On another occasion, Thompson was stunned when a biologist with the National Wild Turkey Federation counted 30 different plants species in a single square meter of his property.

"For many landowners, trees are just a crop," Ozier said. "On most pine plantations you have pine trees and you have virtually nothing living on the ground. It's a wildlife desert."

Significant support for Longleaf Stewardship Fund

Thompson has taken a different and much more valuable approach to his land and Georgia Power applauds the effort, Ozier said.

Georgia Power also manages stands of longleaf pines on its property, including at Plant Vogtle near Augusta.

In addition, Southern Company provides significant financial support to the Longleaf Stewardship Fund, administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. A grant from the LSF program helped establish a Fort Stewart/Altamaha River area longleaf conservation effort that assists landowners with planting and prescribed burning to help restore the longleaf system. Thompson participates in this program.

"Georgia Power is one of the largest private land owners in the state and our motto is to be a citizen wherever we serve," Ozier said. "In addition to providing reliable, affordable electricity, we have a stewardship role, taking care of the environment. Part of being a good neighbor is being a good steward of natural resources."

Effort is worth the hard work

Properly maintaining a longleaf forest can require a lot of work, which is why many farmers opt for the easier option of planting other types of pines.

Controlled burns each year keep the longleaf forest floor healthy, and longleafs withstand the fire much better than other tree species. But burning is a hot, hard job that can be a liability for a landowner if the fire spreads to another farmer's land or if smoke causes traffic accidents. For that reason, the state issues permits for burns only on days when the weather conditions are safe. The effort is worth it, Thompson said.

The fire stimulates the wiregrass and it will eventually be chest high and golden brown.

"It will look like a prairie out here, with some trees," Thompson said.

A giant oak snake slivers through the forest. Reese walks over to admire a patch of carnivorous pitcher plants, then wildflowers with their blue, purple and red blossoms.

"It's a truly unique treasure," Thompson said. "We're losing pristine areas like this. And once we lose them, they're never coming back."



Longleaf pine forest on Thompson's land.