

**LOUISIANA FORESTRY COMMISSION  
VIA TELECONFERENCE OR VIDEOCONFERENCE  
DECEMBER 7, 2020  
MINUTES**

**CALL TO ORDER**

The Louisiana Forestry Commission meeting was called to order by Chairman Scott Poole at 10:10 a.m.

**ROLL CALL**

The roll was called by Epney Brasher

**Members Present:**

Chairman Scott Poole, Gradon Clemons, Michael Hudson, Bill Jenkins, Dr. Allen Rutherford and Wayne Hagan, whom joined the meeting right as the budget was being presented

**LDAF Staff Present:** Wade Dubea, Epney Brasher, David Campbell, Tyler Cloud, Brent Cutrer, Patricia Dayberry, Damian Johnson, Don Smith and Roy St. Pierre

**Guests Present:** Buck Vandersteen

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

No Public Comments at This Time

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

**MOTION:** Dr. Allen Rutherford made a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting held on September 8, 2020; Gradon Clemons seconded the motion. All were in favor.

**BUDGET**

Epney reported that we are at 37% of our budget. We have not had a need to utilize that much of our budget, due to COVID and current conditions. We have been changing employee schedules back and forth because of COVID, our electric bills and fuel costs have been down. We have recently had an increase in fires within the last six weeks and that has raised our fuel costs. Regarding repairs and maintenance we have had some minor issues which we are grateful and slightly surprised about. We have asked the foresters to get with the shops to make certain that cylinders, seals, hoses, etc., for all equipment is in working order and that we are ready to go when things heat up. The question on the travel budget from last meeting was due to improper coding from our revenue/accounting section and has been corrected as noted on the current budget report. Those expenses were for federal travel for employees who went out of state for fire related travel, Texas, California, etc.

Wade wanted to bring everyone up to speed and mentioned that we are still in the process of a timber harvest on the state forest, which began in conjunction with a request from Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to open up some of the longleaf stands for the RCW forest areas. We currently have received \$250,000.00 from that timber sale, which has gone right back into the state forest, limestone for all major roads. This has been the first upgrades to roads in the state forest since I have been here and it is a timely investment. We want to invest some of the proceeds on purchasing a skid steer which we have learned from the hurricanes that have come through it would be advantageous to have and it can definitely be utilized. We are also looking at updating the lawnmower for the state forest. It is our intention to keep the money in the area and using as much as possible on the state forest. The other budget item which you need to be made aware of, if you are not already, is that Jack McFarland introduced a bill that is allowing the Office of Forestry to get the remaining 25% of the timber severance tax to assist in salaries instead of going into the general fund. The amount will fluctuate, but it will allow

us to hire 15 to 17 additional employees. We are greatly appreciative for everyone's support in getting this passed and this is a great plus to The Office of Forestry. The annual timber severance tax that is collected – 75% of all money collected remains in the parish where the timber was severed, which is earmarked for roads, the remaining 25% is divided – 75% of those funds go into the FPP the last 25% now goes into the Office of Forestry for salaries for fire suppression employees. In regards to the Forest Protection Assessment Fund, the assessors usually get a letter in January and the funds trickle in throughout the year, we usually get all by May. Because the Forest Protection Assessment Fund money comes in late in the spending year, we are allowed to have that money roll over to LAFA to be used for fire suppression purchases and expenses since we did not have enough time through purchasing to acquire items.

Buck questioned the extra cash we may have left over from the budget, what happens to it. Wade explained that most of our budget is tightly spoken for – salaries, supplies and travel, which supplies and travel has a little flexibility. These two we can use to absorb a budget cut if necessary. We have two stat debt accounts that we have to watch and monitor closely because they are legislatively targeted every year for a portion to be taken. We are watching to make sure that all the monies are utilized under our authority.

Buck asked about the FPP offering any assistance to hurricane and cleaning up practice guidelines. We are willing to entertain and yes we want to help but we do not want to penalize any of our applicants that were not affected by the storms. We cannot spend federal and state dollars on the same practice. We will look at this at a case by case and there are meetings every Thursday. Epney mentioned that it takes several months, sometimes as much as a year to get any changes made to any programs. We may have to wait to see what our budget comes in for next year, due to the current timber on the ground and what that severance tax comes in as when allocated.

Scott asked a question about the funding that has just been established for fire suppression salaries, if there would be any amounts left over, what happens to that money. Wade explained that the balance will increase in the sub fund that has been established by the new bill/law that Jack McFarland presented. The money will stay in the fund to assist with firefighting salaries as the Office of Forestry sees fit.

