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Sustainable forests: training and jobs add fire power



Sustainable Forestry Initiative

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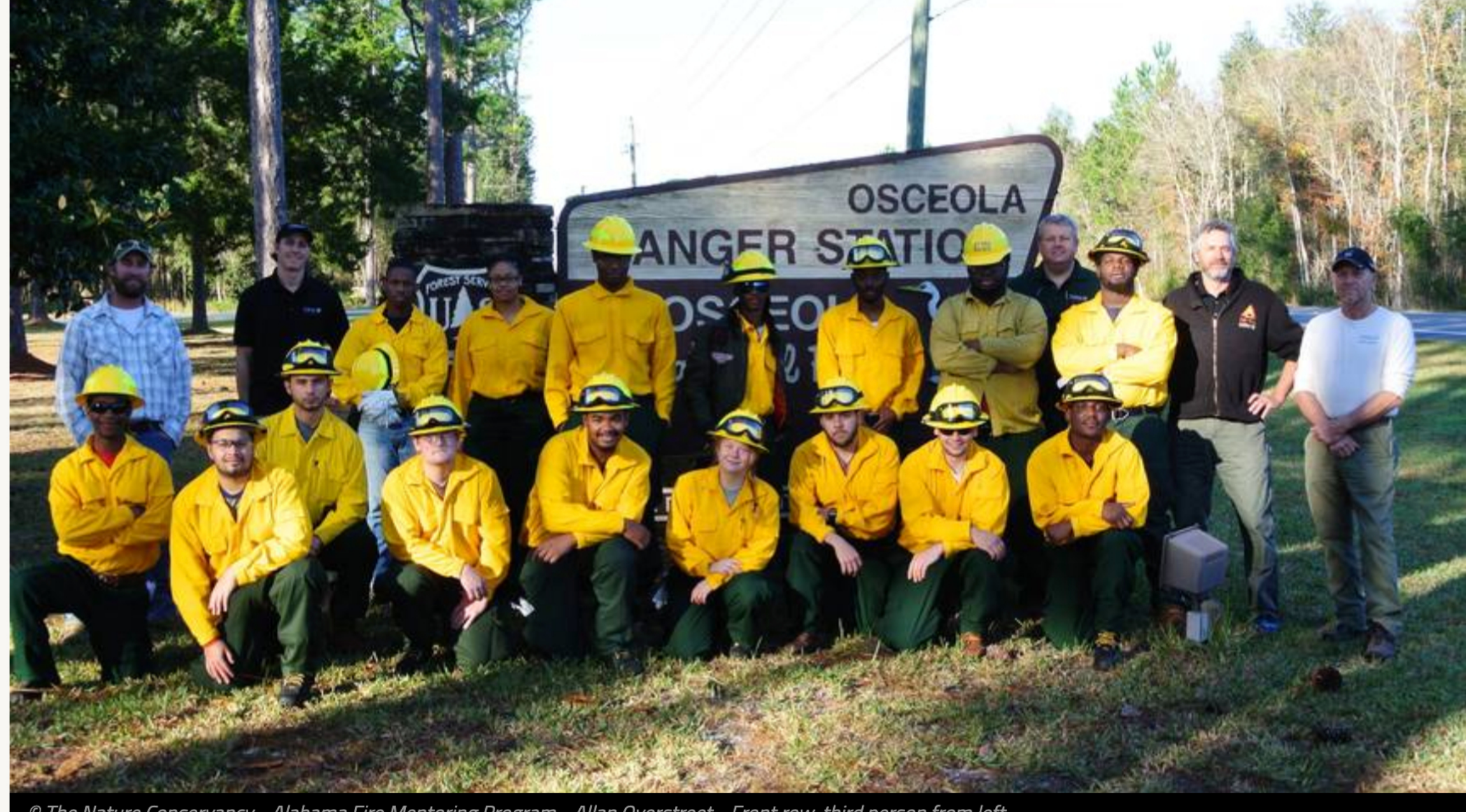
© The Nature Conservancy - Fire Mentor - Alona Snow

The longleaf pine ecosystem in the United States has shrunk from 90 million acres to just 3.4 million over time. Consequently, nearly thirty animal species that rely on it for habitat are now endangered or threatened. Natural longleaf pine forests have been replaced in the landscape by development and plantations of loblolly, slash and sand pine. What’s left of the existing longleaf pine range has been degraded by the exclusion of fire.

