

Pioneer Forest completed management plan, added staff in 2019

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Last year proved to be eventful for Pioneer Forest, with staff additions, a new management plan, a European forester tour and ongoing feral hog eradication efforts that ramped up at the start of 2020.

Much of that activity is detailed in the annual report published by the L-A-D Foundation, the non-profit charged with managing the forest as an exemplary example of uneven-aged conservative single-tree selection forestry.

"It was a really big year," said forest manager Jason Green. "One of the biggest things for us was rewriting our forest management plan and updating it."

According to the annual report, the Pioneer Forest staff crafted a new forest management plan to address a drop in tree reproduction likely caused by the canopies of older, larger trees shading out younger trees vying for sunlight. The plan was approved by the board of directors in October.

Planned major management actions include harvesting between 5,500 and 7,000 acres annually to maintain a 20-year cutting cycle, increasing the volume of timber harvested per acre with monitoring before and after the cut, and extending the use of prescribed fire to enhance regeneration of shortleaf pine.

The plan also calls for maintaining the recreational trail system through the forest, limiting motorized vehicle access on private forest lands and limiting the spread of exotic invasive species. That includes working to eradicate feral hogs from Pioneer Forest in cooperation with the Missouri Feral Hog Partnership and surrounding landowners.

Another highlight of the year was a tour by 16 European foresters from Germany, Switzerland and Austria in June. They are members of a group that advocates close-to-nature forestry that involves selecting individual trees for harvest while maintaining at least three distinct age classes of trees.

Their methods closely resemble the management methods used by Pioneer Forest. Information was shared on the challenges of maintaining the uneven-aged character of a fully stocked forest.

"That was a really good tour, both for them and for us," Green said. "We learned a lot. We were actually invited by them to tour forests in Germany, but there's no travel anywhere right now," due to the pandemic.

Two new foresters joined Pioneer Forest in 2019, Levi Bachmann and Clay Jensen. Bachmann graduated from the University of Missouri in 2017 with degrees in fisheries and wildlife and in forestry, then worked on feral hog issues with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). With Pioneer Forest, he oversees timber sales and assists in efforts to eradicate feral hogs. He is based in the Salem office.

Jensen, as a senior at the University of Missouri, completed a three-month internship with Pioneer Forest last summer, learning about single-tree selection, helping administer timber sales, and trapping and removing feral hogs, among other tasks. After receiving his degree in natural resource management with an emphasis in forestry in December, he was hired by Pioneer Forest in January, and is working mostly in the Ellington District.

According to the report, Pioneer Forest has been working to eradicate feral hogs on its lands for years and supports a highly coordinated trapping effort on public and private lands that began at the start of 2020 after Mark Twain National Forest announced in December that it would follow through on its proposed closure to hog hunting.

In 2016, after decades of trying to combat the hogs through a combination of hunting and professional trapping, the Department of Conservation, the Corps of Engineers, L-A-D Foundation and others changed their strategy, focusing on trapping while prohibiting hunting hogs on land they own and manage, the report says. Mark Twain joined the effort in December.

"We continue to trap the feral hogs," Green said. "We've eliminated over 100 hogs since January. All of our staff participates in that on some level." He stressed that Pioneer Forest is still closed to feral hog hunting.

He described the trapping process that begins with locating hogs in the forest. "They're fairly easy to locate because of their rooting habits," he said. "We'll establish a bait site, and we'll usually put up a game camera so we can document how many of them are there."

Once they start coming into the bait site regularly, a trap is set up and the staff continues to bait it. An elevated drop trap held aloft with a pulley system is used to trap the hogs.

Soon the hogs become comfortable entering the trap to feed and make it a habit. "And then once we get them on that pattern, we set the trap," Green said.

"And then the whole group of pigs will usually go in. They'll hit the trip wire and the whole suspended trap will drop all at once and get the entire group of pigs. We've caught as many as 14 at a time." It's not uncommon to catch a truck bed full or more at once, he said.

Pioneer Forest also grew last year. In March the forest acquired 280 acres on the upper Current River in Dent County, adding to a now 4,060-acre tract just upstream of the popular landing at Cedar Grove. The large tract includes 560 acres of Conservation Department land. The acquisition helps control trespass and prevents construction of a single-family dwelling allowed by an existing easement, the report states.

With the addition, Pioneer land on the west side of the Current River serves as a three-mile long forested gateway along Highway B and further protects the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, it says. The forest also acquired two tracts of land from a neighbor on Wildcat Mountain in Shannon County and several small tracts in Reynolds County.

Also mentioned in the 2019 report is a state champion butternut tree Green first discovered while marking timber in the summer of 2018. Due to its size, he checked the list of state champion trees kept by MDC and determined it could be a contender.

Pioneer foresters Dustin Collier and Levi Bachmann measured the tree—with a height of 78 feet and a breast height circumference of 78 inches—and MDC verified the measurements. It's now listed as a co-champion with a butternut on MDC land.

“We probably have more state champion trees,” Green said. “We just haven’t found them yet.” He called it an unusually large butternut. “They get a blight (called butternut canker) and they usually don’t get to the size of this one, not anywhere close,” he said. “To find one in that condition that’s living and fairly healthy is a pretty outstanding find.”

Conservationist Leo A. Drey began acquisition of the lands that are now Pioneer Forest in March 1951. When National Distillers, a private company with lands located in the Ozarks, decided to liquidate its holdings in 1954, it sold approximately 90,000 acres of land to Drey, who continued to purchase other forestland in the Ozarks for Pioneer Forest. For more than half a century, Pioneer Forest has restored more than 153,000 acres of Ozark woodlands across six Missouri counties through conservative, natural forest management.

In July of 2004, Leo and his wife, Kay, donated Pioneer Forest to the L-A-D Foundation, the non-profit he founded in 1962, to ensure that the forest will be managed through environmentally sound and sustainable practices.

Source: https://www.thesalemnewsonline.com/news/local_news/article_ab9318dc-83e8-11ea-84e5-63dfdd7964fb.html