

LIVINGSTON-TANGIPAHOA

Christmas trees fight erosion



ROGER ZETTLER/The Advocate

James Cutrer, of the Hammond street department, relocates Christmas trees dropped off for marsh restoration. Southeastern Louisiana University and the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources began the Christmas tree marsh restoration project in 1995, said a SLU Public Information Office news release.

By **DEBRA LEMOINE**

Advocate Livingston-Tangipahoa writer

Published: Jan 21, 2010

HAMMOND — Every year since 1995, residents in Tangipahoa and St. John the Baptist parishes have been asked to donate their Christmas trees for wetlands restoration projects run by Southeastern Louisiana University's Turtle Cove Research Environmental Research Station.

In Tangipahoa Parish, the trees are used to build a levee about 10 feet inland from the shoreline of Jones Island along the North Pass from Interstate 55 and into Lake Maurepas, said Fred Stouder, marsh restoration coordinator for Turtle Cove.

The levee helps block wave action from Lake Maurepas from destroying plant life and eroding soil on the island, Stouder said. The trees also catch silt in the water from the lake washing into the island and from the marsh washing out into the lake when water runs off the marsh at high tides or heavy rains, he said.

Between the tree-based levee and the shore, Stouder and others have planted smooth cord grass to prevent erosion and rebuild some of the land being lost to the lake, Stouder said. Smooth cord grass is not native to the island, but it is a plant that has, so far, been able to thrive in the saltier conditions that exist there now, Stouder said.

Once there is enough grass to block the salty water from coming in and more higher ground built up, researchers may eventually replant cypress trees that have died from too much salt. "When it's wide enough and tall enough, we can plant cypress that can slough off salt water," Stouder said.

Even though cypress can grow in wet areas, they still need periods of dry time on higher land, especially when they need to recover from exposure to salt water, he said.

Each year, 2,000 to 3,000 Christmas trees are deposited on Jones Island, mostly in trees that come from St. John the Baptist and St. James parishes. In Tangipahoa Parish, about 200 to 300 trees are collected annually from residents dropping off their trees at various locations throughout the parish, he said.

"I want the public to be aware of what's going on and give the Christmas tree to us instead of burning it or putting it in a landfill," he said.

Since 1995, 26,400 Christmas trees have been placed on Jones Island and 3,800 seedlings of smooth cord grass have been planted, he said.

Under the grants used to pay for the project, Stouder said he isn't required to track how much land has been reclaimed versus how much is lost from erosion on other parts of the island because it would be too difficult to measure.

Looking at pictures taken years before the trees are placed and then after they have been on the ground for a few years, Stouder said the success of the program can be seen.

"It's pretty obvious that it's working," he said.

The other project that the Christmas trees used to go to is one to rebuild a prairie area in the Manchac Wildlife Management Area in St. John the Baptist Parish, he said.

The 600-acre prairie area was once a cypress forest that was destroyed by logging. Then, it was a grassy haven for ducks and duck hunters.

Wave action from Lake Pontchartrain has taken its toll and has converted the marsh into open water, Stouder said.

Stouder said he stopped placing trees there in 2001.

Instead, his work focuses on planting bulrush, a reed that grows into dense roots and stalks, which is able to hold the soil together and trap more soil from water.

“It gets so thick that it collects sediment,” Stouder said. “It builds up the land and holds it together.”