



# **SAVE OUR CYPRESS COALITION** [WWW.SAVEOURCYPRESS.ORG](http://WWW.SAVEOURCYPRESS.ORG)

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## **The Save Our Cypress Coalition Calls On Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe's to Stop Selling Cypress Mulch**

The Save Our Cypress Coalition, a group of Louisiana conservation and environmental organizations, is calling upon Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe's to stop purchasing and selling all cypress garden mulch until a verifiable, third-party certification program is operating to ensure no cypress is being sourced from non-renewable coastal wetland forests. A number of critical questions must also be answered about the effects of cypress mulch production on the state's coastal system and its general sustainability as a product. All three retailers are currently selling cypress mulch supplied by distributors who source from Louisiana.

The groups expressed concerns that non-renewable cypress forests in Louisiana are being clear-cut to feed an unsustainable and unnecessary cypress mulch industry.

The Save Our Cypress Coalition (SOCC) cites several key concerns:

- **The critical role that these forests play in hurricane protection and stabilization of the state's vulnerable coastal landscape:** Swamps and marshes made a significant difference in the damage done by last year's storms, as shown by investigations by LSU scientists soon after those events<sup>i</sup>, and by subsequent work by researchers such as Dr. Gary Shafer of Southeastern Louisiana University. Coastal wetland forests, along with marshes, are part of the vital "multiple lines of defense" identified by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation and others.<sup>ii</sup>  
Clear-cutting of swamps in south Louisiana can remove critical wind and storm surge buffers that help protect coastal communities.
- **The unsustainability of cypress mulch sold at the national and regional retail scale:** There has been no assessment about the impacts on the state's and region's cypress swamps from sale of mulch at the large retail scale. This increasing demand requires a volume that will likely exceed the amount of mulch generated as a by-product of value-added cypress products such as flooring. Swamps in Louisiana are being clear-cut and whole trees are being used solely to produce cypress mulch<sup>iii iv</sup>.
- **The unsustainability of harvesting cypress swamps in Louisiana's coastal region:** A scientific panel appointed by the Governor concluded in a report released last year that Louisiana's coastal wetland forests are threatened by "hydrologic and geomorphic alterations and by conversion... to other uses," and that many these forests currently show "a lack of regeneration."<sup>v</sup> The report



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- concluded that many of these forests are unable to regenerate either naturally or artificially if logged under current conditions.<sup>vi</sup>
- **The important habitat cypress forests provide for wildlife, including threatened and endangered species:** Species such as the threatened Louisiana black bear and the recently rediscovered ivory-billed woodpecker have traditionally made their homes in large cypress trees (needs citation). Forty percent of North America's migratory birds pass through Louisiana's coastal wetlands (needs citation).
  - **The lack of a state plan to deal with the Coastal Wetland Forest situation.**

All of these concerns are converging in the rapid expansion of cypress logging that is being observed in southern Louisiana. The SOCC is concerned about the long-term effects of this expansion, as well as the site-specific impacts in many locations where it is occurring.

The groups have identified several areas where logging of cypress is expanding, including the Atchafalaya Basin and sections of the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary parishes. In the Barataria-Terrebonne region, there are concerns about the loss of hurricane protection that could occur if large areas are clearcut. In the Atchafalaya Basin, there are concerns about regeneration in high water areas, and invasion by exotic species such as Chinese tallow in the drier areas.

There is a marked lack of information about what is happening on the ground, as well as the degree to which the cypress mulch market is driving the expansion in logging of cypress swamps. There have been statements by some officials and industry reps suggesting that mulch is only being produced as a by-product, but the SOCC has identified a number of facilities that are turning whole trees and entire forest stands into mulch.

One of these facilities is the Louisiana Wood Products site located across the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge. Here, whole cypress trees are being chipped and bagged as "No-Float Mulch" or "Florida Gold Mulch", two different brands of Corbitt Mulch. Corbitt Manufacturing Company is a major supplier of Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe's<sup>vii</sup>. For documentation of clear-cuts, mulching facilities, and distribution of mulch products, visit [www.saveourcypress.org](http://www.saveourcypress.org) or contact Dean Wilson, Atchafalaya Basinkeeper.

Most importantly, it is still unclear exactly how much acreage is slated to be cut for cypress mulch. A memo obtained from the Army Corps of Engineers, through a Freedom of Information Act request, shows that Corbitt Manufacturing Company originally



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applied for a permit to use an enormous 50,000 acres for mulch<sup>viii</sup>. Rumors persist of much larger amounts being presented to the Corps, but they have yet to be substantiated.

Another outstanding question deals with the state of cypress forests in coastal Louisiana. The Governor's Science Working Group has concluded that many of the states cypress forests will not regenerate once cut, but mapping of coastal forests has yet to be completed. The groups are concerned that extensive logging is continuing without that critical determination being made.

Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe's have the power to greatly reduce needless destruction of cypress forests in Louisiana and throughout the country by simply opting to sell more sustainable mulch products. The combined purchasing power of the three retailers is enormous, and they can leverage that power to keep Louisiana's coastal protection from being ground away. Unfortunately, all three companies, when presented with the evidence of unsustainable logging that destroys important swamps in Louisiana, have refused to take the necessary steps to stop the practice

Paradoxically, the three largest retailers who sell cypress garden mulch have all adopted corporate policies aimed at protecting the environment.

