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NEWS RELEASE

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USDA Announces Initiative to Improve Longleaf Pine Forest Ecosystems

Jackson, MS, July 12, 2010 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) today unveiled an initiative to improve the health of longleaf pine forests in nine southeast states, including Mississippi. Using an integrated landscape approach, this initiative restores longleaf pine forests on private lands and improves plant and animal habitat.

"This collaborative, all-lands approach to conservation will result in cleaner water, improved critical habitat for sensitive species, and an economic resource for the future, Dr. Homer Wilkes said. "Protecting and restoring this important ecosystem will benefit communities and resources across the nation."

Longleaf pine forests in the southeastern United States initially occurred on 90 million acres at the beginning of European settlement. About 3.5 million acres remain today, providing critical habitat for 29 threatened or endangered species. With the Longleaf Pine Restoration Initiative, NRCS will collaborate with other federal agencies as well as state, local and nongovernmental conservation partners to address conservation needs across the longleaf pine range.

The initiative is funded through NRCS's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Participants agree to carry out a wildlife habitat development plan and NRCS provides cost-share assistance to voluntarily implement conservation practices that maintain, improve or restore longleaf pine ecosystems. Mississippi will receive over \$700,000 in financial assistance through this initiative. The other participating states are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

The majority of the Longleaf Pine soils suitable for longleaf reforestation are located in south Mississippi, south of the Interstate 20.

For more information about the Longleaf Pine Restoration Initiative, including application information, please visit your local conservationist district office.

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NRCS is celebrating 75 years helping people help the land in 2010. Since 1935, the NRCS conservation delivery system has advanced a unique partnership with state and local governments and private landowners delivering conservation based on specific, local conservation needs, while accommodating state and national interests. President Franklin Roosevelt created the Soil Conservation Service in 1935 to help farmers and ranchers overcome the devastating effects of drought, especially in the Midwest and Northern Plains regions.

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