

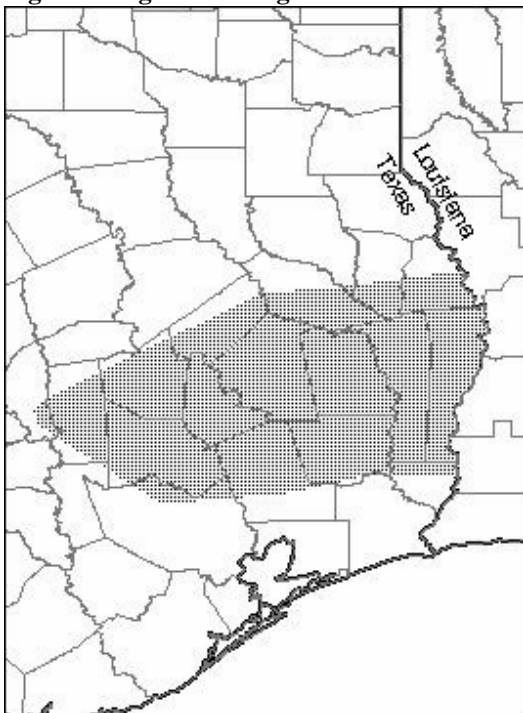
BIG THICKET-SANDYLANDS WEXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conservation Vision

Longleaf pine ecosystems once spanned much of the southeastern United States, including large parts of East Texas. Over time, these distinctive systems have been greatly altered and fragmented. The Big Thicket-Sandylands Conservation Area stands as one of the best remaining examples of the longleaf ecosystems in Texas. The Nature Conservancy of Texas will partner with organizations and individuals to sustain, enhance and restore habitat within the conservation area, recreating an ecologically functional network of interconnected longleaf pine woodlands, wetlands, floodplains, and stream corridors which supports native plants and animals, provides a basis for sustainable forestry and agriculture, and contributes to a high quality of life in local communities.

Longleaf pine ecosystems once covered 24 million hectares (60 million acres) of the Southeastern United States, from Virginia south to Florida and west to Texas. These systems comprised a matrix ecological community, within which were found bottomland hardwood forests, seasonal wetlands and floodplains, arid sandhills, and a vast network of streams and rivers. Today, about 1.2 million disjunct hectares (3 million acres) of longleaf habitat remain nationwide, with about 18,200 hectares (45,000 acres) in Texas. Much of the remaining habitat in Texas is found within the Big Thicket (Figure 1). The coverage of this signature community has been dramatically reduced as the result of commercial and residential development, fire suppression, and timber practices that favor short-lived trees.

Figure 1. Big Thicket region



Despite an enormous loss of longleaf habitat within the Big Thicket, the region still harbors over 85 tree species, over 60 shrubs, and more than 1,000 other flowering plants, including 26 ferns and allies, 20 orchids and four of North America's five insect-eating plants. Nearly 300 kinds of birds live here or migrate through. Over 80 fish species live in the many streams and rivers. Fifty reptile species live here, and frogs and toads abound. Some of the remaining longleaf woodlands are home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, which nests in old longleaf pines. Dry pine-oak woodlands, called sandylands, are home to many drought- and fire-adapted plants, including the federally endangered Texas trailing phlox. Quiet oxbow lakes contain bald cypress and water tupelo, while the riparian bottomlands are home to large cypress swamps. Scattered throughout the longleaf pine matrix are other distinctive plant

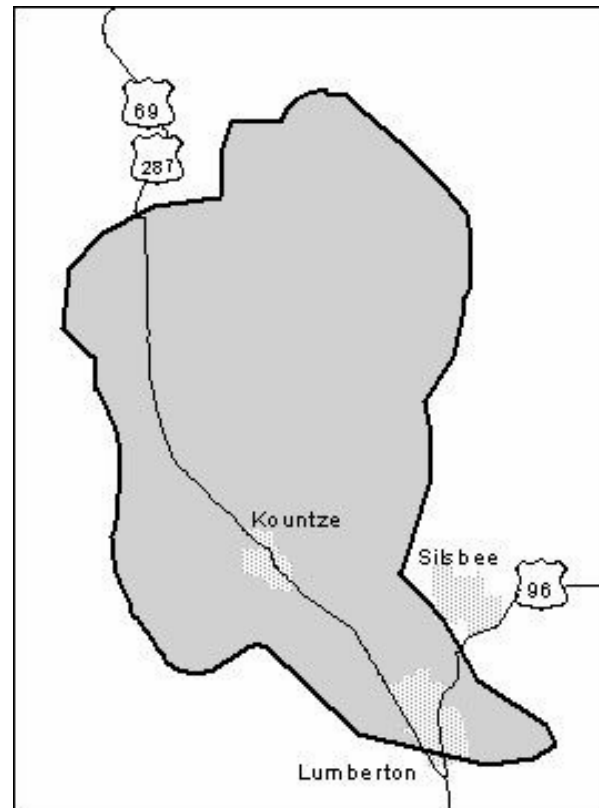
communities, including sphagnum bogs and baygalls (named after the sweet bay magnolia and gallberry holly -- two characteristic trees). Bogs occur in moist depressions and harbor a

distinctive mix of ferns, orchids and small insectivorous plants. Baygalls often surround bogs or are found along wet seeps near streams.

Figure 2. Big Thicket-Sandylands Conservation Area

Achieving Our Conservation Vision

This plan focuses on the Big Thicket-Sandylands Conservation Area (Figure 2), a subset of the Big Thicket region. This conservation area is a rich crossroads of land ownerships and habitats, creating a dynamic mix of partners and conservation opportunities. The conservation area contains excellent examples of the imperiled longleaf matrix community and the species it supports. Additionally, there are opportunities for habitat restoration in some areas. The Nature Conservancy and its partners will take action to conserve and restore native habitat within the conservation area, with the ultimate goal of restoring an ecologically functional network of longleaf pine woodlands and other natural communities across the landscape. The Nature Conservancy will collaborate with Temple-Inland Forest Products Inc., Big Thicket National Preserve, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and other conservation organizations, forest products companies, and private citizens to conserve and enhance native ecosystems, foster economically viable and ecologically sustainable resource-based industry and promote the compatibility of conservation and human communities. The overarching goals for this project are as follows:



- **Build support and awareness within the community about the natural significance of the area and its economic, aesthetic and ecological benefits.**
- **Work with the community to minimize negative ecological impacts of development.**
- **Foster sustainable resource use by helping to establish longleaf pine forestry as an economically viable local industry.**
- **Work with willing landowners to conserve or restore a network of native plant and animal communities across the Big Thicket-Sandylands Conservation Area.**