



# LONGLEAF REHAB IN SECTION 16:

## *The Story of Baldwin State Forest*

*By Madeline W. Hildreth, Escambia County Forester  
Alabama Forestry Commission*

**W**hen Alabama became a state, the section numbered “16” in every township was granted to the area for the use of schools. Many of these sections were later sold or exchanged. In 1939, the State Commission of Forestry acquired a portion of Section 16 land from Baldwin County through a land exchange. According to documents, the governor was Bibb Graves and the state forester was Page S. Bunker. This was the beginning of the Alabama Forestry Commission’s association of an isolated tract of land in south Baldwin County.

### **Down and Out in LA (Lower Alabama)**

Baldwin State Forest, as the tract was known, was often a forgotten parcel of land. The isolated location of the tract, coupled with Forestry Commission personnel’s other priorities made management difficult . . . the frequency and intensity of wildfires in the county often left little time for managing the state forest.

Over the years however, attempts were made to properly manage the remote tract. In 1979 some of the timber was sold, but before harvest began, Hurricane Frederick ripped through the state. The area was significantly altered and a salvage cut was required in addition to the original harvest. Ten years later, the forest was cut to a shelterwood. After a clearcut in 1995, a stand remained naturally regenerating in longleaf. Following a prescribed burn, the stand was left, mostly unmanaged and forgotten. Local Commission employees were occupied with other projects, including wildfires and subsequent hurricanes.

### **Salvation and Rehab**

Fast forward to 2010... a sagging economy was bolstered by federal grants. The Alabama Forestry Commission partnered with the Longleaf Alliance to take advantage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant money. This was to be the salvation for Baldwin State Forest. The goal of the grant was to highlight the longleaf forest and use the area for educating the public. Soon a plan was designed to promote longleaf pine growth through proper management practices. Slowly,

the state forest was to emerge as both a template for managing longleaf pine in this region, as well as an educational tool for all ages to enjoy.

Upon surveying the remote area, the Longleaf Alliance knew there was much work to be done. Before any management practices could be implemented, the roads had to be re-worked. Years of neglect coupled with wet areas made access nearly non-existent. In some places, six inches of water covered the road. Once the ditches were refurbished, roads were crowned, and turnouts were established, water was able to flow across the road without creating erosion problems.

There are two distinct areas on the forest. With years of little management and natural disasters shaping the forest, the east side fared the best. This area has a decent stand of pine, and invasive plants are manageable. The west side of the forest, seriously damaged by a 2003 wildfire, had become overrun with many nonnative plant species. Heavily infested with cogongrass, Japanese climbing fern and tallow tree were also present.

The Alabama Forestry Commission established exterior firelines around the property. Contractors established interior lines, mulched some of the areas with heavy underbrush, and conducted prescribed burns. Because of the intensity of fires due to cogongrass infestation, the area was burned in small compartments. When reintroducing fire on a site that has not been burned, hot spots are inevitable, especially in a closed canopy. The buildup of heat is very intense in these situations and can cause tree mortality. The first burn was extremely intense, and there were many hot spots. The west side had less damage from the prescribed burning simply because the 2003 wildfire had destroyed most of the canopy.

The Longleaf Alliance took advantage of the damaged areas, about 10 acres total scattered over the east side. Though not originally planned, when the project came in under budget, additional demonstrations were planned. One spot, approximately two acres, was planted in late June of 2010 with containerized longleaf. This area, demonstrating the possibility of planting with minimal site prep, had over 50 percent survival.

*(Continued on page 10)*



## LONGLEAF REHAB IN SECTION 16

*(Continued from page 9)*

The decision was made to use another open area to plant native grasses. This endeavor would help decide how to plant these species and see which species worked best. The area was prepared and planted with 13 different species. When asked what had been learned from the demonstration, Anne Rilling with the Longleaf Alliance replied, “Be patient! It takes time!” Plans are to continue monitoring this site for further results.

A boardwalk and an educational pavilion were also built on the property. Adjacent to the pavilion stands a kiosk giving visitors a brief history into both the ups and downs of the state forest.

### Realization of a Dream

In May of 2013, the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Longleaf Alliance, and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System showcased the new state forest to local landowners as well as local foresters in the area. Highlighting the practices initiated by the ARRA grant, the tour allowed the public to see the facility and appreciate the complexity of the longleaf environment. This event also presented an opportunity to honor two extraordinary individuals.

In 1995, Rhett Johnson and Dean Gjerstad had a vision. These Auburn University forestry colleagues dreamed of a group of people working together to manage and restore the longleaf ecosystem across the South. Through their efforts and dedication, these two individuals created national interest in longleaf forests and established the Longleaf Alliance. As restoration of this fascinating species began throughout the southeast region of the United States, their dream slowly became a reality.

An example of this restoration and a tribute to the success of a dream can now be seen at Baldwin State Forest. Through the efforts of numerous agencies working together, the forest is now a restored longleaf ecosystem. This tract of land – once an eye sore due to hurricanes and years of poor management – has now become the poster child for longleaf pine and the habitat it creates for many other species of plants and animals.

Just as the state forest has evolved, so, too, has the landscape across the South. Areas that were once totally neglected or managed with no regard for wildlife are now stately stands of longleaf. Dean Gjerstad and Rhett Johnson have seen their dream

fulfilled. Quite fittingly, the state forest was renamed in honor of the two people who have worked tirelessly to restore the longleaf ecosystem. The newly designated “Johnson-Gjerstad State Forest” stands as a shining example of what is possible when people work together to achieve a common goal. ♣

