

# Feature Story

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## Rankin County Landowner Grows His Own Longleaf Haven

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*Puckett, Miss.* – Clay dominates much of Rankin County’s soil, making it unsuitable to the coveted longleaf pine tree. But a slice of sandy soil just north of Puckett is just right for the longleaf, and a farmer is growing the county’s first longleaf forest since the 1920s.

“I’ve always loved longleaf pine trees,” said Prentiss Calhoun, a tree farmer who is nurturing 300 acres of the rare tree to adulthood. “When I was a child, there was a lot of longleaf growing in this area.”

Longleaf pine plantations once dominated the Southern landscape, but deforestation has wiped them to obscurity. The ecosystem that once spanned 90 million acres has been reduced to 3 million. But with the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), longleaf pine stands like this one in Rankin are sprouting across the state.

While NRCS offers the Longleaf Initiative, Calhoun used a similar program offered by USDA’s Farm Service Agency, called Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCPI). NRCS provided the technical assistance, and FSA County Executive Director Cassandra McCullough provided the program assistance.

So far, NRCS programs have helped restore 1,641 acres of longleaf pines in Mississippi. The agency has also helped with prescribed burning on 1,812 acres.

Calhoun’s land, formerly pastures, has longleaf pines between one and four years old. Calhoun’s land is one of the most northern longleaf pine areas in the state. It is outside of the longleaf pine’s typical range, which begins at the Pine Belt (the U.S. 98 corridor) and continues south toward the coastal counties.

“I just love these trees,” Calhoun said. “They are stronger than other pine trees, and they produce better wood.”

Calhoun said studies show the longleaf is tougher than the loblolly and slash pines, braving the winds of Hurricane Katrina far better.

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“Mr. Calhoun is a student of the longleaf pine,” NRCS Soil Conservationist Murray Fulton said. “He came to our office knowing exactly what he wanted to produce on his land. And it is definitely heading in that direction.”

Calhoun raises young longleaf trees in pots, studying which techniques support best and fastest growth. He is also planting the trees to study ways to effectively harvest fallen pine straw, which can yield more money than the actual tree, he said.

Longleaf pine forests are typically located in coastal zones, often prone to urban development. The vulnerability of the longleaf pine forests and the wildlife that inhabit them make this program a priority of the NRCS.

Calhoun’s land was once a longleaf pine forest. But it was timbered during World War II to produce gun powder. When Calhoun purchased the land, many longleaf remnants that went unsold were still stacked in a large pile, he said.

More than 20 endangered species depend on the longleaf pine ecosystem. One species is the gopher tortoise, which feeds on the legumes and forbes that flourish on the longleaf forest floor. Named for its deep burrows, the gopher tortoise digs holes that provide home for more than a 100 other species. While Calhoun’s farm is located outside of the gopher tortoise range, it still provides a valuable ecosystem to many other flora and fauna of Rankin County, including quail, turkey and deer.

During a recent visit, Calhoun and Fulton spotted some turkeys feeding in the grasses between the longleaf seedlings. Once those trees grow, they will create an environment perfect for legumes and forbes that provide ample food for wildlife – and support even higher populations.

“This place will be able to support a host of wildlife,” Fulton said of the longleaf forest in the making. Fulton has guided Calhoun on prescribed burns and said NRCS will continue to provide technical assistance when needed. “As these trees grow, it will continue to turn into a beautiful place.”

#### **NRCS Technical Assistance and Programs:**

The NRCS offers technical assistance and cost-share programs to landowners planting longleaf pines. For more information on NRCS’ Longleaf Pine Initiative, visit your local USDA service center. To find your local service center, visit [this site](#).

#### **Other Information:**

Calhoun’s farm was written about in a [May 24, 2011 article](#) in Rankin Ledger, the county’s weekly newspaper.

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*Top: NRCS Soil Conservationist Murray Fulton and landowner Prentiss Calhoun examine the growth of young longleaf pine trees. Calhoun has used a Farm Service Agency program and the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service to transform pastures into longleaf pine trees.*

*Above left: Landowner Prentiss Calhoun experiments with different ways to raise young longleaf pine trees as show in these pots.*

*Above right: A longleaf pine forest is in the making at Prentiss Calhoun's Puckett-area residence.*

*Photos by Justin Fritscher, NRCS-Mississippi Public Affairs.*

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