Does Longleaf Make Dollars And Sense?

By RHETT JOHNSON, Co-Director, The Longleaf Alliance and Director, Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center

With interest in longleaf at its highest point in decades, maybe ever, landowners and managers are asking what kind of investment it actually is. The answer surprises some, but there is every reason to expect very positive returns on investment and in a reasonably short time span. Lumbermen have long realized the value of longleaf products like high-quality straight-grained dimensional lumber and strong durable poles. The market continues to recognize this quality by paying top prices for these products.

For years, however, longleaf was regarded as a poor investment for a couple of reasons. First, it was considered a difficult species to plant. If it was established successfully, a lengthy period in the grass stage before it initiated height growth extended the period before income could be earned, gaining longleaf a reputation for slow growth. The tree was also often relegated to “longleaf sites;” usually deep dry sands where growth was indeed slow, as it would have been for any species. Recent developments in nursery techniques, management practices, and markets have made that prognosis dated.

Risk Reduced

Better quality bareroot seedlings and containerized seedlings have taken much of the risk out of planting longleaf. We have learned much about handling and planting longleaf seedlings in the past several years as well. These gains, coupled with increased knowledge about the role of competing vegetation and the development of selective herbicides to control it, have made it possible to shorten and in many cases eliminate the grass stage. That accomplished, we have learned that longleaf is not, as often reported, a slow grower—only a slow starter. Research has shown that once established on average and poor sites, it will catch and pass faster starting loblolly or slash pine in a reasonable time, 12-15 years on poor sites and 25-30 years on average sites. On very good, productive sites, it takes longer to catch up, often outside a reasonable investment period if return on investment is the only measure used.

One consideration often overlooked is that the growth rate of wood volume is not the only or even the most important measure of the value of a forestry investment. The more important measure is the growth rate in value or dollars. Remember that wood volume is not the only or even the most important measure to make comparisons between investment opportunities possible. Unfortunately, in forestry investments, the opposite is generally the case. Costs are incurred early in the investment and profits are earned later or even at the end of the investment. Early returns from the sale of straw before commercial wood products are produced help longleaf produce income at about the same age as faster starting loblolly or slash. CRP payments offset the early costs of planting very quickly and make forestry, and particularly longleaf, a very lucrative investment indeed.

Since longleaf plantings are currently eligible for CRP contracts of 15 years rather than 10 like other pines, they are particularly attractive. An analysis using a planting cost, after cost share, of $97 per acre; a one-time first year herbicide application cost of $45 per acre; $10 per acre per prescribed burn costs at ages 8, 11, and 14; and an annual CRP payment of $40 per acre, yields a very attractive Internal Rate of Return of nearly 29 percent! Remember, this is after most of the significant costs have been incurred and before the first stick of wood or bale of straw is sold from the land. This return is the result of essentially front-loading the investment with early returns, the CRP payments. This is also an almost entirely risk-free investment scenario. The CRP payments are guaranteed by the government if the landowner can keep as few as 200 trees per acre alive during the life of the investment.

Projected Financial Return

All investment analysis must be based on assumptions or projections of future performance. Forestry investments are no different. The accuracy of these projections is critical to the accuracy of the analysis. The basic information needs are growth and yield projections. Growth is projected in terms of volume of wood produced and yield in terms of products grown and in what proportions. Unfortunately, we have little information to draw on with longleaf, particularly planted longleaf, and even less information on longleaf planted in old agricultural fields, as is taking place all over the South with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) program. The limited data we do have, however, indicate very good growth can be expected if management is done properly and that product yields are very favorable, with a high proportion of poles and quality sawtimber produced.

We also know that the wood from longleaf is heavier than that of other Southern pines. That means that when wood is bought on a weight basis, and it almost always is, more money is paid for longleaf than for the same volume of other pines. One 20-year data set, collected in Mississippi by the consulting firm John Guthrie and Son’s, indicates a premium of 10 to 20 percent paid for sales containing mostly longleaf in every year, in good markets and bad.

In addition, longleaf pine straw has become very valuable in the landscaping business. Returns of $100 to $500 per acre per year have been reported and management techniques for straw production are the subject of much study.

One analysis, done by Rick Hamilton of North Carolina State University, predicted a very reasonable internal rate of return of 7.9 percent for planted longleaf on a site with a site quality index of 45 and an internal rate of return of 9.4 percent for a site quality of 55. These rates were calculated for revenues earned by sale of wood only. Both are comparable with rates earned by most investments, even the stock market over the long term. When the sale of pine straw is added to the mix, the return rate of the investment increases to 9.35 percent and 10.1 percent respectively.

