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SENT TO LSU AGCENTER/LOUISIANA FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT CENTER - FOREST SECTOR / FORESTY PRODUCTS INTEREST GROUP

New forest conservation program in north Louisiana said to benefit both industry and environment

A lot of people have to buy in to protect Southern forests: Most of the land is held in small private patches, a few dozen acres here and there that in combination form whole forests. A new conservation program aims to manage the environment in north Louisiana and southern Arkansas by getting all those landowners pulling in the same direction.

The Morehouse Family Forests Initiative plans to lay the groundwork for sustained forest health, said Tom Martin, CEO of the nonprofit American Forest Foundation. Pete Madden's first goal is to get 10,000 acres certified with the American Tree Farm System, which sets out provisions for replanting trees, eliminating invasive species and protecting streams from erosion. Madden is the CEO of Atlanta-based wood pellet manufacturer Drax Biomass.

Wood pellets are produced from soft pine to fuel power plants in lieu of coal. From its facility at the Port of Greater Baton Rouge, it ships pellets from mills in Gloster, Mississippi, and Bastrop in Morehouse Parish. The new forestry initiative is a case in which what's good for industry and what's good for the environment are one and the same, Martin said. Plans call for replanting 1,400 acres where short leaf pine has been logged. Several local species depend on the trees, such as the endangered red cockaded woodpecker, Martin said.

At the same time, the initiative will help remove invasive species such as kudzu and certain beetles that can infest trees. Though they don't live up in the boughs, species like mussels and other aquatic creatures also depend on trees to hold soil banks in place and provide shade that regulates temperature, Martin said. Authorities will also try to determine where they may need to perform controlled burns in areas where vegetation has become overgrown and there are more plants than soil nutrients to feed them all.

The Morehouse initiative will cost \$1.1 million in the first five years, after which organizers will evaluate whether and how to continue. Madden would like to reach out to 550 landowners who own among them an estimated 45,000 acres. Most of the timber used in Drax's Bastrop mill comes from within about 40 miles of the facility — from forests in Morehouse, Union, Winn and Ouachita parishes plus parts of southern Arkansas, Madden said.

Small, family-owned properties make up about 60 percent of the forested land where his company logs. Surveys have shown that small land owners want to take action to protect their forests, and conservationists have long known best practices for doing so, Madden said. Now, they've just got to get both sides to work together. "Our whole business model relies on sustainable forestry," Madden said. "If we're in the business, we want to do whatever we possibly can to make sure the resources are managed after we're gone."

http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/environment/article_6cccc3d0-003a-11e7-8df9-0ffc6edc532d.html

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