

Our forests can help meet energy goals

By Jason S. Lichtstein and Edward Cole

My View

Florida's governor and elected officials have made it a top priority to greatly reduce the state's greenhouse gas footprint, while increasing the amount of energy we produce from renewable resources.

Florida's forests, which dominate North Florida's landscape and provide the backbone for the region's rural economy, can play a key role in meeting these goals.

Our forests already store significant amounts of carbon and offer an excellent opportunity, through good forest management and reforestation efforts, to sequester even more. In addition, wood and other biomass from our forests already provide renewable energy, and our forests are poised to step up with even more.

It is thus critical to our state's environmental and energy goals, and to North Florida's economy, that programs developed to address climate change and our renewable energy needs include a significant role for our forests. North Florida's forests and the region stand at the cusp of this exciting moment in time for our state and can play a key part in this transformation of Florida's environmental and energy policy.

Florida's forests cover over 15 million acres (almost half the state), and 19 of Florida's 67 counties, all of them in North Florida, are more than 75 percent covered by forests.

For example, Leon County is more than 50 percent forested, and most of its neighboring counties are more than 75 percent forested. North Florida's forests offer a huge opportunity for this region.

With regard to climate change, Gov. Charlie Crist has proposed reducing Florida's greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, and both major-party presidential candidates have publicly supported similar reductions through implementation of a cap-and-trade program for carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions.

Florida's forests can play a key role in meeting these reduction goals. Any state or federal climate change program should encourage forest landowners to store and sequester more carbon as a means to reduce overall carbon emissions.

Regarding renewable energy, recent comprehensive energy and climate change legislation signed by Gov. Crist in June directs the Florida Public Service Commission to prepare a proposed Renewable Portfolio Standard for the Legislature's review next session. It will likely require that a greater percentage of energy be generated from renewable sources.

Already, Green Circle Bio Energy's facility in Cottdale, for example, is producing hundreds of thousands of tons of wood pellets for use in power plants. North Florida's sizable forests and vibrant forest industry can be an important partner in these efforts and help attract and bring even more of these types of facilities to the region, generating jobs and tax dollars.

Florida's state conservation agencies are increasingly looking to preserve "working agricultural lands" - including working forests - through the voluntary purchase of development rights from landowners in order to protect these lands from future development, while ensuring that they continue to provide benefits to our economy and environment, including carbon sequestration and renewable energy.

Recent state legislation extends the Florida Forever conservation lands program another 10 years and makes an important watershed shift in the program's focus toward acquisition of development rights from willing owners of working lands.

The legislation also provides a dedicated funding stream for the Florida Department of Agriculture's innovative Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, which will protect local rural economies by maintaining working family lands in forestry and agriculture. By keeping working forests in production, we will ensure that our forests continue to contribute to our state's climate change goals and energy needs.

Florida's forests - especially North Florida's - are poised to help meet the state's environmental challenges, while providing enhanced economic opportunity for North Florida and maintaining the beauty of the region's natural environment. As we wrestle with issues of climate change and energy, we should keep in mind the tremendous opportunity and promise that North Florida's forests offer us in successfully addressing our environmental goals of today and tomorrow.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

· Jason S. Lichtstein and Edward Cole are attorneys at Akerman Senterfitt. Lichtstein is based in Tallahassee, and Cole, who is also a forester, is in Jacksonville. Both practice environmental law and are a part of Akerman's Forest Resources practice group. Contact them at jason.lichtstein@akerman.com.