Restoring the Longleaf Pine: Preparing the Southeast for Global Warming

Naturally Resilient to Warming, the Longleaf Holds Key to Part of Southeast's Future Economy

Atlanta, GA (December 10) – A good-news global warming story about a pine tree with a storied past promises that a back-to-the-future approach will provide economic opportunities and help prepare the southeastern U.S. for a changing climate.

Restoring longleaf pine ecosystems across the Southeast will boost the economy and help the region cope with global warming's expanding effects, according to a new report from national and regional conservation groups. *Standing Tall: How Restoring the Longleaf Pine Can Help Prepare the Southeast for Global Warming* is being released today by the National Wildlife Federation and two southeast forest conservation groups, America's Longleaf, and The Longleaf Alliance.

The report highlights the latest scientific research on global warming's effects in the Southeast and how it puts southern forests at risk. The report also describes how longleaf pine forests are uniquely resilient to the long term impacts of global warming and the opportunities they present for forest landowners, especially minority and underserved landowners throughout the southern region.

"It is time for the longleaf pine forest to come to national attention," said Edward O. Wilson, Pulitzerprize winning author and Harvard University professor emeritus. "A substantial part of America's environmental future is tied to this one species, which dominates the trees in the land it occupies. The longleaf also holds the key to an important part of the future economy of the southeastern United States."

Longleaf pine has a storied history in the development of the South. As the dominant native pine of the region, its high-quality wood was used in both residential and commercial structures, including homes across the country and U.S. naval ships. Longleaf forests also provided a variety of other economic products including turpentine, pine straw, and recreational hunting habitat. Unfortunately, overcutting and replacement by short-rotation pine species or agricultural crops has greatly diminished the extent of longleaf pine. It once covered more than 90 million acres across eight states along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, but now is found on less than 3 percent of its historic range.

This loss has had huge impacts on the region's wildlife as many unique species of plants, insects, birds, amphibians and reptiles are associated with healthy longleaf pine ecosystems. A serious investment in longleaf pine restoration will both protect native biodiversity and help the South better prepare for global warming.

"The South will experience many impacts from global warming in the years ahead, from sea-level rise, to increasingly violent storms, to potentially prolonged drought and wildfire, to the spread of invasive species," said Eric Palola, senior director of National Wildlife Federation's Forests for Wildlife program. "We need new tools to deal with the effects of climate change in the South, and the good news is that bringing back the iconic longleaf pine ecosystem is one of the best tools available."

"Landowners restore longleaf forest on their land for various reasons," said Joe Cockrell, wildlife biologist, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. "They are aware that the practice brings a wide variety of benefits. This report increases the awareness of an advantage to restoring longleaf pine that has not previously been emphasized."

The report demonstrates that longleaf pine systems are naturally more resilient to climate extremes than other southern pine species due to their ability to withstand severe windstorms, resist pests, tolerate wildfires and drought, and capture carbon pollution from the atmosphere.

"This new report is a valuable synthesis of the current scientific information and significantly enhances understanding of how restoring the longleaf forest not only benefits an imperiled ecosystem but also addresses climate change," said Tom Darden, senior editor for America's Longleaf, an initiative involving more than 20 private organizations and government agencies. "The report advances the discussion on longleaf/climate change set forth in the Range-wide Conservation Plan for Longleaf Pine issued earlier this year as part of <u>America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative</u>. Southerners have long valued longleaf as the iconic forest of our region's past; it turns out that longleaf will be an important forest for the future to respond to climate change."

"This report makes a strong case for an exciting opportunity to restore much of the South to a native ecosystem of immense historic, social, and ecological importance," said Dr. John S. King, associate professor of tree physiology at North Carolina State University. "The rate at which effects of climate change are happening in the South is proving a surprise even to scientists. In addition to curbing sources of carbon emissions, successful strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change will include managing the landscape for maximum carbon pollution capture and storage. In certain physiographic settings across the South, there will be no better way to accomplish this than restoration of longleaf pine ecosystems. The added benefits of increased biodiversity, social development, and decreased risk of catastrophic wildfires is icing on the cake."

The report calls for a national-level commitment to longleaf ecosystem restoration, on par with other major ecological restoration initiatives such as the Everglades or the Chesapeake Bay. Range-wide restoration of longleaf will also require new levels of support such as those made possible through a federal climate bill that invest in state natural resource agencies and provides direct incentives to private forest land owners to protect and enhance forest's ability to capture carbon pollution.

Copies of the report may be downloaded at http://www.nwf.org/longleafpine

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<u>National Wildlife Federation</u> is America's conservation organization inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future.

<u>America's Longleaf</u> is a voluntary collaborative effort of more than 20 organizations and agencies that seeks to define, catalyze and support coordinated longleaf pine conservation efforts. The vision of America's Longleaf is to have functional, viable longleaf pine ecosystems with the full spectrum of ecological, economic and social values inspired through a voluntary partnership of concerned, motivated organizations and individuals.

<u>The Longleaf Alliance</u> was established in 1995 in association with Auburn University. It has recently become an independent organization whose mission is the restoration of the longleaf pine forest ecosystem across its range, emphasizing its economic and ecological values through research, education, and outreach.