

Cypress Editorial

The following editorial will appear in an upcoming issue of Forests & People magazine, the official publication of the Louisiana Forestry Association. The Council will join with LFA to respond to the unjustified media attacks by environmental groups.

Recent claims by self appointed advocacy groups protest that sensitive Southern forests are being ravaged primarily for the purpose of generating garden mulch. They further claim unsustainable practices endanger the environment, destroy eco-sensitive deep water swamps and expose people and property to natural disaster. One such media slogan is, “Why kill a tree to grow a flower?”

Such extreme claims have appeared in a variety of media from The New York Times to local television programs, all in a battle for consumer perception. As they say, a lie told often enough eventually becomes the truth. Fortunately, public misdirection only works where the facts are unknown or the degree to which the truth is bent is hidden from the audience. And looking at the facts, the truth is a much different color than the hype.

U.S. Forest Service Research recently reported cypress forests growing at 300% of total annual losses and 600% of logging removals. While losses are occurring in sensitive coastal areas, these are due to saltwater intrusion created by levees, roads and other causes—not extensive logging. The fact is that the pretty pictures of deep water swamps in activist campaigns are a misdirection because deep water swamp logging is economically impractical and no logging removals are being done in true coastal areas.

Adding fuel to the fire is academic speculation that 70% to 80% of harvested trees in some areas will not regenerate. The anti-mulch advocates would have the public believe such speculation is not only fact but also applies to all harvested areas—another means of disinformation.

The truth is that Southern cypress forests are de facto proof that regeneration works because most of today’s cypress forests are regenerated stands. And, you don’t kill a tree any more than you kill a field of corn, a patch of tomatoes or a row of carrots: it’s a crop and a renewable re-source.

Yes, sustainable land management and logging practices should be followed to assure future regeneration and growth. The forest industry is in the business of growing timber, and timber, like any crop, must be properly managed if it is to remain healthy and productive. Left alone our forests are susceptible to disease, pests and natural disasters as Nature corrects what man neglects. Just look at the wasted resources from massive fires and timber losses in the West as an example of politics replacing common sense and professional forest management.

Regarding mulch, mankind has always needed to garden since the beginning of time. Some households garden for food and most garden as a quiet refuge from the daily assault of urbanization, traffic, media and machines. Today’s biggest garden trend is moving to outdoor rooms based on our need to commune with nature. Not just once a year for a few who can afford an exotic bayou vacation but every day.

Global warming or climate change is challenging man and his daily environment. Mulch helps cover bare ground to reduce soil off gassing, lower greenhouse gas emissions, prevent erosion, eliminate weeds without chemicals, cool the soil, conserve water, save time, brighten our environment and protect the billions of dollars homeowners invest in gardens and landscapes each year.

Mulch is only 6% of forest by-products and less than 1% of total forest production according to the U.S. Forest Service. It is only one small part of timber harvesting but offers maximum utilization of valuable resources by eliminating waste.

These are the facts. They’re not academic speculation of what might be fact. They’re not undocumented or misdirected advocacy claims. They’re not political pandering or subtext for some future federal money grab. They’re just the truth of the matter.

Unfortunately, the truth can be meaningless if the audience never hears it. The forest industry is being challenged in a battle for public image, and don't be confused about the real issues here. This battle isn't about mulch, or even cypress. The issue is about cutting trees—any trees. Cypress is simply the current advocacy perception of a saleable PR campaign taking advantage of the recent hurricane disasters to advance a long-term agenda against cutting trees as a renew-able resource.

Now is the time for the forest products industry to work together to bring the public the facts regarding benefits and practices. Certifying land owners and loggers is a big step in the right direction demonstrating responsible resource management. We need to work together to put our policies, practices and message in place quickly because the truth is ultimately a matter of public perception, and that is a battle we can't afford to lose.

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