

Hurricanes, Longleaf Pine, and Gopher Tortoise: One Landowner Family's Solution

By Michael Older, Registered Forester, Alabama Forestry Commission

Gopher tortoise, whitetail deer, turkey, and longleaf pine have been a common denominator for most of the sandhills ecosystem located throughout south Alabama. Agriculture, changing timber industry, and urban sprawl have had and will continue to have effects on this declining ecosystem. However, Phillip and Gail Jones are doing their part in re-establishing the sandhills characteristics on their property located in Covington County. Their efforts have resulted in the Joneses being selected as the 2009 Southern Region Helene Moseley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award winners.

Phillip and Gail inherited the 166-acre property from Gail's parents.

They have now owned and managed the property for over twenty years. Gail and her sister, Elaine, grew up on the farm and can remember when they had cattle, grew bahia grass that was harvested for seed, and produced other row crops. Most of the property was cropland planted in loblolly pine in the late 1980s, while some was clearcut and regenerated in loblolly during the same time frame.

As with a lot of landowners, timber management starts out as the primary objective, but as they own the property longer and get exposed to different benefits of multiple use management and steward-



ship, many other attributes begin to share the focus of the primary objective. Wildlife, recreation, aesthetics, and education have become nearly equal to the timber management. At the time the property was planted, loblolly pine was the normal regeneration practice. As the first thinning time period was approaching, Phillip attended a forest management program sponsored by the Covington County Forestry Committee at LBW College in Andalusia. While at the program, Phillip was introduced to a local consultant forester that would provide the expertise to take the Joneses' objectives and ideas

and turn them into practices not just for economical returns but for the whole TREASURE Forest concept. The planted pine was marked and thinned to provide openings to the forest canopy, poorly stocked areas were clearcut, additional wildlife openings were created, firelines were established, and a burning program begun. The clearcut area was planted in longleaf pine. The Joneses recognized that longleaf was the species that belonged on their property, offering numerous wildlife benefits and other attributes for which they were looking.

Phillip and Gail were thrilled to have a new look to their farm with the active management taking place. Then along came Hurricane Ivan. The property suffered major damage, some of the worst in Covington County. The well-spaced thinning took a

direct hit with over 50 percent damage, and one area suffered total damage from a spinoff tornado. While some may have thrown in the white towel and admitted defeat, the Joneses wiped away the tears and went back to work with their consultant to find a solution. What was jointly decided was to salvage the damaged trees and plant longleaf pine. The tornado-damaged area was clearcut and replanted with longleaf, while in the lesser-damaged area (30-40 square feet of basal area remaining) the severely damaged trees were harvested and longleaf pine planted underneath, creating a two-species, two-aged stand. The simple solution would have been to clearcut the entire property and start over. Their solution instead retained the aesthetics of a forest, provided for future timber productivity with pine regeneration, and greatly benefited wildlife including the gopher tortoise.

Gail has fond memories of growing up on the property. One recollection is that of keeping a pet gopher tortoise during the summer months while out of school. Her father drilled a small hole on the shell skirt and attached a long cord so it could move around the yard freely. She can remember riding on the back of the tortoise. Her fondness of gopher tortoise has played a role in the current management of the property where longleaf pine, openly spaced trees, and wildlife openings all benefit the growing gopher tortoise population. The Joneses have located most

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TREASURE Forest landowners Phillip and Gail Jones inspect a gopher tortoise burrow with AFC Forester Mike Older.



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of the gopher tortoise burrows with a global positioning device to prevent damage during any future management activities.

While the gopher tortoise is a species of interest to the Joneses, they have enhanced other wildlife habitat. A larger wildlife opening was established, numerous fruit and mast trees were planted using tree shelters for protection, and two ponds and a streamside management zone provide water resources. The prescribed burning program has included winter and growing-season burns. The last growing season burn released a large crop of partridge pea across the property that quail and turkey dined on.

Phillip is a public accountant that has a special interest in forestry, and Gail is a semi-retired educator. The house in which Gail grew up is now used as a retreat to spend time together, as well as to host numerous groups, tours, and educational programs. Hunting is a recreation enjoyed by Phillip and friends. However, the greatest recreational benefit is the enjoyment of managing and working on the property. In addition to the natural setting, they have a small pasture where they keep miniature horses and goats. Fruit trees, grape vines, and vegetable gardens are maintained for human consumption as well as the local wildlife that claim their share.



Through their land ownership journey, they have



obtained advice and information from local resource professionals such as the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Longleaf Alliance, the Natural Resource and Conservation Service, and others. They have used cost-share assistance to help offset some of the management expense. They became members of the Covington County Forestry Committee and leaders in the Covington County TREASURE Forest Chapter, as well as mentored other family members and friends along the way. They assist Gail's sister, Elaine, in managing her portion of the family property. And the circle will continue with their daughter, Alexis, a TV reporter in Birmingham becoming more interested in being the next generation steward of the family farm. 🏡

