

Longleaf Ridge Conservation Area Plan Executive Summary

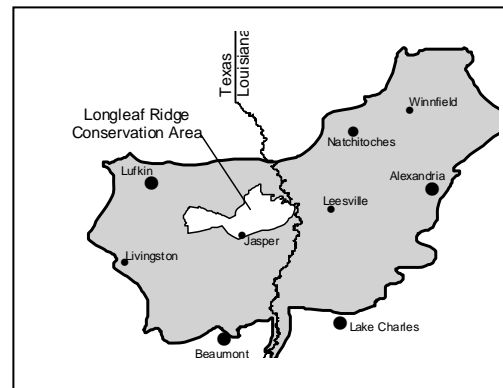
Vision

The Longleaf Ridge Conservation Area, in the West Gulf Coastal Plain ecoregion, harbors some of the last intact and biodiverse longleaf pine woodlands. This historic area encompasses two National Forests and large tracts of timber industry lands. The opportunity to collaborate with large landholders provides an excellent forum for conserving this landscape-scale conservation area. The Nature Conservancy of Texas will work to conserve a functional landscape of longleaf pine and hardwood forests, bogs and baygalls, glades and barrens, and aquatic systems within the conservation area. The Nature Conservancy will partner with other public, private, and commercial landowners to leverage the many separate stewardship efforts already underway, taking conservation beyond property boundaries and expanding it across the landscape.

Introduction

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 riparian forests, small wetlands, and a vast network of streams, rivers and floodplains. Today, about 1.2 million hectares (3 million acres) of fragmented longleaf habitat remain nationwide, with about 18,200 hectares (45,000 acres) in Texas. 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. Much of the remaining habitat in Texas is found within the West Gulf Coastal Plain ecoregion (Figure 1).

Figure 1. West Gulf Coastal Plain ecoregion

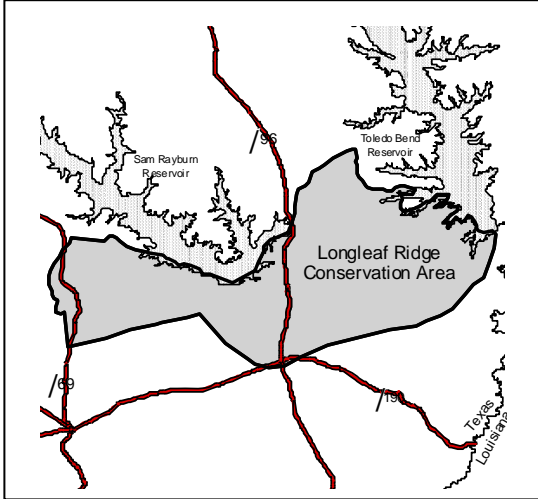


The Longleaf Ridge Conservation Area (Figure 2) still supports a partially connected mosaic of longleaf pine woodlands on public and private lands. Scattered throughout the 194,677-hectare (481,047-acre) site are other distinctive plant communities, including carbonate glades and barrens, sphagnum bogs, and baygalls. Glades and barrens are products of specific soils and ecological processes: sedimentary outcrops subjected to seasonal drought and fire produce the open vegetation structure and plant communities characteristic of these areas. Bogs occur in moist hillside 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. Some of the remaining longleaf woodlands are home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, which lives in and feeds on old longleaf pines, and to the Louisiana pine snake, a secretive native reptile that feeds on pocket gophers, another longleaf pine woodland species.

Challenges and Opportunities

Longleaf Ridge has sustained timber harvesting for over a century and has been heavily used for recreation since creation of the Angelina and Sabine National Forests. Similarly, manufacturing and agriculture have altered the landscape, as land was cleared for factories, crops, and livestock facilities and as these operations released chemicals and nutrients into rivers and streams. Fire suppression has

Figure 2. Longleaf Ridge Conservation Area



taken its toll as well, altering the mix of plant and animal species. These activities have contributed to a loss of longleaf forests, to habitat fragmentation or degradation, and to a decline in numbers of some endemic plants and animals. Nonetheless, significant portions of this area are intact or recoverable. Also, large landowners in the area have expressed a sincere desire to conduct ecologically sustainable commercial enterprises and to collaborate in conserving or restoring the biodiversity of Longleaf Ridge. Toward that end, the Conservancy will partner with public, private and commercial interests to:

- Help to build productive, working partnerships with local stakeholders who wish to leverage their management and conservation efforts.
- Maintain or restore ecologically functional longleaf woodlands, mesic slopes and terraces, mixed pine-hardwood forests, floodplains, and aquatic systems.
- Restore or enhance habitat to enable interaction between the red-cockaded woodpecker sub-populations in the area, to help create a viable population eligible for downlisting and eventual removal from the federal Endangered Species list.
- Maintain and restore habitat for the Louisiana pine snake, with the ultimate goal of returning East Texas' population to viable status.

