

A LONGLEAF LEGACY

HEBERT HODGES AND THE WILLIE HODGES ESTATE FAMILY FARM

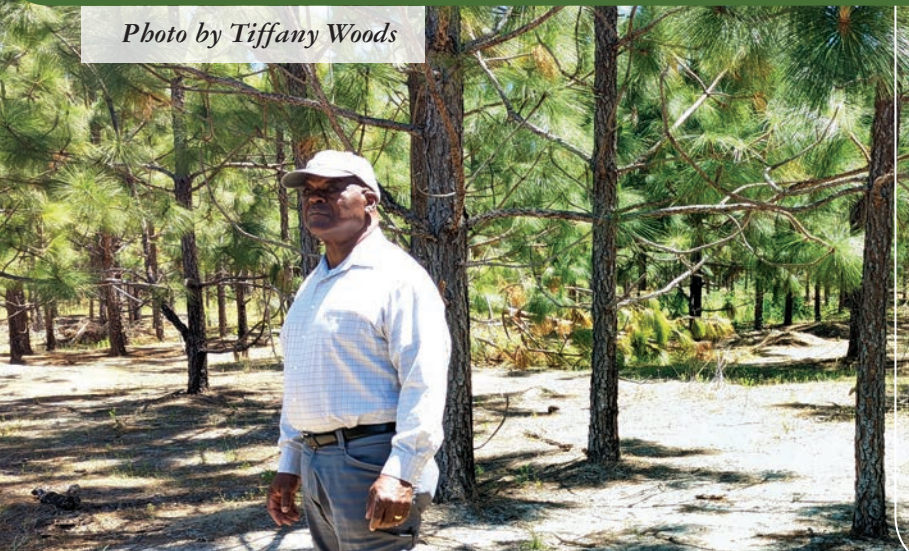
By Wendy Jo Ledbetter, The Longleaf Alliance



Herbert Hodges (center) with Longleaf for All co-leads Luther Jones and Tiffany Woods. Photo courtesy of Tiffany Woods.

Hebert Hodges and the Willie Hodges Estate Family Farm in Twin City, Georgia, are the 2022 Gjerstad/Johnson Landowners of the Year. The award honors a private landowner for ensuring the future of the longleaf ecosystem on private land. Mr. Hodges and family will be recognized at the 2022 Regional Longleaf Awards Program during the 14th Biennial Longleaf Conference in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Photo by Tiffany Woods



During my life's journey, I have come to these conclusions:

- Excuses have no value
- Negative outcomes are guides toward success
- Where you start does not determine how far you are going
- And, cruise control is for cars, not life

Herbert W. Hodges, Points of Wisdom

Traveling a winding road through the shaded woods of South Georgia's Emanuel County, one arrives at the arid hill-top of the Hodges Family Farm. Open longleaf pine stands with dense wiregrass and abundant forb groundcover are in view.

Patriarch Herbert Hodges has guided the care and prosperity of these longleaf stands as part of his father Willie Hodges' Estate. The rich history of this 600-acre family farm, which can trace its beginnings to 1883, includes Mr. Hodges recalling his father's turpentine operations. One of nine siblings, Hodges says none of them were true farmers, and the concern for sustaining the property for future generations led them to consider longleaf for timber production. Converting farmland to longleaf pine as a part of the estate's economic portfolio began around 2011.

With assistance from the Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), 390 acres of longleaf pine were established with firebreaks to allow future prescribed burning, with more longleaf plantings planned this winter. To maintain and improve low-lying bottomlands and stream crossings, water bars were installed to help combat soil erosion and sediment loading. Mr. Hodges has worked with a consulting forester and other natural resource professionals to reach the family's goals for their land.

Keeping the family estate intact has benefitted the native wildlife, too. A sustainable population of the state's threatened gopher tortoise has been documented. Along with the

tortoises, aggregate species like the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake have been observed. To avoid disturbance and compromise of the tortoise's habitat, more intensive land practices like pine straw raking will be considered for other areas of the Farm.

Dr. JT Pynne, Wildlife Biologist with the Georgia Wildlife Federation, noted, "Many gopher tortoises are found on private lands, usually where prescribed fire is used to promote diverse grass and forb understories and generally associated with longleaf pine savannas. These animals are long-lived herbivores and a keystone species for promoting rich, native biodiversity, resulting in more productive private lands. With 93% of Georgia's land in private industrial and non-industrial ownership, working with landowners like Mr. Hodges is extremely important for conserving wildlife species, like the state-threatened gopher tortoise."

Beyond the work on the land, the Hodges Family Farm is also teaching and inspiring fellow landowners as a demonstration site. With the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and other conservation partners, a "Learn & Burn" Workshop was held in 2022 with another planned for 2023. Hodges Farm will also host a Longleaf 101 Academy next year, in cooperation with The Longleaf Alliance, NWF, and NRCS. This two-day workshop includes classroom instruction and field time to showcase Mr. Hodges' NRCS practices, view longleaf plantings, and discuss pine straw production.

Working with Mr. Hodges and like-minded landowners across the longleaf landscape is the purposeful effort of America's Longleaf working group, Longleaf for All, to engage and



Photo by Wendy Ledbetter



Gopher tortoises form open tunnel systems that host more than 350 other species, including several other species that are threatened. Photo by Tiffany Woods.



“It is wonderful to watch the mentorship Mr. Hodges provides to other landowners through the Hodges Model Farm in partnership with NRCS and the Longleaf for All program. Landowners teaching other landowners is crucial to our regional outreach efforts to restore longleaf pine. After Mr. Hodges hosted his first Learn & Burn in the spring of 2022, a handful of landowners requested follow-up advice and mentorship specifically from Mr. Hodges as they began considering first-time burning options for their own tracts. Mr. Hodges is not only passionate about his forested property and the family legacy, but he is also dedicated to helping other landowners and their families keep their land for future generations. His teaching spirit and generosity make him truly deserving of this award. It has been a privilege to learn from him and work alongside him on the Hodges Model Farm.”

Tiffany Woods, National Wildlife Federation and Longleaf for All co-lead

support minority landowners in their forest management goals and objectives. Providing technical assistance, exploring financial assistance programs, and providing education and training opportunities are key elements of supporting landowners with their vision for their land.

Vontice Jackson, District Conservationist with the USDA-NRCS Swainsboro, Georgia office, shares the sentiment of

many, “I have had the pleasure of working with Mr. Herbert Hodges over the last ten years. He is passionate about preserving his family's legacy and protecting the natural resources on their land. He has helped other minority landowners in the area do the same for their family property. He is a trailblazer and model forestry landowner for all.”