

Preservationists kill reasonable approach to cypress

By Jewel Willis

A large and growing segment of the timber industry in Louisiana is at risk of being lost. The segment of our timber industry that is under attack by "preservationists" in the environmental movement is the vast cypress-tupelo forest primarily in the lower one-third of the state.

The first settlers in the region used cypress lumber for their houses, fences and boats but it was not until the late 1800s that extensive cypress harvesting began. Production peaked around 1913; and by the 1930s all but scattered small islands of cypress had been cut-over.

Of the approximately one million acres of cypress found in Louisiana in the 1800s about 800,000 acres exists today. These trees have been growing for 100 plus years. Most of the stands are overstocked (have more trees per acre than the site will support) and are stagnant. Studies have shown that more of these trees die than are harvested annually.

The demand and availability of cypress timber has encouraged the wood-using industry in the cypress belt to modify standard logging equipment to harvest trees in swamp conditions with minimum impact to the soil and overall integrity of the stand.

Under the guidance of the Louisiana Forestry Association, best management practices that insure sustainability have been developed for wetlands logging.

With the above facts in mind, a logical person would conclude that south Louisiana was ready to experience a healthy and needed addition to its industrial base. Unfortunately that is not happening.

Since silvicultural (forestry) operations in wetlands are exempt under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Regulatory Division has "decreed" that timber harvesting within areas tidally influenced by a navigable stream are now covered by Section 10 of the 1899 Rivers and Harbors Act and now require a Corps permit.

That means no matter how far from a navigable stream a stand of timber may be, if it drains into a stream and falls below a yet to be determined high water mark, it is now to be considered in navigable waters. The

one request made to the Corps office over two years ago for a permit to harvest timber under Section 10, has not been acted upon to date.

To understand why the Corps would make such a far reaching, and in my opinion, totally unfounded ruling, one has to understand what is happening in the "environmental movement." A large, well-funded segment of this movement is intent on "saving" or "preserving" our forest.

Their core belief is that, no matter what the cost, our forests should not be managed or used for any purpose other than certain abstract and intangible reasons. They completely reject the fact that to keep a forest healthy and productive, it is possible and necessary to harvest certain trees.

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The Corps of Engineers is being influenced by preservationists both within and outside the organization. A complicity, and in my opinion, irresponsible segment of the mainstream

news organizations support their views by publishing or broadcasting articles that have little or no basis in fact, or are outright disingenuous. Some of the catch words to look for in these articles are "magnificent" or "ancient" forests and cypress mulch.

All forest landowners and others who wish this state to be progressive and prosperous should be aware of this movement. All efforts to educate the general public of the value of the timber industry should be encouraged and supported.

If the environmental preservationists are successful in destroying the fledgling cypress industry in Louisiana, they will be one step closer in destroying our entire forest industry.

Jewel Willis is a consulting forester in Washington, La., who has more than 40 years experience, especially dealing with cypress forests.