

Sandhills conservation group plants milestone seedling

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Staff photo by Cindy Burnham. Volunteers with the North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership prepare to plant the partnership's 500,000th longleaf pine seedling Friday at Carvers Creek State Park. Related By John Ramsey

Staff writer

Ryan Elting began digging a shallow hole in the woods Friday afternoon, something he has done about 2,000 times since 2005.

This time, cameras captured his movements as more than a dozen people watched him start making a home for a 2-foot-tall longleaf pine tree. This tree was no more or less important than any of the others. It had the fortune of good timing.

The baby tree, set into the earth by two invited guests just east of Fort Bragg at Carvers Creek State Park, marked a milestone for the North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership. It was the 500,000th longleaf pine tree the group has planted since it formed in 2000 to restore the tree and related ecosystems. That's about 1,500 acres of trees, and it's halfway to the goal of 1 million trees the partnership plans to plant by 2015.

"We're going to make sure the 500,000th is here for another 150 years," said Elting, North Carolina Sandhills Program director for The Nature Conservancy, one of the organizations that form the partnership.

Longleaf pine trees covered more than 90 million acres in the South when settlers came to America. Today, there are about 3 million acres.

Larry Earley, author of "Looking for Longleaf: The Fall and Rise of an American Forest," was one of the guests who helped plant the milestone tree. Earley said it's efforts like these that are helping to keep longleaf pine forests from dying out.

"It was all but written off 30 years ago" in favor of the loblolly pine, Earley said. "It's kind of like coming back from the dead."

Longleaf pine forests provide habitat for many different animals, including the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

The partnership was originally created because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service required Fort Bragg to help recover the local population of red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Other organizations in the partnership include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army at Fort Bragg, U.S. Environmental Command, North Carolina Office of Conservation, Planning and Community Affairs, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, North Carolina Division of Forest Resources, The Nature Conservancy, Sandhills Area Land Trust and the Sandhills Ecological Institute.

In 1991, Fort Bragg's most heavily used range was closed to protect the woodpecker. So in some way, those half a million trees have not only helped the environment, but they've also aided national security.

Staff writer John Ramsey can be reached at ramseyj@fayobserver.com or 486-3574.