Much like rain forests must be sustained by rain, longleaf pine is a “fire forest.” Fire has a renewing quality for longleaf pine trees and the plants and animals that call the longleaf pine forests home. Fire removes debris and fuels, allowing native plants to regenerate and re-sprout with vigorous new growth. Fire also controls plants that are not as resilient to frequent fire and may invade the longleaf pine forests. Having evolved with fire, longleaf pine maintains a competitive advantage in the face of burning.

To reverse the degradation of longleaf pine forests, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is partnering with the Student Conservation Association and US Forest Service to recruit and train the “fire starters of tomorrow.” The Fire Mentoring Program provides controlled burn training, on-the-job experience, and career opportunities for underserved youth.

Fire Mentoring Program participants are recruited through Job Corps, a Department of Labor initiative that offers free education and vocational training to economically disadvantaged young people aged 16–24. Support from the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) has helped anchor one Fire Mentoring Program crew in a priority longleaf pine landscape in southeast Georgia and northeastern Florida. This crew is a pivotal part of a larger range-wide initiative that has placed more than 50 members of the program on crews across eight states over the past four years. It’s not only the longleaf pine forests that benefit, but also the young people involved. Take a look at just two of the many success stories.



© The Nature Conservancy - Alabama Fire Mentoring Program - Allan Overstreet - Front row, third person from left

Allan Overstreet, Alabama

A few years ago, if you had asked Allan Overstreet what he wanted to do with his life, he probably would have answered something along the lines of “stay out of prison.” He was unemployed, with no high-school diploma and nowhere to live.

“Nobody cared if I went to school,” he said. “My dad was in and out of rehab, never around for long. My mom had her own problems and had enough to do just trying to pay the bills. Almost everyone I knew was selling drugs or taking them.” Circumstances got so bad that Allan was forced to beg his neighbors for food so that his brothers and sisters wouldn’t have to go to bed hungry. Allan’s grandmother finally agreed to take him in but only on one condition: he had to sign up with Job Corps.

Allan completed the Fire Mentoring Program in Alabama, and within a month, received a well-paid, full-time job with Wildland Restoration International, a non-profit conservation organization focused on fire management, where he still works today. He has also served on a wildfire suppression crew in California. When people recognize Allan’s uniform, they approach him on the street to thank him for the work he is doing.



© The Nature Conservancy - Fire Mentor - Tyrell Downie

Tyrell Downie, Florida

Tyrell Downie credits his time in the Fire Mentoring Program with helping him become more of an adult and developing his concern for nature.

“Before...I hadn’t even heard of longleaf pine forests,” Tyrell said. “So, the Osceola National Forest was like a whole new world for me. I learned how controlled burns maintain this habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers, gopher tortoises, indigo snakes, and other species.”

Tyrell returned for a second season as a member of another Fire Mentoring Program crew based in Bristol, Florida and used the money he earned to enroll in college.

“I feel like I’m making a difference,” Tyrell said, “like I can give back for generations to come.”

These success stories are grounded in the collaboration between TNC, the Student Conservation Association, the US Forest Service, Job Corps, and similarly aligned organizations. Supporters like SFI help the work grow and be sustained. The goal of the Fire Mentoring Program is to become a model for “green-collar” career recruitment throughout the United States.

Troy Ettel, Director of the TNC Longleaf Pine Program in the Southeast, explains, “Most people think of TNC purely as a land- and marine-conservation organization. Our other, lesser-known goal, especially today, is connecting people from all backgrounds with their local environment. The country and the world are changing. Long-term conservation can’t be successful unless we change our approach right along with it. Recruiting through Job Corps is an obvious solution. It provides a steady flow of deserving young men and women that TNC and our partners can train and equip for full-time careers.”

The Fire Mentoring Program is funded in part by an SFI Conservation and Community Partnerships Grant. SFI is an independent, non-profit organization that provides supply chain assurances, produces conservation outcomes, and supports education and community engagement.

To learn more about SFI, sustainable forestry, and how community partnerships can make all the difference to people and forests, visit sfiprogram.org.