



America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative Longleaf Partnership Council

2014 Range-wide Accomplishment Report Executive Summary



Angelina National Forest, credit
Clay Ware

Longleaf pine forests once covered 90 million acres from Virginia to Texas, but, for a variety of reasons, longleaf acreage declined to roughly 3 million acres by the 1990s. These forests provide critical habitat for a large number of native plants and animals, provide valuable economic opportunities for landowners, and are well adapted and more resistant to catastrophic loss from fire, storm events, and forest pests. In addition, longleaf forests offer compatible land uses for military training and testing

that are important to national defense. Diverse public and private partners began working to restore longleaf pine forests back to the southern landscape in the 1980s and are continuing at an even larger scale today. These efforts have halted the century-long decline in longleaf pine and have resulted in increased acreage of longleaf over the past decade.



Pitcher plants on The Nature Conservancy's Splinter Hill Bog Preserve near Perdido, Alabama, credit Clay Ware.

The *Range-wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine* (Conservation Plan) was released in 2009 and established an ambitious goal to increase longleaf pine forests to eight million acres and improve the condition of existing longleaf pine forests. Since the release of the Conservation Plan, a strong partnership of agencies and organizations has coalesced around longleaf conservation in an effort referred to as the America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative (ALRI). In 2011, the Longleaf Partnership Council formed to provide the overall leadership for ALRI and provide a forum for communication among the partners. ALRI reached a milestone in 2014 with the 5th year anniversary of the Conservation Plan, and successes achieved to date serve to invigorate and propel our collective efforts forward.

Achieving the ambitious restoration goals of the Conservation Plan requires maintaining extraordinary levels of on-the-ground work. This *2014 Range-wide Accomplishment Report* communicates the restoration work collectively accomplished by the many partners in ALRI. This is the second annual range-wide comprehensive look at the restoration work to bring back the iconic longleaf pine forest to the South. Using the framework of the ALRI *Strategic Priorities and Actions 2013-2015* document, this report illustrates the scale of on-the-ground work occurring, demonstrates how public and private funds are being leveraged, and measures the progress toward achieving the eight million acre longleaf restoration goal identified in the Conservation Plan.

Findings

The various public and private sector partners involved in ALRI accomplished over 1.55 million acres of on-the-ground activities to further the conservation of longleaf pine in 2014. An estimated \$118 million of public and private funds were utilized to implement these activities, which included tree planting, prescribed burning, mid-story treatments, invasive species control, native understory plant establishment, over-story treatments, and land acquisitions/easements. The reported accomplishments in 2014 are an increase of around 13% from 2013 totals, although part of this success can be attributed to improved reporting from the involved partners.

Remarkably, the number of Local Implementation Teams expanded to 17, which now provides coverage to all 18 of the identified Significant Geographic Areas (SGAs) across the range. These expanded teams and their members will generate even greater longleaf restoration results in the future, particularly on private lands. The teams facilitate collaboration among the local partners within the SGAs and provide additional capacity and local knowledge to advance longleaf conservation.

Longleaf Establishment

An estimated 153,000 acres of longleaf was established in 2014, exceeding the ALRI short-term annual goals. Approximately 120,000 (78%) of establishment acres were reported on private lands. The ALRI short-term goals were developed to achieve a desired annual net increase in overall longleaf pine forests of 100,000 acres. If these net increases are realized, it is estimated that overall longleaf pine forest acres will return to 1970 levels by 2020.



Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge in McBee, South Carolina, credit Jack Culpepper

story and mid-story, and to combat invasive plant species. In 2014, a total of 142,328 acres of additional restoration activities were reported. Without these additional treatments, it would take many more years to achieve our restoration goals using prescribed fire alone.

Accomplishments in Significant Geographic Areas

Approximately 69% of the overall accomplishments occurred in the 18 SGAs, which complements the goals for these priority landscapes as envisioned in the Range-wide Conservation Plan. The accomplishments in the SGAs are primarily due to the impressive work of the Local Implementation Teams that focus on these areas and the habitat maintenance contributions of public lands that anchor these landscapes.

