
The Florida Forest Steward



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Wiley Coyote: Curious canine or problematic pest? Photo by Dr. Lloyd Glenn Ingles, California Academy of Sciences

Stewardship Appraisal Revisited

If you've been in the Stewardship Program or have been receiving the Florida Forest Steward in the mail for the last 5 years or so, you may recall an article in the Spring 2001 issue (vol. 8, no. 1) entitled, "A *Stewardship* Appraisal Category?" In it we discussed the merits of a property tax assessment that considers the value of non-timber benefits in calculating property taxes for a particular property. The conclusion of the piece was that, since many non-timber benefits, like wildlife habitat and recreation, also require active management, properties that are actively managed for these benefits should be valued under some sort of "Stewardship" or "Conservation" appraisal category so that landowners who are providing these benefits receive at least a modest level of property tax relief.

Since that article was written, and independently of it, some progress has been made in this direction at the State level. If approved by legislative committee and sponsored, a Conservation Assessment Act will be



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placed before the Florida State Legislature.

Alachua County Gets the Ball Rolling

Property taxes are one of the economic factors that influence land conversion from forest to residential or urban, especially where the land's fair market value is extremely high relative to agricultural assessment, as is the case now in much of Alachua County. Agricultural or forestry tax assessments account for bona fide active management and contributions to the economy but they offer no benefit for landowners providing other nonagricultural conservation or habitat benefits. Depending on landowner objectives and the number of trees they may plant per acre, many properties (or parts of them) may not qualify for the County's timber current use value (CUV) and are therefore appraised as though they are under no management at all. Land under no management is taxed on its fair market value, the highest level of CUV taxation possible.

To give some tax benefit to landowners who wish to manage for conservation or habitat values, the Alachua County Conservation Assessment Act was proposed by County Commissioner Mike Byerly. The purpose of the act was to recognize that allowing land to lie fallow provides benefits to an agricultural economy by enhancing soil fertility; serving as a buffer against wind and rain erosion and the spread of agricultural pests; providing habitat for crop pollinators and protecting water quality. Conservation land provides further public benefits, including plant and animal habitat, recreational

opportunities, air filtration and scenic beauty. Conservation purposes include *“uses that provide for the maintenance of plant or wildlife habitat, or uses less intensive than that agricultural use that is ordinarily required for qualification as bona fide agricultural use pursuant to Section 193.461, Florida Statutes.”*

Under the Act, the current tax assessment for agricultural land would be extended to farmers or landowners who set aside land for conservation or who scale back their agriculture activities, and only landowners who have been getting the agriculture assessment for five years would qualify.

Having won support for the initiative in Alachua County, County officials would need to have the Act approved by the State Legislature so the tax assessment category would apply only in Alachua County. However, the County Attorney concluded it would be unconstitutional because the state Constitution prohibits special laws pertaining to the assessment or collection of taxes for state or county purposes.

Can this be applied at the state level??

This is a distinct possibility but it will be a much larger challenge. Alachua County is now trying to find an area state legislator who will sponsor the bill and file it as a general act. This would allow all counties to extend the agriculture assessment for conservation if passed. Once sponsored, the bill would be reviewed by the appropriate committees and either approved or denied.

Legislators are only allowed to sponsor a given number of proposals and this

year's legislature is already in session so it may need to wait for next year. Despite the challenges ahead, Commissioner Byerly is optimistic that the Act will gain support if they can get it on the agenda.

Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Cost-Share Program

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services news release

As of May 1 the Florida Division of Forestry is offering a new Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Cost Share Program to eligible non-industrial private forest landowners. The goal of this program is to minimize southern pine beetle damage in Florida by helping forest landowners reduce the susceptibility of their pine stands to this destructive insect pest. Periodic southern pine beetle outbreaks in Florida have resulted in millions of cubic feet of pine timber killed on many thousands of acres. Forest management practices, such as thinning and prescribed burning, can improve the health of pine stands and decrease their likelihood of developing southern pine beetle infestations.

The new program offers up to 50% cost reimbursement for pre-commercial thinning and prescribed burning treatments, and a fixed-rate, per-acre incentive payment for landowners who conduct a first pulpwood thinning. The program is limited to 44 northern Florida counties located within the range of the southern pine beetle. Qualified landowners may apply for one approved practice per state fiscal year. The minimum tract size requirement is 10 acres and funding requests may not exceed \$10,000.

For an application and more information on program requirements and procedures, please visit your local Division of Forestry office. Contact information for the county forester office in your area is available at www.fl-dof.com. Applications will be evaluated on a first-received, first-served basis. The program is supported through temporary grants from the USDA Forest Service and will be offered only as long as funding is available.