A general truth in financial analysis is that the earlier in the investment revenues are earned and the later in the investment costs are incurred, the better the investment. This is due to the power of compounding interest and the importance of time when discounting incomes and costs back to the year of investment to make comparisons between investment opportunities possible. Unfortunately, in forestry investments, the opposite is generally the case. Costs are incurred early in the investment and profits are earned later or even at the end of the investment. Early returns from the sale of straw before commercial wood products are produced help longleaf produce income at about the same age as faster starting loblolly or slash. CRP payments offset the early costs of planting very quickly and make forestry, and particularly longleaf, a very lucrative investment indeed.

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Longleaf is resistant to diseases and insect attacks, and notably tolerant of fire, reducing risk of loss to these factors significantly. It is difficult to calculate the value of this risk reduction, but this natural insurance policy against loss does indeed have value. The long-term value of this investment is maximized if the trees are allowed to grow into poles, often thought to be optimal in rotations of 55 years or so on most sites, but the CRP payments make it a very profitable investment over the short term as well. Most of us can appreciate the long-term value of an investment, say in 50 years, but have a much greater interest in return in terms of our own lifetimes.

David Morehead and Coleman Dangerfield, economists at the University of Georgia, estimated internal rates of return of more than 80 percent using reasonable growth and yield figures, costs, and prices and factoring in aggressive management, wood sales, pine straw, and CRP payments. We cannot predict growth and yield with great confidence at this time, and have even less assurance about things like markets and prices, but it is pretty obvious that longleaf is a good investment.

**Conclusion**

The Longleaf Alliance is in the planning stages of a regional growth and yield study that should refine our ability to make those projections and make investment analysis more dependable. Other areas of interest include the financial attractiveness of natural regeneration and uneven-aged management. The potential for increased wildlife lease value for longleaf plantings is also a subject of much interest. The Longleaf Alliance has adopted the philosophy that the way to save something is to give it value, and one sure way to give something value is to use it. Museums lock up and protect things that once were and won’t be again. We don’t want to relegate longleaf to the museum, but make it a contributing component in the southern landscape. In order to accomplish that, it is necessary that private landowners play a significant role. Private landowners have a right to expect a positive return from their lands and on their investments. Longleaf can provide that profit and a host of other benefits as well.

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**The Longleaf Alliance**

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Forest landowners prefer longleaf pine forests for their valuable timber and associated ecosystem, one that is both aesthetically pleasing and conducive to a diverse plant and animal community. Unfortunately, many of these landowners have been unable to readily obtain information and advice on longleaf management.

**Longleaf Alliance Established**

The Longleaf Alliance was established in 1996 with the express purpose of coordinating efforts to restore longleaf and its accompanying ecosystem on lands where they are compatible with the objectives of the landowner. This initiative resulted from the recognition that interest in the longleaf ecosystem and the tree itself was growing rapidly. Ecologists, foresters, wildlife biologists, landowners and land managers were all searching for information or for an outlet to distribute what they had learned. A growing body of anecdotal information, personal experience, and scientific data was being passed on fitfully and many areas of the public were not being reached. The Longleaf Alliance was formed in an attempt to serve as a clearinghouse for information on longleaf and longleaf forests for the general public.

The Longleaf Alliance is based at Auburn University’s Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center in southern Alabama in the heart of the largest longleaf concentration left in the country. It is a nonprofit collaborative effort incorporating a broad community of similar interests in the longleaf forest system. Its structure is simple, its goals direct: the establishment of a functional longleaf forest ecosystem to the extent feasible in today’s Southern forest environment.

Recognizing and emphasizing the importance of both the economic and ecological value of the longleaf forest broadens the appeal of the Alliance and gives it credibility with both the scientific and private communities. Members include researchers, outreach providers, landowners and managers, tree nurseries, state and federal natural-resource agencies, forestry and wildlife consultants, forest industries, and forestry service providers. Because the vast majority of forestland acreage in the Southeast is privately owned, the Alliance has directed significant effort to the management and re-establishment of longleaf forests on private lands. This has been done by conducting workshops focused on establishment and management techniques, responding to numerous daily specific inquiries and producing timely publications pertinent to longleaf issues. The effort and the organization are regional in scope, and the Alliance presently has nearly 700 members from every state in the longleaf region. As a benefit to members, the Alliance maintains and constantly updates databases on current longleaf related research, longleaf seedling nurseries, forestry and wildlife consultants with longleaf expertise, and pertinent research and demonstration sites.

The Alliance has held two regional meetings that each attracted large enthusiastic audiences. The first was held in Mobile, Alabama in 1996 and was attended by over 250 longleaf fans and the second, held in Charleston in November 1998, attracted 400 attendees. Numerous publications including conference proceedings, a landowner’s guide to management of longleaf forests, research notes, newsletters and other pertinent resources are available at a nominal cost.

The Longleaf Alliance is funded through donations, memberships, and grants. Further information on the Alliance is available by writing The Longleaf Alliance, Rt. 7, Box 131, Andalusia, Alabama 36420, telephone 334-222-7779, fax 334-222-0581; e-mail addresses: dxnctr@alaweb.com; gjerstad@forestry.auburn.edu; or hainds@alaweb.com.

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