



Timber Management by Mississippi Tree Farmer

Creates Safe Harbor for Tortoises and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers

Randy Browning, USFWS



“My goal was a sustained yield of forestry products of increasing quality.”

So says Dr. John Lambert of his plan in

assuming management of the family farm in Covington County, Mississippi, in 1958 and enrolling the property in the American Tree Farm System. The tree farm system “provides rational management of the land,” he says. “It is a wholesome intermediate between mindless environmentalism and ruthless exploitation.”

During 50 years of management, Lambert has revised his goal to feature replicating the pre-settlement forest cover by restoring longleaf pines. “I want to demonstrate that we can provide habitat and still have viable timber production.”

Looking back, Lambert says that a college forestry course changed the management of the family farm land in southern Mississippi. The course inspired him to chart a new plan for the property that his father had begun acquiring in the 1920s.

The First Safe Harbor Agreement in Mississippi for Gopher Tortoises and Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers

In 2005, Lambert entered into the first Safe Harbor Agreement with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Mississippi for threatened gopher tortoises and endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers. He enrolled all 750 acres for the existing tortoises—and the woodpeckers that he hopes will eventually return to their historic range. The effect of the agreement is “business as usual,” he says, adding that “I agreed not to degrade the environment for these species. They both have the same requirements.”

In fact, his management is helping wildlife. Several groups of tortoises are benefiting from thinning and burning the understory to allow light to reach the forest floor and stimulate a diverse ground cover around their burrows. This habitat expansion is likely to increase their numbers. Keeping the understory open helps longleaf regenerate by removing dense, competing vegetation. Similarly, planting longleaf and retaining older pines creates habitat for the woodpeckers. These actions provide the net conservation benefit that Safe Harbor Agreements require.

Benefits of the agreements for landowners include protection from liability under the Endangered Species Act in connection with otherwise lawful activities. “If there’s an incident, such as collapsing a tortoise burrow with heavy equipment, I have a permit authorizing the incidental take of members of the species above the number that called my property home when the agreement began,” Lambert says. His agreement extends through 2027.

Lambert Property: Evolving from Crops to Timber

Decades before Lambert returned from Mississippi State College—as it was called in the 1950s—his father, C. A. Lambert, had become the owner of farm land with open pine woodland where free-ranging cattle grazed. Through the years C.A. Lambert cut some timber to expand agricultural uses—planting corn, cotton, and sugar cane. By the 1940s, he had begun to reforest fields with slash pine plantations. Ten years later, John Lambert added to his father’s holdings with adjacent farms and began actively managing for timber and cattle.

Applying Agriculture Techniques to Forestry

Lambert defines pine plantations as “the application of agricultural techniques to forestry.” Thinning makes stands better able to grow and to “withstand pathological insults,” he says, adding that after several thinnings, trees planted in rows lose their linear appearance. To make harvests attractive to logging crews, he established 16 permanent wood-



J. Lambert

Mississippi Forestry Association

C. A. Lambert views his Hill Field pasture in 1957, prior to planting it with loblolly pine the following year. In 2008, at a field day celebration, his son, John, was recognized for 50 years’ participation in the American Tree Farm System by Drue DeBerry, the American Forest Foundation’s Vice President for Conservation.

loading decks connected by an internal road system that leads to a main highway.

In 1986 and 1987, through the Conservation Reserve Program, Lambert planted loblolly pines on 265 acres then in crops or pasture. Having thinned these stands at least once, he is harvesting the trees as they reach economic maturity and planting longleaf pines in their place, a practice that will result in a preponderance of longleaf and uneven-aged trees, a desirable state. In 1998, Lambert was named the Mississippi Tree Farmer of the Year for his “exemplary timber management program that maximizes economic return on investment, sustains forest production, and protects soil and water quality while providing wildlife habitat and working to replicate the native forests of the region.”

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit Mississippi, requiring adjustments to management plans. Four years later, Lambert has finished salvaging and harvesting mature and over-mature trees. After clear-cutting some severely damaged plantations, he has replanted with longleaf. He is retaining over-mature trees as potential cavity trees for red-cockaded woodpeckers. The older longleaf trees will also provide seeds for natural regeneration. Longleaf pines may live to be 300 years old, while loblolly and shortleaf pines have a lifespan of up to 125 years.

Present Management and Future Vision

Looking ahead, Lambert envisions thinning to remove hardwoods and leaving specimen longleaf and older loblolly and shortleaf pine trees. He plans to continue conducting prescribed burns, creating forest openings that the gopher tortoises like, planting longleaf, and practicing low-impact logging and uneven-aged tree management.



J. Lambert

A knuckle boom-loader places pine logs on a truck in a first-time thinning operation for a 16-year-old plantation. As Lambert removes loblolly pines, he plants longleaf.



J. Lambert

Forest technician Annette Bizzell marks pole timber for harvest.

Lambert says that his vision for the future is colored by the accounts of early Mississippi pineywoods settlers—lumber and naval stores men—who “desired an open, poor, pine country which forbade a numerous population. The land gave character to the people: both were wild and poor.” (William H. Sparks, *The Memories of Fifty Years*: Macon, Georgia 1872). The undisturbed lowland forest along Martin Branch, a stream that flows through his property to the Bouie River, serves as a reminder of pre-sawmill days. Martin Branch is registered as a Natural Heritage Area with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks.

One of the first landowners in the country to be chosen to enroll property in a 99-year conservation easement through the Healthy Forests Reserve Program of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Lambert has protected his land from development while management activities continue. Created by the Healthy Forests Act of 2006, the competitive program is designed to restore forests, promote endangered and threatened species recovery, improve biodiversity, and increase carbon sequestration—fostering environmental quality and the economy. Benefits range from a 10 percent cost-share for approved conservation practices to long-term conservation easements. Lambert’s Safe Harbor Agreement helped him to be selected for participation.

A retired veterinarian, Lambert grew up with rabbits, snakes, turtles, dogs, cats, horses, and mules and has a fondness for animals. One observation about his recent land management activities is “a dramatic increase in quail, rabbits, and turkeys—attributable to prescribed burning.”

Lambert reflects that “participation in the Safe Harbor program enhances my management flexibility and removes perceived disincentives and uncertainty in regard to the Endangered Species Act.”

**Endangered Species Program
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 North Fairfax Drive
Arlington, VA 22203**

703/358 2171

<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>

September 2009

