Seedlings Facing Shaky Future, But There's Hope

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When life seems tough, consider the future of 2,500 cypress seedlings planted this week in a musky field 10 miles north of Henderson.

They face the threat of nutria, an unattractive swamp rat which enjoys ripping up cypress seedlings to dine on their succulent roots.

If the nutria don't get them, the rabbits may. Wild bunnies don't seem to find the seedlings too tasty, but will chew them just to keep their ever-growing teeth filed so they don't curl under.

There is also the hot summer sun to contend with since the seedlings have been resting for the past several months in storage regulated at about 35 degrees.

Despite these potential hazards, George Miller is optimistic that, in about 40 years, there will be a nice stand of cypress trees on that field.

Looking Ahead

As district forester for the Louisiana Office of Forestry, Miller is accustomed to planning for the future.

He believes that planting cypress trees is worth the risks. It's a joint project of the Office of Forestry, landowner Larry Arnaud and the U.S. Forestry Service.

Arnaud supplied the 5 1/2 acres adjacent to the St. Landry/St. Martin parishes line where the baby trees are being planted and will cultivate them. The Office of Forestry has a 10-year lease with an option to renew, supplying the seedlings and labor to plant them with, Miller said.

The U.S. Forestry service will take measurements of the trees and collect information to be used in research.

Studying Spacing

The project will give foresters a chance to study the relationship between tree growth and the spacing between the cypress trees.

Foresters will also take a look at different cultivation methods.

A seven-man crew from the U.S. Forestry Service office travelled from Clinton to begin planting the seedlings Thursday and is expected to complete that task this afternoon.

They are aided by an aluminum tool, called a "dibble," which Miller designed. It resembles a shovel, but digs a triangular hole.

One worker concentrated on measuring the location where each of the trees were to be planted. To mark the spot, he would insert a wire stake, topped with a blue piece of plastic, into the ground.

Miller said the year old seedlings, which are about 36 inches tall with deep roots and about three eighths of an inch in diameter, are planted so their roots are completely buried in the mud.

Normally, we would plant them in February or March," he said. But at that time, water is still too high in the Atchafalaya Basin. If water completely covers the seedlings during their growing season, they will die.

"So we put them in cold storage until the water went down about three weeks ago," he said. "This project is also an experiment to see the effect of cold storage on seedlings."

He is crossing his fingers that the nutria will leave the seedlings alone.

"Hopefuly we won't have any nutria damage because everything else is looking good," he said.

Miller suspects that the nutria like the salty fertilizer that they find in the seedling roots. Or, they might nibble on the seedlings just because they are there, he said.

Grabbing At Blue

At first, cows who passed by the field of blue markers caused a bit of a problem.

"They'd just see that blue and grab them," Miller said.

Once the bovines determined the markers weren't edible, they spit them out and moved on. Cows are no longer allowed in the area.

Miller said there has been a general decline in the number of cypress trees "because there is little effort to regenerate them."

Some people have the misconception that cypress trees are difficult to grow.

That's not the case, he said.

"Cypress transplants are extremely easy," he said. "The trees do everything they can, but it's a matter of battling other parts of nature - such as the nutria."

Photos By P.C. Piam