



# THE LONGLEAF LEADER

## GROWING A LEGACY

### A WORKING FOREST FOR THE LONG RUN

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**COVER** Longleaf pinecone in a longleaf stand that is used for pinestraw production in South Carolina. Photo by Casey White.

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By Kent Evans, Coordinator Texas Longleaf Implementation Team

# LANDOWNER SPOTLIGHT

## MIKE HOWARD

Ten years ago, Mike Howard began acquiring land in Sabine County, Texas in the footprint of the historic range of the longleaf pine ecosystem. Mike first bought a 1000-acre tract of cut-over and unmanaged land along the western edge of Toledo Bend Reservoir. With a history of commercial timber production, the land had lost its longleaf pine 50 years earlier and had little history of controlled fire. After the last commercial harvest the land had been allowed to grow up into a tangled thicket typical of unmanaged lands. That is when it went up for sale and caught Mike's attention. He had a vision of what the native habitats were in this part of east Texas and knew he could make a difference. Thus Mike began the labor of restoring those forest

communities to the land which is now known as Clear Creek Ranch. Even though much of the land was covered in thickets of yaupon, Mike recognized the potential to restore the variety of habitats on the land, from the low hardwood creek bottoms to the high sandy upland hills. Over time, several contiguous tracts were added to the original purchase and now stands at approximately 2500 acres. With the creative use of herbicides, mechanical treatments, and fire, the original forest composition and structure are quickly recovering.

Mike sought advice from state and federal agencies on restoring longleaf to the uplands on the property. In the process of planting over 1,100 acres to longleaf, he utilized a variety of farm bill programs and technical assistance through the Texas A&M Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). He also became partners with those agency staff and hosted numerous youth groups, landowners, and resource professionals on the land where they could learn from and share the processes in restoring part of the longleaf ecosystem. Mike is hosting a



*Mike Howard speaking to landowner group during field day. Photo by Kent Evans.*

TPWD growth and yield study to compare growth rates of loblolly and longleaf in the Longleaf Ridge area. Mike is keenly interested in seeing the wildlife response to the restoration process and has enlisted the help of TPWD which monitors the response of the Bachman's sparrow, a state listed species of concern, through annual bird count surveys. The richly diverse herbaceous growth also has attracted a response from the native eastern wild turkey and bobwhite quail. Mature trees along the shores of Toledo Bend Reservoir host nesting bald eagles. Beaver and river otter frequent the streams on the property. The deer herd is managed through the state's Level 3 Deer Management Program and Mike joins many other Texans in a year round control effort of feral hogs.

Mike maintains a busy, full-time legal practice in Houston and is an avid woodworker recognized for the amazing restoration work done to the 100-year-old house that serves as his law office. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the law offices contain some touches from longleaf lumber Mike repurposed into cabinets and furniture collected from a dilapidated Texas coastal cottage. He invests much of his "spare time" in east Texas on the farm. There you can see his hands-on management style carried out on the forest. He runs his own dozer and serves as the burn boss on prescribed fires to keep a two-year rotational burn on the longleaf. Mike, with his family and friends burn an average of 1,000 acres a year. He is an advocate of land owner burning and has contributed his perspective on burning in Texas at local workshops.

In addition to providing the Clear Creek Ranch longleaf stands with the critical natural function of regular fire, the land provides another critical ecological function, connectivity, for





*Young longleaf. Photo by Kent Evans.*



*Recently burned longleaf stand. Photo by Kent Evans.*

the longleaf forests in Sabine County. Along two sides of the property is the Sabine National Forest's "Foxhunt Tract." This 2400 acre tract is a functioning example of a mature longleaf forest with a regular fire regimen and contains many of the classic components of the system including red-cockaded woodpeckers, pitcher plant bogs, and a diverse herbaceous understory. However, for at least 40 years, the national forest tract has been isolated by more than 5 miles from the next nearest longleaf stands. As Mike sustains longleaf and fire over time, the management of his 2,500 acres will almost double the size of the adjacent National Forest longleaf stand.

