

Another Conservation Success Story...

Pierce County, Georgia

December 2008

Partnering for Conservation

In October 2006, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) unveiled a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Longleaf Pine Initiative. The new CRP practice, CP-36, was created to help re-establish longleaf pine and the native ground cover that accompanies this ecosystem.

Approximately 60,000 acres of CP-36 were enrolled in middle and south Georgia where there are crop fields best suited for this practice. Under the CP-36 practice, the longleaf pines are planted in rows spaced 12 feet apart and the areas between the rows are planted to native grasses. When established, the native grasses provide excellent wildlife habitat and fuel to carry a fire—the preferred management strategy for longleaf pine stands.

This past January, the Seven Rivers Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Council entered into a partnership with FDC Enterprises to educate CP-36 participants about native grass installation and offer them options for native grass installation services. By combining their efforts, the Council and FDC Enterprises have put together a program that has resulted in excellent public outreach and conservation on the ground.

"We saw an opportunity for our service in this area. We did some workshops and talked to Seven Rivers about their education and outreach and found that it would be a great partnership opportunity for us and landowners looking to learn more about native grass establishment and the services available to them," said Tom Schwartz, a certified wildlife biologist for FDC Enterprises.

"Last January we went for a visit to see what FDC Enterprises was doing in other regions" said Eugene Dyal, treasurer, for the Seven Rivers RC&D Council. The Council

liked what it saw. "What we saw met the needs of the Council and the needs of the people in the area. We have a good feeling about our partnership. We were a little disappointed in public participation but this is Seven Rivers' first year in this partnership and we are successful for what we did. It's a good thing for our farming community," said Dyal.

The landowner, Eddie Bennett, one of the first landowners to use the service provided by the Seven Rivers RC&D and FDC Enterprises, lives on his family farm that has been in the family for 80 years. But he says he has not been actively farming. "I have not been actively participating in farming for the past 15 years. My brother and father farmed up until about 5 years ago when my brother passed away. After my brother passed away, I leased land to a local farmer for a few years," he said.

Bennett had a dream of restoring the quail population to what it was years ago. "I have always dreamed of having a quail population like when I was growing up. I have fond memories of quail hunting 30 years ago," he said.

"I had been hearing about some state and federal programs over the past few years that were aimed at improving quail populations in the southeast and this caught my interest. I contacted my USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) representative and he informed me of the longleaf pine and the bobwhite quail initiative. The programs were exactly what I had been looking for," Bennett added.

Bennett believes he is on the right road to restoring the quail population. "We have everything planted now in longleaf and native warm season grasses and I truly believe we are on the road to restoring our quail. I think this a great program that will benefit our future generations."

The native grass portion of the CP-36 program consists of planting a number of grasses and wildflowers that are beneficial for wildlife and are necessary for the proper function of the



Dane Smith, soil conservationist for the NRCS in Blackshear, stands in one of the fields shortly after planting this past spring. The main picture is the same field in August.

longleaf pine ecosystem. "There is a four species' mix of native grasses planted which include big bluestem, Indian grass, little bluestem, and switch grass and a pound of wildflower seed," said Schwartz.

Schwartz says the grasses are important because, "they are used for fuel to carry fire—longleaf pine need to periodically be burned in order to promote growth and cut down on the competition from other trees and plants." The CP-36 is a cost-share practice that pays up to 90% of the cost of installation. "The folks that sign up for a CP-36 practice are actually receiving 50% cost-share to have the practice planted plus a practice incentive payment, which is another 40% to pay for the installation. So virtually 90% of the costs are paid for by the federal government," said Schwartz.

"I think this a great program that will benefit our future generations"—Eddie Bennett

The landowners get several benefits for enrolling in CRP. "For taking their land out of production, they get an annual payment based on the soil productivity for the life of the contract of either 10 or 15 years," said Schwartz.

"They are getting an annual payment for adding the land into this program instead of putting crops on that same property," he added. "Also the eco-system that is created provides for quail, turkey, deer and other wildlife associated with that eco-system. That's part of the purpose of putting those grasses with the pines."



Tom Schwartz shows Stan Moore, coordinator for the Seven Rivers RC&D Council, the differences in the four species of grasses planted this past spring.

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