

Georgia Forestry Commission News

Georgia's Forestry Industry had an increased impact on the state's economy between 2004 and 2005, according to statistics contained in a new Georgia Institute of Technology report. Figures cited in *Economic Benefits of the Forestry Industry in Georgia: 2005* show the state's forestry industry in 2005 had an output of \$16.1 billion, a 14% increase over 2004. The total impact of the forestry industry last year in Georgia, including its corresponding economic effect on local communities, was \$26 billion. Respective increases were recorded in compensation to employees and proprietors.

"It is good news," said Robert Farris, Interim Director of the Georgia Forestry Commission. "It indicates the industry is stable and responding to the economy."

The report shows Georgia's forestry industry paid \$3.4 billion in compensation in 2005, a four percent increase over 2004 levels, while employment stayed stable at 67,694 persons. The forestry industry ranks second in Georgia behind food processing, when considering compensation to employees and proprietors. Forestry ranks third behind textiles and food processing when considering number of employees.

Forestry activities result in \$591 million in taxes and other payments to Georgia's state budget.



A new initiative has been launched to expand Georgia's longleaf pine forests. The Conservation Reserve Program's (CRP) Longleaf Pine Initiative seeks to increase longleaf pine forests by 250,000 acres throughout nine states, including Georgia. Over the past 100 years, longleaf pine forest acreage in the South has decreased from 60 million acres to less than four million acres. The initiative's primary purpose is to re-establish longleaf pine stands at densities that benefit wildlife species and protect water quality.

To be eligible for the CRP Initiative, landowners' acreage must be in the historic National Longleaf Pine Conservation Priority Area, and be capable of being restored to a viable ecosystem. Eligible landowners may apply for the new continuous practice, CP36, for longleaf planting. Enrollment began in December, 2006 at local FSA offices and will continue until December 31, 2007 or until the 250,000 acre goal is met. For more information, visit www.fsa.usda.gov.

Prescribed Fire Awareness Week is observed in Georgia February 4-10, 2007. An official proclamation signed by Governor Sonny Perdue recognizes prescribed fire as a valuable and necessary forest management tool that is protected by the Georgia Prescribed Burning Act of 1992. The Proclamation congratulates land managers who "protect and maintain Georgia's natural heritage for present and future generations."



Hemlock woolly adelgids infest north Georgia trees.

GFC Professionals in the Gainesville District are assisting in the effort to eliminate the destructive hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). GFC Rangers are helping scientists at the University of Georgia's new predator insect rearing laboratory in Athens by transporting infested branches to the lab for predator feedings. The newly-hatched predator insects, a species which occurs naturally in the Pacific Northwest, will start being released in north Georgia this winter. It is hoped they will begin attacking the HWA, which has invaded about 100,000 acres of the 250,000 acres in Georgia in which hemlock naturally occurs. Trees that are attacked for more than five years are likely to decline to the point where death is likely. GFC has joined with a number of state, federal and private entities to raise support for the lab and to combat the insect. GFC Professionals say releasing these predators on a landscape scale is the best hope for minimizing the impacts of HWA and for saving native eastern and Carolina hemlocks.



Prescribed Fire - Valued Tool of the Trade at Gully Branch

Earl and Wanda enjoy the sights, sounds, and serenity of Gully Branch during every season.

It is a crisp winter morning and Earl and Wanda Barrs have been up since before dawn. Radio, TV and computer weather reports, along with a quick step outside, tentatively confirm their expectations: today would be a good day to start the fires on Gully Branch.

"There are very few days in a year that are good burn days," said Earl Barrs, owner of the 1500 acre Bleckley County property that takes its name from a branch of Gully Creek. "Prescribed burning is really an art and you can get in trouble when you push it. Fire can get away from you. But it is our number one forest management tool here at Gully Branch."

Barrs said he is known among his peers as a "burning fool," a moniker he only half-heartedly disputes. He and his wife, Wanda, have realized so many benefits from years of burning on their land, that he might also be labeled the "poster child" for prescribed, or "silvicultural" burning.

Silvicultural burning, both understory and reforestation burning, accounts for

By Stasia Kelly, Georgia Forestry Commission



The American Tree Farm System and BASF Corporation have awarded Gully-Branch owners, Earl and Wanda Barrs, the "Outstanding Achievement in Sustainable Forestry Award."

treatments on an estimated 900,000 Georgia acres per year. Approximately 21,000 burn permits were issued by the Georgia Forestry Commission in calendar year 2005, with the average size prescribed burn at about 45 acres. Land owners use prescribed burns to reduce dangerous accumulations of forest fuels, control unwanted tree species, enhance wildlife habitat, and bring life back to fire adapted ecosystems. Often, prescribed burning can lead to increased income from the forest. Hunters will pay more per acre to lease well managed properties and producers will pay more when proper burning regimes improve access to timber.

While the sale of hunting rights is not a practice conducted at Gully Branch, the attraction of wildlife most certainly is. Barrs says their primary property management goals are to host wildlife and grow timber. They also strive to preserve the property's aesthetics. For two decades, they've been working diligently to support those goals, which have their roots in family.