Mike's passion to restore these lands has not gone unrecognized. In 2009 Mike was awarded the Certified Forest Steward Award for his unique efforts, followed in 2011 by the



*Tools of the trade. Photo by Kent Evans.*

and his effective advocacy. And a vital piece of the longleaf ecosystem is being restored to health and productivity.

prestigious Texas Lone Star Land Stewardship Award in creating wildlife habitat from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Because more than 94 percent of Texas is privately owned or operated, private landowners are the key to effective wildlife habitat management in the state. Mike Howard provides a powerful example to other private landowners through his "hands-on" management



## New Longleaf Orchard Underway in Texas

*By Tom Byram, West Gulf Coastal Plain Tree Improvement Project, Texas A&M Forest Service Geneticist*



*One-year-old longleaf graft in the Texas A&M Forest Service's new seed orchard at the Magnolia Springs Seed Orchard. TFS employees are for seed production. Photo (L-R) Randall Clark, Wes Morehead, and Arthur Nichols. Photo by Texas A&M Forest Service.*

*Longleaf progeny test recently thinned on the Masterson State Forest (Newton Co., TX) to leave only the best individuals would not be contaminated with seed from other species. Photo by Texas A&M Forest Service.*

*Planting a stand of bluestem grass acquired from the NRCS East Texas Plant Materials Center as a future seed source. Extensive site preparation was conducted to ensure that the seed*

Seed source matters and one of the best sources for western sourced longleaf pine will be from the seed orchard recently grafted at the Texas A&M Forest Service's Magnolia Seed Orchard in Jasper Co. (Photo 1). The trees in this orchard were selected from individuals that survived a rigorous multiple-step screening process. First, seed was collected from approximately 580 individual trees from local stands throughout the Western Gulf Region (TX, LA, and MS). In a second step, seedlings from these trees were field tested for survival, brown spot resistance and early height growth. Then, only seedlings from the top 50% of all families were further evaluated for growth rate and form in a second round of long-term tests. Finally, after 15-20 years of observation, only the best 20 to 30 individuals from the best families are being grafted in the TFS orchard where in eight to ten years they will supply local landowners with genetically improved seed for this important species.

But we know you may not be able to wait that long. In the meantime, there are two other ways to access closely related seed. The first is from the seedling seed orchards originally established by the Mississippi Forestry Commission (now collected by the USFS) and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (availability of seed from this location is unknown given that the State of Louisiana recently shuttered their tree improvement program). Both these orchards were established with seedlings from the top 50% of the families from the short-term tests described above and then thinned to leave only the best- looking individuals to produce cones. The second source of seed may come from a project initiated this year by the TFS. One of the long-term progeny tests located on the Masterson State Forest in Newton Co., TX was thinned to leave only the best trees for cone and seed production (Photo 2). This area will supply only a small part of the regional seed demand and then only after the crowns develop more fully as they respond to the sudden openings the thinning created. Trees from thinned progeny tests have lower standards for selection and will be intermediate in genetic gain between local seed production areas (SPA) and seed orchards.

The Texas A&M Forest Service is also supporting two other initiatives. The first is to locate and preserve up to 100 trees from local stands to safeguard this resource. This is being done in conjunction with the states of Florida and Georgia that are also preserving selections from their local populations. Our trees will be grafted at Magnolia Springs Seed Orchard and exchanged with the other states as insurance against catastrophic loss from such events as hurricanes. A new project for the agency involves establishing a stand of little bluestem grass to be managed for seed production for this important component of the longleaf pine ecosystem (Photo 3). This project uses a variety of bluestem grass selected by the NRCS East Texas Plant Materials Center staff in Nacogdoches, TX from bluestem collected in Texas and Louisiana. So not only can the longleaf trees be from local populations, the bluestem grass established as an understory can also be from local sources!