Farmers Can Benefit Under New Program by Providing Bird Habitat

By Chuck McKelvy, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is encouraging north Florida farmers to improve quail habitat and providing compensation for those farmers who do so, under a federal program initiated last year.

The program, CP33 - Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds, pays farmers to not mow or harrow the native grasses and shrubs that border their fields and instead allow it to remain natural. These "bobwhite buffers" provide much-needed habitat for quail, songbirds and other small animals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), working through local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices, will enroll up to 250,000 acres nationwide for the Northern Bobwhite Quail Habitat Initiative. Florida has been designated for 2,300 acres. The initiative is part of the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program, which compensates farmers who set aside sensitive areas to protect

water quality and other environmental assets, including wildlife habitat. Landowners may plant these buffers or may allow natural vegetation to become established. In either case, they must agree to manage the enrolled acres periodically to prevent tree encroachment.

Bobwhite quail, once prolific in the Southeast and Midwest, have declined in the past several decades. Since 1980, quail populations have declined 70 percent nationwide, according to federal data.

The cause appears to be loss of habitat – the weeds, shrubs, briars, goldenrod and wildflowers that spring up after a natural or planned disturbance such as a prescribed fire. These types of vegetation provide the necessary food, cover and nesting habitat for quail and other birds, but this habitat has declined due to modern farming techniques, conversion of marginal farm land to timber production, intensification of forestry practices, urbanization and lack of prescribed fire.

If landowners want to enroll in the program and meet basic land eligibility requirements, they may establish a natural border from 30-120 feet in width around one or more sides of an agricultural field. Compensation includes a one-time signing bonus of up to \$100 per acre enrolled. Landowners will receive annual payments for the length of the 10-year term of the agreement based upon soil fertility and local established rental rates plus an annual maintenance payment of \$5 per acre.

The FWC is reaching out in particular to landowners in 21 counties in northern Florida, where this initiative has the most potential to benefit bobwhite quail. Interested landowners should contact their county FSA office and ask for enrollment applications for Practice CP33 - Habitat for Upland Birds. For more information about the program contact Chuck McKelvy at 850-414-9911.

The Wiley Coyote: Curious Canine or Problematic Pest?

By Leslie Adams, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

In the past twenty to forty years, the cagey coyote has established its presence in the Florida peninsula. If you haven't seen one, you still may have overheard one of their nightly yip-howl conversations. You may have wondered: Is the coyote an uninvited house guest to Florida, or does the canine naturally have a place among the palmettos and pines of the sunshine state?

The “barking dog”, as described by its scientific name *Canis latrans*, is a creature that is well adapted to human settlements and activities. Coyotes favor open spaces (e.g. agriculture landscapes) as opposed to dense forests. The conversion of Florida into more coyote-friendly habitat coupled with the removal of a competing predator (the wolf), prepared Florida to become the next stop in the coyote's natural expansion into the east. The importation and “unnatural” release of coyotes during the 1950's and early 1980's by spirited sportsmen for dog-hunting purposes most likely didn't cause the establishment of a permanent population but did contribute to the rapid expansion

of their range. Observations of the coyote in Florida have been documented since the 1930's, and annual surveys have been conducted by The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the University of Florida since 1997.

When you spot a coyote, it is most likely part of a group that has an established territory. Territory size depends on a number of factors including available resources, geographical features and seasons (dry/wet). One Florida study found home ranges to range roughly between 5,000 and 7,000 acres. Groups consist of the alpha pair (the mating pair) and beta dogs that help raise the pups in the spring and early summer. Often, the beta animals are last year's pups. While pairs do not mate for life, they often stay together for up to four years. Coyotes typically breed once a year, in early-to mid-winter, depending on location. Courtship can last for as long as 2-3 months before mating takes place. The pups are born after a gestation period averaging 2 months. Litter size can range from 2 to 12 pups, with six pups as the average size. The litter size can vary with population and prey density; when food resources are abundant, the litter size increases. Mortality is greatest during their first year and the average life span of a coyote in the wild is 5-6 years. Captive coyotes have survived as long as 12 years.

Coyotes are opportunistic consumers. In other words, if they trip over a fawn they will definitely make a worthwhile attempt to make supper out of it. The chances of the same coyote taking the time to stalk and hunt adult does are possible, but slim. Besides fawns, a

study in south central Florida revealed that coyotes preferred fruit – namely palmetto berries – and rabbits over delicacies such as quail eggs. Coyotes will also eat rodents such as the cotton rat, insects, and snakes. Diet varies greatly both seasonally and geographically, as do the methods by which prey are acquired. Coyotes are active predators relying primarily on vision while hunting, and they have been observed to fish and climb trees in pursuit of food.

