



Managing Wildfire in Southeast Georgia by Restoring Arabia Bay

The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy is a national collaborative effort to bring a broad cross-section of stakeholders together to address wildland fire management challenges. The Strategy directs wildland fire planning activities and has three primary goals: restore and maintain landscapes, develop Fire-Adapted Communities, and improve wildfire response.

Activity	Impact
# acres burned in 2011 fire that originating from Arabia Bay	11,000
Cost of suppression and economic damage from 2011 fire	\$8,500,000
Restoration funds awarded to restore the Bay (WREP program)	\$8,000,000
# acres in conservation easements in and around bay after restoration	5,350
# rare, threatened, or endangered species benefitting from project	3
# acres of fire-resilient longleaf pine buffer planted around bay	500

Arabia Bay, a 6,000 acre Carolina bay located in Clinch County, Georgia, contains a rich ecological and human history. The Bay provides important habitat for wetland and upland species, including the threatened or endangered gopher tortoise, wood stork, and Flatwoods salamander; is an important part of the regional hydrology; and once provided income to landowners through agricultural and forestry products. Despite these attributes, Arabia Bay has been a source of or contributor to several devastating wildfires.

Property taxes necessitated that early landowners find a way to profit from the Bay. As a result, Arabia Bay was logged and used for rice cultivation and pasture management. Though logging was the most profitable of these ventures, all three attempts to make a profit on the Bay were unsuccessful. Furthermore, draining the bay to carry out these activities resulted in increased wildfire hazard because the high organic matter soils (when dry) provide fuel for wildfires.

Wildfire is a common and cyclic (every 4-5 years), yet often devastating event in Clinch County, Georgia. Ninety percent of

the county is forested and tax structure, jobs, and industry depend on the forest-based economy. Wildfire damages this economy, destroys property, threatens lives, and disrupts important wildlife habitat.

In 2011, a wildfire originating in Arabia Bay burned approximately 11,000 acres within and outside of the Bay. Residential areas in the nearby city of Homerville were threatened and Southern Georgia and Northern Florida experienced reduced visibility from smoke. Fire-fighting efforts were led by the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) and local timber companies, Langdale and Rayonier. Suppression costs exceeded \$500,000 and economic losses were \$8 million.

Following the 2011 fire, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and GFC hosted a community meeting in Clinch County called *After the Smoke Settles*. This meeting introduced local landowners to wildfire awareness strategies, including Firewise principles, forestry best management practices (BMPs), financial assistance programs, and the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP).

Success stories highlight regional wildland fire accomplishments that support implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy in the Southeast. The stories demonstrate how the Southeast is improving its "fire resiliency" through technology, education and outreach, forest management, collaboration, and more. Success stories also serve as a model for other communities to follow.



Arabia Bay fire smoke map.
Credit: NOAA and Wildfire Today

In August 2012, the NRCS worked with U.S. Representative Jack Kingston to secure \$8 million for restoration of Arabia Bay through WREP. Restoring the bay:

- improves wildlife habitat
- reduces occurrence and intensity of future wildfires
- decreases timber and property loss
- improves firefighter and homeowner safety

All Arabia Bay landowners agreed to participate in the program, enabling full hydrologic restoration of the bay. In addition, the WREP project provided Arabia Bay landowners potential property tax savings by buying 5,350 acres of conservation easements in and around the bay. The GFC, The Conservation Fund, and NRCS committed resources toward restoration activities outlined by WREP, including flooding natural ditches within the bay (that were once drained) and establishing an 500 acre longleaf pine, fire resilient forest buffer outside of the bay.

David White, of the NRCS, expressed the importance of this restoration project to the broader community in a 2012 press release. “You’re talking about huge avoided costs in the future. The taxes that won’t have to be paid to fight fires are going to be huge, and that’s money that Clinch County can put back into their schools or roads or some other uses,” said White.



Aerial view of the Arabia Bay Fire. Credit: Georgia Forestry Commission



The threatened gopher tortoise benefits from the restoration efforts at Arabia Bay. Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Service



The threatened wood stork benefits from restoration of Arabia Bay. Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Service

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