- Home Depot has some of the most progressive corporate policies on wood purchasing and use.<sup>ix</sup> Home Depot pledged to eliminate wood purchases from endangered forests by 2003, and have committed to purchasing only wood from certified sources, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).<sup>x</sup> Home Depot has carried out "product shifts" for a number of items to ensure certification and sustainability for a large number of items such as boards, cabinets, and fencing. \*
- Lowe's has adopted a long-term goal that all wood products sold in their stores come from well-managed, non-endangered forests, with preference for products certified by the FSC.<sup>xi</sup>
- Wal-Mart has undertaken an ambitious company-wide initiative to reduce their corporate ecological footprint and to sell products that sustain the environment. This includes their wood products, though it is unclear whether a specific wood policy has been developed yet.

Reviewing these progressive corporate policies, selling cypress mulch harvested in coastal Louisiana appears to violate all of them.

Certification - There is no requirement for independent certification, much less FSC certification, for cypress mulch. These companies are relying on reporting from their vendors to assess sustainability of cypress mulch production in



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Louisiana, not a certification process, and they are not relying on FSC certification.<sup>xii</sup>

Endangered Forests – The SOCC believes that the SWG report demonstrates clearly that coastal swamps in Louisiana constitute an endangered forest system, even though that designation has not officially been applied by the researchers that Home Depot and Lowe’s work with. It seems clear that they should ascertain the condition of these forests before sourcing from them. The questions of sustainability of retail sale of cypress mulch at the national and regional scales also apply to the entire Gulf region and country, even though Louisiana faces the most immediate problem.

These companies are to be commended for their corporate policies, and the Save Our Cypress Coalition now calls upon them to apply those policies in Louisiana, the state with the fastest disappearing coastal wetlands.

Sustainable alternatives to cypress mulch exist, and they are similarly-priced and equally effective<sup>xiii</sup>. Although old-growth cypress heartwood was revered for its rot-resistance and ability to ward off bugs, most modern cypress mulch comes from young trees that do not possess those characteristics. Pine straw, pine bark nuggets, farmed-eucalyptus mulch, melaleuca mulch, cedar mulch, recycled sugar cane, pecan shells, and lawn clippings are all meet mulching needs without destroying vital wetlands.

Until a credible, verifiable third-party certification program is operating to ensure that mulch products are not being sourced from non-renewable cypress forests anywhere along the Gulf coast or other sensitive areas of the country, the Save Our Cypress coalition is publicly demanding that Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowe’s immediately stop selling all cypress mulch products.

## **Easy Internet References**

[www.saveourcypress.org](http://www.saveourcypress.org). Official website of the Save Our Cypress Coalition.

<http://www.coastalforestswg.lsu.edu/>, Official Website for the Governor’s Coastal Wetland Forest Conservation and Use Science Working Group.

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>. University of Florida, IFAS Extension searchable database, including many articles on mulch properties and effectiveness in gardening.

- <sup>i</sup> “Studies abound on why the levees failed,” *Times-Picayune*, March 23, 2006.
- <sup>ii</sup> “Pontchartrain Multiple Lines of Defense Strategy,” <http://www.saveourlake.org/lod.htm>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Internal Army Corps of Engineers Memo, “Re: Helicopter Logging Sites Proposed by Earl Billing on Behalf of . . .”, April 12, 2005. Obtained April 28, 2005.
- <sup>iv</sup> State of Louisiana Department of Economic Development, Corbitt Manufacturing Grant Application, “Section 2: Project Description”. Obtained May 6, 2005.
- <sup>v</sup> *Final Report to the Governor of Louisiana from the Coastal Wetland Forest Conservation and Use Science Working Group* (SWG Report), April 30, 2005, p. iii, iv.
- <sup>vi</sup> SWG, p. vii.
- <sup>vii</sup> State of Louisiana Department of Economic Development, Corbitt Manufacturing Grant Application, “Section 2: Project Description”. Obtained May 6, 2005.
- <sup>viii</sup> Internal Army Corps of Engineers Memo, “Re: Helicopter Logging Sites Proposed by Earl Billing on Behalf of . . .”, April 12, 2005. Obtained April 28, 2005.
- <sup>ix</sup> “Environmental Principles”, “Wood Purchasing Policy”, “Product Shifts”, “Certification,” Home Depot, Inc. Corporate Web Site, [www.corporate.homedepot.com/wps/Environmental\\_Principles](http://www.corporate.homedepot.com/wps/Environmental_Principles).
- <sup>x</sup> Forest Stewardship Council, [www.fscus.org](http://www.fscus.org).
- <sup>xi</sup> “Lowe’s Wood Policy,” [www.lowes.com/lowes/wood\\_policy.html](http://www.lowes.com/lowes/wood_policy.html).
- <sup>xii</sup> FSC, [www.fsc-info.org/english/resfme.asp?Country=United+States+of+America&OrderBy=Country&StartP](http://www.fsc-info.org/english/resfme.asp?Country=United+States+of+America&OrderBy=Country&StartP)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Various articles, University of Florida, IFAS Extension, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>