Hemlock Restoration on Trout Streams

A Partnership Initiative of Save Georgia's Hemlocks & Trout Unlimited

Background

The hemlocks in north Georgia have been under attack by the invasive insect Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA) since 2002/2003. Thousands of trees have already died; thousands more in 19 counties are infested; and all are in danger of eventually being killed by the pest. This problem affects all ages, sizes, and species of hemlock across the continuous landscape of public and private property. Forecast to be a crisis similar in scale to the loss of American chestnut in the 20th century, widespread loss of the hemlock will have devastating long-term, and in some cases irreversible, effects on the aesthetics, environmental and ecological health, and economic vitality of communities throughout the region and impact the personal and spiritual well-being of individuals and families who live, work, or visit here.

For more than a decade, the U. S. Forest Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Georgia Forestry Commission, and university-based research labs have focused on preserving a population of hemlocks in designated conservation areas through chemical treatments and/or biological controls. During the past five years and continuing into a sixth year, Save Georgia's Hemlocks (SGH) and volunteers from other conservation-minded nonprofits such as Trout Unlimited (TU), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) have provided labor support for some of this work. Where these preservation efforts have been implemented, the chemical treatments have worked well, and the biological controls are beginning to gain traction; however, both approaches continue to face the limitations of money and manpower, and to our knowledge, there has been no government-funded program to address hemlock restoration on public lands.

Goals

As the loss of hemlock canopy is of particular concern along our trout streams, SGH worked with TU to develop the concept for a **Hemlock Restoration Initiative** to create, enhance, or restore a healthy hemlock population along key waterways in support of:

* watershed protection and water quality;
* the numbers, health, and diversity of the aquatic inhabitants (especially trout);
* the public's ability to access and enjoy these areas; and
* the economic impact of the related tourism and recreation.

Scope and Approach

The scope of this initiative includes site preparation, planting of hemlock saplings, and follow-up care on any designated trout stream in north Georgia where the hemlock canopy has been lost or is absent but desirable. Sites can be on public, community, or private land, *provided* we can obtain the property owner's / manager's permission to plant *and* the stream is open for public access. SGH covers all the expenses for the trees and planting materials and provides volunteer training and project management.

To ensure an orderly roll-out that offered the opportunity to establish appropriate protocols, anticipate resource requirements, and understand expected results, in October 2016 we conducted a pilot project with TU to install 60 hemlock saplings 3-4 feet tall along a 1500'segment of community property on the Toccoa River. The little trees were treated to give them 5 years of protection against HWA and will be retreated as needed in the future.

Since then we have done several similar large projects. To continue making this initiative successful, we're seeking nominations from the public for restoration sites, TU's expertise to confirm the "trout friendliness," and participation from many groups to share the labor with us.

If you'd like to nominate a trout stream for hemlock restoration and/or help plant trees, please call the Hemlock Help Line 706-429-8010. Let's keep the trout happy!

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