Store won’t sell cypress mulch

Conservation group cites win; industry worries about future

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Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. has told its suppliers it won’t buy and sell cypress mulch that’s harvested, bagged, or manufactured in the state of Louisiana, starting in January 2008.

The Save Our Cypress Coalition, a group of environmental organizations based in Louisiana, has publicly pressured retailers Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe’s to stop selling cypress mulch since November 2006.

“It’s a tremendous step that Wal-Mart has recognized that cypress sustainability is a serious concern,” said Mark Ford, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, in a statement on Wednesday.

Up to 80 percent of the state’s cypress is in southern Louisiana swamp areas that can’t regrow, according to a 2005 state report. Louisiana’s coastal cypress forests are a buffer against strong winds and storm surges. One of those areas is the Atchafalaya Basin, where environmental scientists worry about regrowth in high-water areas, and invasive exotic trees in drier areas.

The Louisiana Forestry Association, which represents the logging industry, doesn’t agree with this state report that’s touted by environmentalists, said spokeswoman See MULCH on Page 7B

By the numbers

- 80 percent of Louisiana cypress swamps are in sites with no potential for natural or artificial regrowth.
- 791,000 acres of cypress/tupelo forest cover Louisiana.
- 80 percent of those forests are privately owned.
- 7 billion board feet of cypress sawtimber are in these forests.
- 222 million board feet is growing annually.
- 30 million board feet is harvested annually.

SOURCE: 2005 report by the Coastal Wetland Forest Conservation and Use Science Working Group; Paul D. Frey, commissioner/state forester of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry; Louisiana Forestry Association

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Mulch

Janet Tompkins.

They say landowners who can’t make money by harvesting cypress could choose to sell their land to developers.

"The real loser in this is all these small private landowners," she said. "If (retailers) stop the sale of cypress mulch it really will have no impact on anything, and it's a distraction of things that really need to be done for coastal restoration."

Wal-Mart's decision follows Lowe's continued statement that it has a moratorium on mulch from cypress harvested south of I-10/I-12 in Louisiana, excluding the Pearl River Basin, and suppliers have assured Lowe's they're following cypress harvest laws.

Jean Niemi, a Home Depot spokesman, said the company has asked its suppliers not to use cypress from coastal Louisiana and that it has given suppliers until Oct. 1 to confirm that they are not using the product.

But there's no official inspections of what mulch is put into which bags to prove that suppliers are avoiding cypress forests that are proven not to regenerate.

Atchafalaya Basinkeeper Dean Wilson and coalition members have tried for months to share photographic evidence of logging being done in restricted coastal areas, and say they've traced those trees to mulching companies that bag and sell to the big three retailers.

One example, highlighted by The Daily Advertiser in a Feb. 12 story on cypress logging, noted a prominent mulch company that said it mistakenly put Louisiana cypress mulch into bags marked "Florida."

Until official product inspection rules are created to show where mulch really came from, Dan Favre, campaign organizer for the Gulf Restoration Network, said buyers should avoid any cypress product.

Other mulch options are available such as leftovers from pine logging that would occur anyway.

"Use something else like pine straw, or pine bark nuggets," he said. "In most places there's some sort of pine mulch available. If big retailers embrace these alternatives, they'll open up a market for those and others, and prices will go down."

Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Wal-mart will no longer sell Cypress mulch like these stacks at the Louisiana Wood Products manufacturing plant South of Port Allen.

John Rowland/Advertiser file photo