

LOCAL NEWS

National, state, and local leaders gather to explore Chattahoochee Valley conservation efforts



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It's a familiar sight for the Columbus and surrounding areas – smokey skies that mean it's time for another prescribed burn. The National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and Southern Company helped gather more than 100 national, state, and local leaders to learn how these controlled fires support Chattahoochee Valley conservation efforts.

“We're actually out here looking at how to restore these forests so they can actually support the wildlife and wildlife habitat that is good for these species,” explains Jay Jensen, the NFWF Southern Region Director.

Environmental experts explained to attendees, prescribed burns are actually essential to the protected species that call the Chattahoochee Valley home, like the gopher tortoise and the eastern indigo snake. Controlled fires help keep their habitats healthy by making space between the trees.

He also adds by controlling where the fires burn and when, we're far less likely to see wildfires.

"All the brush and dead vegetation that might fuel a fire, or an uncontrolled wildfire, the ones that cause damage to homes and properties and endanger lives, what we find is that those fires, the number of them, actually go down with a prescribed burn program in place," Jensen adds.

Fort Benning leads the way in the prescribed burn program by organizing fires on purchased land then converted into Army Compatible Use Buffer properties. Brent Widener is the ACUB Program manager and he says conservation goes hand in hand with the army's combat training.

"What we found is actually that prescribed fire program, those open, park-like longleaf forests provide ideal training scenarios for particularly our infantry soldiers that are doing dismounted maneuver training," Widener says.

Southern Company has been a major benefactor in the prescribed burn program for about 16 years. Representative Joe Drumm says it's not only important to provide money, but see the good work done with it and encourage others to do what they can for the environment.

"We're here to brainstorm, bounce ideas off each other, to ensure that we keep growing and keep improving the environment," Drumm says.

The group that visited Fort Benning and the surrounding wildlife conservation properties included representatives from national and state environmental government agencies, local non profits, and local land owners.

Organizers say the diversity of the group helps spread environmental education to as many sources that can make a difference.

"All of our agencies are operating in a climate with limited resources, and so we have to rely on each other to get things done that need to happen in these landscapes. There's no other way we could get it done," Widener says.

"Land owners who may be growing these trees for the lumber industry may be concerned if they find these protected and endangered animals on their land, that the Endangered Species Act may cause some restrictions, but there's ways to make that work and be totally compatible," Jensen explains. "So you can grow those trees and make a dollar and you can also grow these species. It really gets people excited to hold and interact with these animals."

To learn more about local conservation efforts and endangered species, [visit the Chattahoochee Fall Line Conservation Partnership page online.](#)