

ANNUAL REPORT
July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

Active Personnel

Ken Wells Chief Ranger
 Beadie Carter Admin. I Tower Operator
 Ira Croft, Jr. Ranger III
 Chris Rigg Ranger III
 Jeromy Browning Ranger II
 Wesley Rowe Ranger I

FOREST PROTECTION

While protecting over 206,341 acres of forested land in Lowndes County, the local forestry unit responded to 19 wildfires which burned a total of 51.13 acres. The average wildfire size was 2.55 acres. Equipment and personnel from Lowndes also responded to 3 wildfires outside of its home unit. Once again this year, debris burning was the major cause of wildfires in Lowndes county.

Fire Cause	Number of Wildfires
Debris Burning	19
Construction/ Land clearing Escaped Prescribed Burning Residential Children Other	10
Lightning	1
Undetermined	1
Campfire	2
Machine Use	2
Power line/Electric Fence	0
Incendiary	2
Structure/Vehicle	0
Fireworks	0
Spontaneous Combustion	1
Total	19

*****6 of the 19 suppressed fires were not permitted and thus resulted in suppression charges being issued*****

FIRE USE ASSISTANCE – Burn Permits

During the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Lowndes County Clerk/Tower Operator Beadie Carter issued 1,113 burn permits to include Land-clearing, Agriculture and Silviculture burns totaling 9,455.6 Acres.

The local GFC unit also strives to uphold the local county burn ordinances, and assist in the correct use of permits. In accordance with Lowndes County ordinances, certain land-clearing operations require site inspection and approval by the Lowndes County Fire Department. These inspections (to meet Lowndes County Ordinance) determine if an Air Curtain Destructor (ACD) is needed, or if the operation is able to be burned on top of the ground before obtaining a permit through GFC (to meet State Requirement).

A list of land-clearing operations that have been approved for burning is shared with our Southern Response and Central Response Centers. This eliminates duplication of inspection requests for the County Fire Department should local unit phones be rolled over to the 24-hour call centers. During FY24, numerous site inspections were performed by LCFR that resulted in land-clearing pile permits obtained through GFC.

In addition, residents who request yard debris burn permits are informed of any known county restrictions in their area before the appropriate permitting system is utilized. This is one example of the symbiotic relationship between Georgia Forestry and Lowndes County Fire.

FIRE USE ASSISTANCE – Plow/Harrow/Burn Services

The GFC provides fire use assistance to any landowner who requests such a service. Pre-suppression firebreaks are essential when performing prescribed burns, and are invaluable to protect timber stands from the ongoing threat of wildfire. The fee for pre-suppression plowed firebreaks is \$205-140 per hour, which is billed in accordance with the hours that are placed on the tractor/plow unit. Price range is dependent on the amount of Hours the tractor/plow is used.

The GFC also has a Stewardship harrow which is pulled behind the dozer units, used to "reclaim" old firebreaks and cut down on the risk of erosion. The fee for this service is \$205 for the first hour, Then \$140 an hour, for every hour after.

Prescribed burning is an important tool used to reduce hazardous fuels in timber stands, improve wildlife habitats, and prepare sites for re-planting. Fees are calculated as follows: ATV \$25 per hour, firefighter \$35 per hour, Engine use \$0.75 per mile or \$75 per hour, and torch fuel \$4.00 per gallon.

This past year, Lowndes personnel and equipment assisted 30 different landowners (some with multiple jobs throughout the year) and provided 30 services for residents in Lowndes County. Control burns totaled 384 acres. Plow and harrow jobs totaled 130.20 miles of fire breaks installed.

Assistance Type	Number of Jobs	Miles	Acreage
Control Burns	9	NA	384
Plowing	12	79.65	NA
Harrowing	9	50.55	NA
TOTALS	30	130.20 miles	384acres

AIR OPERATIONS

The GFC air patrol is an invaluable tool in the detection and suppression of wildfires. In addition to regular fire control flights, the GFC aircraft also fly insect surveys, twice each year, that obtain early detection on any infestations that may be detrimental to our forests.

TOWER OPERATIONS

The air patrol pattern that is flown by GFC aircraft is greatly reduced due to the restricted area in and around Moody Air Force Base, so the Lowndes unit keeps its fire tower staffed daily by 1000, weather permitting. Tower watch allows unit personnel to monitor permits by discerning the location of smoke plumes, as well as discovering any wildfires. This past fiscal year, several landowners were notified by tower watch of visible smoke in their location on days that no permit was obtained; this allowed for prevention measures to be taken, either by the landowner or GFC.