Private and Public Lands

Public lands accounted for 77% of the overall reported range-wide accomplishments despite containing only 39% of existing longleaf-dominated forests. Public lands accomplishments in 2014 represent a 13% increase over the 2013 totals, although a portion of this could be attributed to improved reporting. Private lands accounted for the remaining 23% of the longleaf restoration work, although they contain 61% of existing longleaf-dominated forests. Part of this disparity may be due to the difficulty in comprehensively capturing accomplishment data for private lands. It is exciting to note, however, that reported accomplishments on private lands in 2014 represent an increase of over 12% compared to the *2013 Range-wide Accomplishment Report* total.

Prescribed Burning

An impressive 1.22 million acres of prescribed burning were reported in longleaf pine for all ownerships in 2014. While falling short on annual prescribed burning goals in ALRI's *Strategic Priorities and Actions 2013-2015* document, this number is still encouraging because it represents an 11% increase from the total acreage burned in 2013. Roughly 75% of the overall prescribed burn totals occurred within the 18 designated SGAs. Prescribed fire plays a critical role in maintaining healthy longleaf pine ecosystems, and partners will continue to work collaboratively to find ways to put more fire on the ground, particularly on private lands.

Longleaf Improvement Activities

In addition to prescribed fire, ALRI is implementing various improvement activities to accelerate the restoration of native understory plant communities, desired longleaf stand structure in the over-

Broadening the Resource Base

Federal partners continue to be the major source of funding for longleaf restoration, although substantial progress is being made in attracting non-federal funds. Increases in private contributions to the Longleaf Stewardship Fund and the complimentary Forestland Stewards Initiative, along with non-federal matching funds provided at the project level, continue to enhance longleaf conservation efforts. These initiatives provide key resources to support and sustain the collaborative on-the-ground restoration work of the Local Implementation Teams. Other funding opportunities continue to be pursued. One promising opportunity is to integrate longleaf pine restoration into the overall Gulf Coast recovery effort through the RESTORE Act. The Natural Resource Conservation Service has designated longleaf pine as a Critical Conservation Area in their newly authorized Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Efforts to develop projects in all of this program's available funding pools are being pursued by ALRI partners. The ALRI partnership will continue to look for successful long-term models to engage large acreage landowners in conservation of longleaf pine on private lands.



Longleaf pine seedling re-sprouting after prescribed fire in Splinter Hill Bog Preserve, credit Clay Ware

Recommendations

Based upon the findings, the following are priority focus areas for the ALRI partnership in 2015-16:

- Continue to emphasize improving and maintaining the existing 4.7 million acres of longleaf pine forests by increasing the acreage of prescribed burning and other improvement activities on private lands, while maintaining or increasing the current level of effort on public lands.
- Continue efforts to increase the capacity and coordination of technical assistance and outreach to private landowners, including further refining of economics tools and identifying additional incentives for increasing the involvement of medium and large private landowners in the longleaf restoration effort.
- Support range-wide and Local Implementation Team planning and mapping efforts to enhance ALRI's ability to prioritize and implement restoration actions, identify new funding and conservation opportunities, track and monitor changes in longleaf pine forest condition classes, and better inform future accomplishment reporting.
- Continue to seek increased corporate and other private funding through the Longleaf Stewardship Fund and pursue opportunities to incorporate longleaf restoration into Gulf Coast recovery efforts.
- Continue to seek ways to improve longleaf reporting mechanisms for annual accomplishments, particularly for prescribed fire.
- Develop *Strategic Priorities and Actions 2016-2018* to identify and prioritize short-term recovery activities and goals for 2016-2018.

All the findings and recommendations of the full report can be found on the ALRI partnership website: <http://www.americaslongleaf.org>.