

John Henry Kirby State Forest



On Saturday, March 18, 2023, Conor McInnerney (left photo), Texas A & M Forest Service Forester for Tyler County, coordinated a tour of the Kirby State Forest for about thirty members and guests of the Tyler County Forest Landowner Association. The Kirby State Forest, comprised of 630 acres donated by John Henry Kirby in 1929, is on Hwy 69 in southern Tyler County. The expansion plans for Hwy 69 will take 20 acres of the forest.

Conor, along with Steve Anderson (center photo), State Lands Coordinator for Texas A & M Forest Service, and Matthew Garrison (right photo), Texas A & M Forest Service Forester, led the attendees on a hayride tour of the Kirby State Forest and discussed management techniques that are being employed to protect the health of the forest and return it to dominant longleaf pines.

Longleaf, loblolly and shortleaf pines are all considered southern yellow pines. Historically, longleaf pines were the most prevalent in Tyler County. Today, loblolly pines are more prevalent on tree farms because they have characteristics desirable for current markets. While there are shortleaf pines in Tyler County, they are more plentiful north of Nacogdoches where the soil is sandier and well-drained.

The goal of the Kirby State Forest is to establish a longleaf forest that will regenerate itself naturally. Longleaf pines produce a good seed crop on a five-to-seven-year cycle and the seeds fall close to the parent tree. If longleaf pine seedlings are being planted to create a new stand, it is advisable to clearcut and then burn the site.

In a mixed longleaf and loblolly pine forest, the faster growing loblolly pines will shade the young longleaf pines, inhibiting their development. If longleaf and loblolly pine seedlings are planted at the same time with sufficient sunlight for both, the longleaf pines will catch up to the loblolly pines' height in about twelve years.



Longleaf pines are dependent on fire and young longleaf pines will tolerate fire well. Control burns help eliminate competition, including young loblolly pines. Control burns must be prescribed early and often (every 3 – 7 years) to effectively manage understory growth. The optimum time to perform control burns is limited to a six-week window beginning in mid-December.



Once the new growth candles start to appear on the tips of the limbs, the control burn window closes because the candles are susceptible to fire damage that will kill the limbs or even the tree. “Thermal thinning” is the euphemistic term used for burning trees that were intended to be kept.

Additional options for managing undergrowth include herbicides, mowing/mulching, and cattle/goat grazing. Yaupon is problematic throughout Tyler County with swamp titi being an additional nuisance in the southern section of the county. Herbicides can be effective when carefully selected and properly applied. Although expensive, mechanical mowing and mulching can enhance the effectiveness of herbicides the following year because it is easier to thoroughly cover the new, shorter growth. Cattle, especially longhorns, will eat underbrush but will create trails through the forest that will pack the soil and may facilitate erosion.

While roads through forests are necessary for access and management, they damage the roots of the trees along the road. Consider clearing an easement beside the road which will limit root damage and allow more sunlight on the road to help it dry. To reduce erosion on roads, construct water bars and wing ditches to divert the water off the road and slow its velocity. When harvesting, it is advisable to have a set area on each side of the road to avoid heavy equipment crossing and damaging the road excessively.