MAINTENANCE

The GFC realizes that in order for equipment to be ready to respond to an emergency, it must be constantly maintained. Most all of the repairs that are needed can be handled at our county units, which is due to the dedication and professional knowledge of the unit personnel. On staff in Lowndes, and surrounding area units, we have personnel who are accomplished welders, mechanics, plumbers, carpenters and electricians who are constantly performing tasks that save the State of Georgia and the local taxpayer thousands of dollars each year.

LOWNDES COUNTY FIRE RESCUE / VALDOSTA FIRE DEPARTMENT

The GFC assists Lowndes County Fire Rescue (LCFR) in the acquisition, inspection and upkeep of all "Co-Op" lease equipment. There has always been excellent cooperation between the GFC and LCFR. With this cooperation, the GFC and local county fire departments provide our citizens with the wildland and structural protection needed to ensure public safety.

Out of the 19 wildfires this past fiscal year in Lowndes, 12 were suppressed by the joint efforts of LCFR, Valdosta Fire Department and GFC.

REFORESTATION

The GFC has two seed production orchards, Flint River in Byromville and Arrowhead in Cochran, GA. GFC is a major supplier for the National Wild Turkey Federation, and a grower for USFS experimental seedlings.

Seedlings are shipped weekly, December through March, to the local county units where landowners can pick them up. Since FY19, Lowndes has served as a central point for distribution. For FY24, a total of 41,230 seedlings were sold at Lowndes County Forestry Unit.

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Lowndes was busy in the field of Forest Management this past year. Approximately 114 landowners received Forest Management advice from either unit personnel or the local county Forester.

Type Assistance	Lowndes
Conservation Reserve Programs (CRP)	33
General Advice Cases	7
Environmental Quality Incentives Programs (EQUIP)	32
Best Management Practices (BMP) Exams (used to prevent or reduce water pollution during forestry operations)	1
Stewardship (future generation land planning)	41
Total # of Cases	114

FOREST EDUCATION

The GFC continues its efforts to educate the general public about forestry operations and fire prevention. Georgia's timber industry now contributes over \$39.1 billion dollars annually to the State's economy (a \$3.1 billion increase from 2021). With 64% of Lowndes county's acreage being forested, the GFC strives to convey the importance of forestry operations in our everyday life, as well as the importance of proper fire prevention.

Unfortunately, our community is still affected by the Covid-19 pandemic which has impacted GFC's public outreach programs. However, employees in Lowndes were still able to invest 78.5 hours through 9 programs. These included teaching children about fire safety through our Smokey Bear program, and advising young adults about Forestry careers through FFA Field Days. In addition, fire prevention and proper forest management practices were discussed in public meetings, and with private land management. These programs reached over 559 citizens in Lowndes county.

Some of the programs that the Lowndes Forestry Unit was involved with this year included:

1. Lowndes Hazard Mitigation Meetings
2. Smokey Bear/Fire Prevention at Open Bible
3. Arbor/Earth Day at City of Valdosta/Hahira
4. Langdale Forestry Field Day
5. Forestry Field Day/Pine Grove Elementary/Ware High School/Colquitt
6. Urban and Community Forestry
7. Smokey Bear/Fire Prevention at Brookfield Academy
8. Equip

9. Urban and Community Forestry/USDA Office

LOWNDES COUNTY SUMMARY

	FY19-20	FY20-21	FY21-22	FY22-23	FY23-24
Total Permits	20,770	18,821	890	792	1,113
Wildfires	25	34	40	21	20
Seedlings	151,760	34,850	41,641	115,216	41,230
Forest Management Cases	51	35	76	66	114
Service Jobs	55	44	33	34	30

CONCLUSION

The timber industry is a very big business in our local area, providing untold dollars to our local economy, billions to the State of Georgia, and various forestry-related careers. The Lowndes Forestry Unit will continue to uphold the GFC mission locally by keeping timber Georgia's number one industry. The unit will continue to provide the protection from wildfires that the citizens of Lowndes County deserve.

We truly appreciate the strong support that we rely on from our local government officials and the taxpayers that live in this county.

Sincerely,

Kenneth M Wells
Chief Ranger
Lowndes Unit
3011 US Hwy 84 E.
Valdosta, GA 31606
229-333-5267 office
478-319-5042 Cell
kwells@gfc.state.ga.us

cc: Region 5 Office
County Commissioners
Unit file

Mission Statement:

Protecting and conserving Georgia's forest resources through leadership, service and education.