"My grandfather and great grandfather were born out here on this land," Earl said. "They didn't own it, but they share-cropped

on the property. In the 1930s, it was offered to my grandfather for nine bales of cotton, but he couldn't afford to pay taxes on it. I was finally able to acquire 400 plus acres of the original property in 1986 and over the years have added on to where we are today."

Gully Branch exemplifies a model southern Georgia plantation and "working forest," with a spectrum of life that conveys the property's natural rhythms and cycles. One hundred foot natural loblolly pines stand guard near planted short leaf pine and fields of crimson and wheat clover. In fall, piles of harvesting waste wait for pick up, while skidder trails await filling and water-bar construction. A 100-year old heirloom pear tree grows next to an abandoned cabin. Maple, sassafras and yellow poplar dot the landscape. Year-round, giant cypresses crag-gily rise from Reedy Creek. Deer of different size and spot configurations bound just beyond one's line of sight, setting off the whoop of birds nearby. In the pond, mammoth grass carp stretch for another bite overhead.

While one might be tempted to fully credit Mother Nature for these postcard-worthy sights and sounds, the Barrs' want

their visitors to know that planning and execution helped bring about Gully Branch's success. For more than a century, people have had a hand in enhancing its bounty. Wanda Barrs is a former Middle School teacher and is currently Georgia's State Board of Education Chair. She is passionate about providing Georgia children with a realistic look at Forestry, which she and Earl generously offer up at Gully Branch. A myriad of tree-packed trails, wildlife, streams and two ponds teeming with catfish and carp wow even the most dubious youngster. A newly-constructed pavilion with a giant stacked stone fireplace and over-water deck seals the deal.

"We average about 800 children a year who come here on field trips," said Wanda Barrs. "Pre-K kids and fifth graders come out with their teachers and their parents, and I love sharing this with both children and adults. For a lot of them, it's the first time they've seen up close what a working forest really is. They learn about sustainability, wood products, and the relationship between the wet and the forested areas." It is also the first time most have heard the words "prescribed burning." On tours of



Specific wind, humidity, temperature and other conditions must be met before prescribed burning can be conducted by landowners.

the property they can see land in various stages of post-burn regeneration and hear first-hand about the benefits controlled burns can provide.

"We burn between January and March," said Wanda. "When the students visit in April, they can see where that's taken place, and they can understand how it opens up the forest. And of course we bring in Smokey Bear to impress the importance of fire safety to younger students."

But, according to Earl Barrs, Smokey may have done "too good of a job" in years past, with some of his older audiences.

"Lots of the newer land owners don't understand the benefits of fire," said Barrs. "They haven't learned about how wildlife flourishes when prescribed fire is used in the right way." He said the main thing land owners need to know is to seek professional advice in setting their management goals and, especially, in burn planning. "Fire is unpredictable and people will do foolish things. Safety is a huge issue, and smoke scares me more than fire. If the wind shifts, smoke can cover a highway and cause accidents. You just can't take chances."

On this brisk January morning, Wanda and Earl have triple checked their to-do lists. They've contacted their local GFC Ranger for a burn permit and confirmed all weather factors are acceptable. That includes in-stand wind speeds between three and five miles per hour; 30-55% humidity; temperature below 60 degrees Fahrenheit; proper moisture levels in upper soil layers (Keetch-Byram Drought Index); and appropriate smoke manage-

ment factors such as the Dispersion Index, Mixing Height and Transport Wind Speed. But the ground work for this burn was actually laid years ago.

"We wrote our first Forest Stewardship plan back in the early '90s," said Earl, a University of Georgia School of Forestry graduate who owns the forestry consulting and real estate firm, Knapp-Barrs and Associates, Inc. "We knew that we wanted to attract the wildlife, keep the beauty and manage the timber. We worked real hard on fire breaks. Over the years about 75% of the land has been burned."

Barrs said their first prescribed burn required five hands on deck. Each successive year, however, new growth is reduced by burns, keeping woody plants "knocked

back." Earl is also a proponent of the use of chemicals to supplement burns and keep the undergrowth in check. With that method, subsequent control burns require fewer assistants, he said.

"After 18 years, Wanda and I have all the tools to handle a hundred acre burn. We have our own equipment and water tanks. We've got a regimen. Safety is huge."

With three family members serving back-up and Duke, the family dog, watching from the pickup bed, Wanda and Earl set out with their drip torches to begin the day's work. Each mapped line of fire is carefully executed, and walkie-talkies crackle messages between the couple. Flames lap at the tinder with a rich crackle and the smoke rises and disperses according to plan. The fire is welcome warmth against Georgia's January chill. By mid-afternoon, the tract is transformed to a darkened swath of natural debris. A cycle ends. A cycle begins anew.

"When we bought the property, it was quiet as could be out here. Not a covey of quail to be found. Now, you walk the property and you hear all kinds of wildlife. It's working. We've attracted quail, turkey, nesting birds, fox squirrels, and deer. No one but family and friends hunt here, so there's no pressure," said Earl.

"A lot of people visit here and think this is virgin forest," added Wanda. "But there's much more here now than there was when we arrived. This is a hard working forest." ☞



Wanda Barrs handles backfire duties on a portion of the prescribed burn.