Sometimes, a newly born calf or a patch of juicy watermelon provide the opportunity that coyotes are looking for. Oftentimes though, livestock losses are actually due to a group of feral dogs or most frequently, to poisonous plants. You can often discern how your livestock was killed by examining the bite marks and wounds. Commonly, free-roaming dogs will mutilate but not consume the animal whereas coyotes typically make a meal out of their kill, in particular the fleshy hindquarters. Like the turkey vultures we see everywhere, coyotes are scavengers and oftentimes the carcass in which you see them ears deep is not their kill.

If you are not experiencing either loss of livestock or watermelon crop to coyotes, removal of one or both of a territorial pair may result in the establishment of coyotes that have learned to prey on livestock, a behavior that also will be taught to offspring. Consequently, removal of non-problem coyotes may be counter-productive. If a problem with livestock or crops is identified, control efforts should attempt to target the problem coyotes. This is both a less expensive and more effective strategy than indiscriminate control efforts.

Oftentimes, indiscriminate control efforts actually result in an increase in the coyote population. By reducing the population, an increase in food resources for the remaining coyotes will result. As pointed out earlier, female coyotes will produce a larger litter when resources are bountiful.

Eradication efforts in the West have had minor impacts in some populations of coyotes, but the costs in terms of labor and money is high. Participants of a Utah bounty program recognized their efforts in terms of damage control as minimal. When surveyed, the number one reason for participation was to 'enjoy the outdoors'. Livestock protection ranked 6th out of 8 reasons. A more cost effective method to control coyote damage is the use of a guard dog or llama.

Concerns regarding the coyote's role in Florida's ecosystem include competition with other predators such as bobcats and foxes. Florida's native gray fox is frequently excluded from habitat occupied by coyotes. On the other hand, competition with heavy nest predators such as the raccoon may result in less predation on the nests of ground nesting birds such as the bobwhite quail.

Like any critter in the woods or water, coyotes can have both positive and negative effects on your property. It is important to acknowledge the potential benefits as well as the potential drawbacks when considering the need to manage coyotes.

For more information on coyotes in Florida visit the "South Florida Coyote Study" website at:
<http://www.imok.ufl.edu/wild/coyote> or

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission:
<http://myfwc.com/critters/coyote.asp>

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Congratulations to these Landowners for Achieving Forest Stewardship Certification

*Ralph and Mary Armstrong,
Jackson County*

*Austin Cary Memorial Forest, UF School of
Forest Resources and Conservation,
Alachua County*

*Dean, Tommye and Aaron Collins,
Suwannee County*

*Jack and Katherine Ewel,
Alachua County*

Helen Griffith, Calhoun County

Chet and Rita Grimsley, Wakulla County

*Gary and Cindy Klingebiel,
Seminole County*

Andrew Lee, Calhoun County

*Longleaf Ecology and Forestry Society
(recertification), Alachua County*

*John and Jolene Paramore,
Jackson County*

*W.E. and Corrine Paramore,
Jackson County*

Gordon Revell, Liberty County

Leila Shiver, Calhoun County

Nadine Stone, Calhoun County

Stephen Toner, Calhoun County

Virginia Upton, Jackson County

Timber Price Update

This information is useful for observing trends over time, but does not necessarily reflect current conditions at a particular location. Landowners considering a timber sale would be wise to let a consulting forester help them obtain the best current prices. Note that price ranges per ton for each product is

included in parentheses after the price per cord.

Stumpage price ranges reported across Florida in the **1st Quarter 2006** Timber Mart-South (TMS) report were:

- Pine pulpwood: \$15 - \$27/cord (\$6 - \$10/ton), ↑ from 4th Quarter 2005
- Pine C-N-S: \$56 - \$78/cord (\$21 - \$29/ton), ↓
- Pine sawtimber: \$96 - \$119/cord (\$36 - \$45/ton), ↓
- Pine plylogs: \$117 - \$134/cord (\$44 - \$50/ton), ↑
- Pine power poles: \$148 - \$159/cord (\$55 - \$66/ton) ↑
- Hardwood pulpwood: \$13 - \$26/cord (\$5 - \$9/ton), ↓

Trend Report

The average price trends for the major timber products across Florida were mixed. Prices were up from 4th Quarter 2005 for pine pulpwood, poles and plylogs and down for the others reported here. The Southwide averages for all products were up from last quarter. Consistent with this trend in Florida were large diameter pine products such as poles and plylogs.

