

# The White Oak Initiative

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**T**here is a new focus being placed on hardwood management across the Southeast. Over the past year, I have heard this comment time and again from many different people. One evidence of this emphasis is the ‘White Oak Initiative.’ I had to educate myself about the issues involved, and have been very surprised by what I found.

White oak seems common enough in the forest. The large trees are always easy to spot, so I have always taken them for granted. However, what I did not take into account is that the large white oaks we see today on good sites are a legacy of past land-use practices, such as frequent fire to keep the forest open. The tree also benefitted from the loss of the American chestnut, and was able to fill canopy space left by the demise of that species.

For many decades now, fire exclusion has been the rule for the vast majority of hardwood forests of the eastern United States. Trees that are intolerant of fire but tolerant of shade, such as red maple and yellow poplar, are increasingly filling these forests, shading out and out-competing young white oak. So while you will still find large oaks in the forest, the fear is that as these mature logs are harvested or lost to natural mortality, there is an insufficient amount of oak regeneration to compensate. This phenomenon has been known and studied for a long time, but little action has been taken up until now.

That is where the White Oak Initiative comes in. This effort is designed to unite universities, industry, large investment landholders, non-industrial private landowners, conservation organizations, the Forest Service, and state forestry agencies in seeing what steps can be taken to reverse the decline of this key species. A three-day symposium was held in Knoxville, Tennessee, in October 2017 to discuss the latest research into the tree’s silviculture. Efforts are underway to secure grant funding for landowner outreach and education, as well as efforts to secure Farm Bill funding for landowner cost shares that will benefit white oak. I recently attended a meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, where this issue was discussed in detail, and there is a lot of momentum being placed behind the effort.

As this previously-mentioned new emphasis is being placed on hardwood management across the Southeast, you can expect to hear more about opportunities being provided through the efforts of the White Oak Initiative. ♣

*Photo by David Stephens / Bugwood.org*

