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Sandhills, Triangle Chapters' Earth Day Walk in the Forest a Major Success

Thanks to the Sandhills and Triangle Chapters of the North Carolina Division of the Appalachian SAF, the town of Erwin recently experienced its first "Walk in the Forest." Held in commemoration of Earth Day, the event brought more than 100 middle school children to a 1,000-acre longleaf pine forest, where they learned about a variety of topics, including the efforts to re-establish the longleaf pine ecosystem in the South and the use of prescribed fire as a forest management tool.

The walk was the brainchild of Jim Gray, CF, owner of JMG Consulting and past chair of the Sandhills Chapter, and the chapter's current chair, Henry Randolph, of the Edward and Randolph Forest Management Group.

Gray said that he wanted to help organize the event because he thought it was important to create a greater awareness of forestry in his community.

"I really felt like we needed to bring it home into the Sandhills. If [Walks in the Forest] could be done in other places in the state, then it could be done in our area, too," he said. "Also, I wanted to show [the children] that forestry is not bad, that it has some pretty good activities associated with it."

The Walk was held in a 1,000-acre longleaf pine forest that, as a result of Gray's efforts, had recently come under his county's ownership. In the future, the land is to become a park and recreation area.

"We are in an active growth boundary of Fort Bragg and Raleigh, and the event was a way to highlight this new asset, both in regard to what had been done on it and what its potential was," said Gray.

As is customary with Walk in the Forest events, the goals were to inform children about the benefits of trees and forests, to highlight their dynamic nature, and to show that foresters collaborate with other natural resources professionals to keep forests productive and healthy. To achieve these objectives, the Walk educated its student attendees about such topics as how trees grow, the origins of forest products, the biology and ecology of local wildlife, the use of Geographic Positioning System technology in forestry, the ecological importance and structure of forest soils, the area's former naval stores industry, the efforts to re-establish the longleaf pine ecosystem, the ecological role of fire in longleaf ecosystems, and the use of prescribed fire as a forest management tool.

"A lot of the students didn't even know that there was such a thing as a longleaf pine ecosystem, but I think they went home with a better understanding of how a longleaf pine ecosystem works—and they definitely went home with the understanding that prescribed fire was good."

To give the students a first-hand look at the effects of prescribed fire, the organizers provided lunch in the middle of a recent controlled burn.

"The students ate their lunch in the middle of a controlled



The Sandhills and Triangle Chapters of the North Carolina Division of the Appalachian SAF recently hosted a Walk in the Forest for more than 100 middle school students in Erwin, North Carolina.

burned. Right at the entrance to the demonstration area, there had been a wildfire about three weeks earlier that had burned the tops out of all the trees," said Gray. "In the demonstration area that we showed them, there was a scorch height of about three or four feet, which showed how the fire reduced the fuel load. That helped us bring home the message that fire in the Sandhills is a necessary management tool and that, although the smoke from a prescribed fire may be an inconvenience today, it may prevent a larger wildfire down the road."

In the end, said Gray, it was clear that the event was a success.

"I think we hosted a successful event because the school system is already in touch with us about repeating it this coming year."

Because it was so well-received, Gray said, the Walk in the Forest will become an annual event, and the chapters will likely use the same format. The only difference, he said, is that next year they'll try to double the number of students they reach.

For other SAF chapters around the country that may want to try something similar in their area, Gray offers the following advice.

"Start small, don't try to get too big, and remember that you need only three or four committed members to help lead the effort," he said. "I chose to involve a lot of volunteers from state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and others, but it's good if SAF can provide the leadership."

Among the agencies, organizations, and others that volunteered personnel and resources to the event were the North Carolina Parks and Recreation—Raven Rock; the North Carolina Division of Forest

Resources, Harnett County, Raleigh, and Fayetteville staffs; the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission Stewardship and Regional Biologists; the North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service; private forestry consultants; the Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, Sandhills Area staff; Harnett County Forest Landowners, North Carolina Woodlands Chapter; the North Carolina State University Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources; and County Commissioners.

For more information, contact Jim Gray, JMG Forestry Consulting, Inc., 128 Chicora Club Drive, Dunn, NC 28334; (910) 891-7376; jmgray1@earthlink.net. For more information about holding Walk in the Forest events, visit the SAF website at www.safnet.org/education/WIFhandbook.pdf.