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WELCOME TO TEXAS

James B. Hull

Texas State Forester
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Welcome to Texas - - Y'all! We are honored to be hosting this prestigious symposium in Austin, and only 6 days after the 80th Texas Legislature adjourned after being in regular session for the past 140 days. This is a process that occurs every two years in Texas, whether we need it or not! Austin is not only the home of the State Capitol, but also the orange and white University of Texas Longhorns. However, the Texas Forest Service is part of The Texas A&M University System, 100 miles northeast of here in College Station. In honor of our school colors, the Aggies have just about perfected a way of genetically causing all of the Texas Bluebonnets in Austin to have a rich maroon color!

Texas is a mighty big and extremely diverse state: Vast Pineywoods of East Texas; rugged mountains of Southwest Texas; rich agriculture in the Northwest high plains; tropical citrus and other agriculture in far South Texas; and the beautiful rolling hill country in between. Texas has over 350 miles of shoreline along the Gulf of Mexico; 1200 miles of international border with Mexico and 250 miles of international border with Louisiana! It is 885 miles across Texas from north to south, and 835 miles across from East to West.

Texas has six major tree regions, totaling over 29 million acres of forest lands. Now that we have finished our second year of completing a statewide Forest Inventory and Analysis, we are finding that we might actually have up to twice as many acres of forest as previously thought. Commercial forestlands in Texas are undergoing tremendous restructuring in ownerships. Where forest industry historically owned and provided world class forest management on approximately one-third of these forest, recent divestiture of these lands has seen these forests now in the hands of TIMO's and REIT's. The other lands belong primarily to individual/family forest owners (64.8%) and public owners (8.0%).

Texas also has a tremendous acreage of range and other open space, yet at the same time we are becoming identified as an urban state. Texas has three of the nation's ten largest cities, and five of the top twenty. Of the 22.5 million Texas residents, 84 percent live in or near cities. One of the biggest challenges to Texas is the population growth into the rural/urban interface. As example, of the 32,000 wildfires that burned in Texas in 2005-2006, 85% of those started within 2 miles of a Texas community.

I was named Texas State Forester in 1996, and since then many folks will tell you that it has been one disaster after another. While some of these disasters have been of my doing, others have been associated with unprecedented wildfires, ice storms, hurricanes, floods, southern pine beetle outbreaks, wind storms, and the Texas Forest Service had the lead role in the Columbia space shuttle recovery efforts in 2003.

With changing roles and responsibilities, the Texas Forest Service has made the commitments to work smarter and provide the role of leadership in several areas of forestry. Currently, our staff is leading development of the Southern Critical Forestland Assessment for the 13 southern states. This is an effort to identify the forested areas that are in most need of priority attention. We recently completed the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment that provides GIS tools to identify the highest areas of wildfire risk for planning, fire prevention, mitigation and response activities.

Another Texas-size disaster has been oak wilt devastation across vast areas of the Texas Hill Country in Central Texas. Dr. Ron Billings and his Forest Pest Management team have made significant progress over the past 20 years in dealing with this massive problem. To most successfully deal with oak wilt, we have effectively integrated and coordinated it with our Forest Stewardship, Urban, and FIA programs. I am very proud of these accomplishments in this area and no doubt you will hear more about it while you are in Austin.

Thanks again for coming to Texas. While you are here it is our goal to prove to you our claim that Texas is the friendliest state in the United States. Y'all come back now!