## **DIVISION REPORTS**

**FPP** – the balance amount that is still in the treasury fund is not available currently and will have to be requested from our revenue department and will be sent when that division returns from being on quarantine. We did get approval for the additional one million dollars and we should be able to pay out six million. We have taken measures to increase the funding to decrease that money in that account. Wade explained that we are working with the new funding year and the rate changes that go into effect for April 2021, should keep the dollars in and out at an even keel. The funding that was approved is a 75% reimbursement with a \$10,000.00 cap. This means that the landowners can get the work done, get the paid receipts in and be paid in a timely function after July 1, 2021. David is currently working on invoices for current year that has recently been received. The average payment to an applicant has ranged between six and eight thousand, not many reached the \$15,000.00 cap. We are hoping moving forward that the landowners will benefit from the changes.

**AVIATION** – Currently we are at a 91.6% readiness rate for the fleet. This number includes the planes that are in shops for maintenance.

**ENFORCEMENT** – Scott noticed that we have arrested Mr. Edwards again on another offense. Roy explained that Mr. Edwards 2 cases have occurred in the same year – moving from one landowner to another, we were waiting to go to trial on the first case where he concealed \$178,000.00 to 180,000.00 from a landowner. He issued about \$13,800.00 in worthless checks on top of that and then he turned around and did not pay another landowner – DA offices have been notified and we are awaiting reply. Question – Do you see a correlation in the thefts in North Louisiana where there are more mills running then in the Southeast region of Louisiana where there are not so many mills or are crooks going to be

crooks wherever they are? Crooks are going to be crooks wherever they are. We have had a smaller number of mills shut down. It really does not matter how many mills are in the area. There is no correlation; there is more of a section in the northwest of the state to where to haul. Most of the cases in the central norther parts of the state are fraud cases where they are concealing loads and withholding payments. In the southeast area of the state, we have cypress theft, timber encroachments and discretion of prompt payment to landowners. This is the case that we have with Mr. Edwards.

Question – I know that this Commission does not issue master logger certificates, but do we have any recourse to removing a master logger certificate from someone has been convicted. Mr. Edwards is not a master logger, he is logging through someone else and that has been brought up, but there are still some folks falling through the cracks. No one should be buying timber from Mr. Edwards. Epney noted as our office recommends going through a consulting forester, which is another layer of protection with a contract, who can usually keep up with what is going on to hopefully keep a landowner from be taken advantage of. Roy mentioned that the only way the Enforcement Division for the Office of Forestry can reach out to anyone is to make notification about anyone in question, is to publish an article about the arrest. But again only if you read the article would have the knowledge about that person of interest. Not sure how we can reach out to everyone so that they are no other victims. Epney asked Roy to mention that we have a new enforcement employee, Scottie Paul. He has been with us for about two months now and will be based out of the Oberlin office and covering that part of the state. Roy explained that he has prior law enforcement experience and is retired detective from the Allen Parish Sheriff Office and will be very helpful to us. He is very well known and has worked a number of fraud cases and anything that you can think of. He is doing a great job and has already made two or three cases and is currently working on a timber theft. He is going to be a great asset for us. He can be reached through our Oberlin office. Epney mentioned that we are looking at hiring another Enforcement officer and two additional pilots for Aviation.

**PROTECTION** – We are about to set another record for lowest wildfires and that burns are down.

**FOREST HEALTH** – Southern pine beetle trapping went on after the storm and there was nothing significant to report that showed up in those traps and we will continue to monitor. Scott would like to have some of the Forest Hand guides sent to his office for field employee crew use.

**OLD BUSINESS**

None to Discuss

**NEW BUSINESS**

After executive session of discussing the severance tax rates were set for 2021.

**ADOPTED SEVERANCE TAX VALUES FOR 2021**

<b><u>PRODUCT</u></b>	<b><u>VALUE PER TON</u></b>	<b><u>TAX RATE</u></b>	<b><u>TAX PER TON (2021)</u></b>
Pine Sawtimber	\$31.98	2.25%	\$0.72
Hardwood Sawtimber	\$35.00	2.25%	\$0.78
Pine Chip-n-Saw	\$16.87	2.25%	\$0.38
Pine Pulpwood	\$8.25	5.00%	\$0.41
Hardwood Pulpwood	\$7.25	5.00%	\$0.36

**MOTION:** Michael Hudson made a motion to accept the tax rates as stated; Bill Jenkins seconded the motion. All were in favor.

The requirements for sexual harassment training were discussed.

**MOTION:** Bill Jenkins made a motion to accept the state resolution to complete one hour of the sexual harassment training program; Dr. Allen Rutherford seconded the motion. All were in favor.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

New markets for Louisiana are needed to be established to assist landowners, loggers, etc. Since Buck brought up new markets, Scott shared that his company was denied for expansion. There is disarray at the parishes and state levels and COVID measures have added to the issues. Buck offered any assistance that The Louisiana Forestry Association can provide. Mike commented about the new mill that got proposed for Mississippi and not Southeast Louisiana. Louisiana is not viewed as friendly to businesses.

**ADJOURNMENT**

**MOTION:** Scott Poole made a motion to adjourn the meeting; Dr. Allen Rutherford seconded the motion. All were in favor. Meeting was adjourned at 11:32 p.m.