

Water district plants 1 million seedlings



Longleaf pine and wiregrass seedlings are planted in the Econfina Creek Water Management Area.

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By The News Herald

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SAND HILLS — The Northwest Florida Water Management District recently planted more than a million longleaf pine and wiregrass seedlings along the Econfina Creek and other water management areas in the area.

The effort was part of a reforestation and groundcover restoration project.

The plantings took place over 19 days in January — at an average of about 60,000 plants per day — and covered 1,483 acres in Bay, Jackson, Walton and Washington counties.

Funding for the project came from revenue collected through district timber sales and cost-share assistance from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Longleaf Stewardship Fund through partnership grants with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF).

“The National Wild Turkey Federation is proud of its partnerships with the Northwest Florida Water Management District and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and our overall longleaf restoration

efforts in the Southeast,” said Mark Hatfield, NWTf’s director of eastern conservation planning. “We are dedicated to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting heritage, and longleaf pine is a Southern ecosystem that is critical to the restoration of wild turkey populations.”

Planting native species such as longleaf pine trees and wiregrass restores land to a more natural condition, improving plant species diversity and wildlife habitat for animal and insect species, providing erosion control and helping provide “fuel” for effective prescribed burns. Prescribed fire is a safe, effective and efficient land management tool, which applies a natural process to ensure ecosystem health, water management district officials said in a press release. Prescribed fires, which mimic naturally occurring fires, reduce wildfire risk, enhance native vegetation and improve wildlife habitat.

“The Nature Conservancy provided 363,000 longleaf pine trees to advance habitat restoration at Econfina Creek Water Management Area,” said Brian Pelc, natural areas restoration specialist with The Nature Conservancy in Florida. “Restoring lands near Econfina Creek helps to protect this critical source of clean, fresh drinking water for Bay County residents.

He said the grant was made possible through a partnership with the Apalachicola Regional Stewardship Alliance, a multiagency cooperative that includes The Nature Conservancy and the water management district, which works to restore and manage native ecosystems within the Apalachicola River region.

The district owns more than 212,000 acres across Northwest Florida, protecting river corridors, springs, streams, lakes and wetlands. The Econfina Creek, Choctawhatchee River and Chipola River water management areas consist of 111,243 acres and protect groundwater recharge areas, sandhill lakes, rivers and notable springs like Williford, Sylvan and Pitt.