



LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

*Bastrop team develops
plan to restore Lost Pines region*



The fire could be seen raging in Bastrop County during the weekend of Sept. 4, 2011. Photo by Chase A. Fountain, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.



Sweeping fires engulfed the Bastrop Lost Pines ecoregion the weekend of Sept. 4, 2011. In total, 34,000 acres and 1,691 homes were burned in a fire the Lost Pines Recovery Team described as “catastrophic.”

Although the team is sure that recovery from this fire will be long, they are optimistic their efforts will succeed.

Formed in response to the Bastrop fire, the Lost Pines Recovery Team consists of local, state and federal experts on the ecoregion in the Lost Pines area. With their comprehensive knowledge base, the recovery team has developed a plan to help Bastrop recover from the September fire.

“In terms of the recovery, the Lost Pines Recovery Team put together a five-year plan that includes erosion control, reseeding, replanting and hazardous fuels management,” said Roxanne Hernandez, habitat conservation plan coordinator for the Houston toad.

The team plans to address erosion control and a portion of the reseeding during this year and next. Seedling planting also will start next year and continue for four to five years, she said.

Nature brings challenges

Erosion has proven to be one of the most difficult challenges to recovery. Initially, the fire caused much fertile soil to erode. Hernandez said until vegetation grows to provide ground cover, erosion will continue. Newly planted pine tree seedlings will also wash out so herbaceous vegetation should be planted before seedlings are, she added.

“When I heard the forecast today and the possibility of more than 4 inches of rain overnight, I thought, ‘Oh boy, here we go again,’” she said. “When we had the rain last month, we had water flowing over roads where water never flowed before.”

Flooding and erosion have been so severe that culverts and roads have been washed out, Hernandez said.

The timeline for getting herbaceous vegetation in the area is not yet clear. The first opportunity to make a dent in the problem ended with the warm season planting time in mid-May, and the team did not see as much growth as they wanted, said Daniel Lewis, a state forester with the Texas Forest Service.

Additional challenges to the pine trees’ recovery come from ips engraver beetles, which attack stressed trees, Lewis said.

“Bastrop trees were already severely stressed by drought before the fire,” he said, “and now the trees have suffered additional stress as a result of the fire. This additional stress on the pines has caused an increase in beetle attacks on surviving trees, leading

to additional losses. The challenge this creates is that with very little surviving pines, there will be little chance for natural regeneration, where no adult pines survive to produce the seed.”

The area still faces the potential for another fire, the experts said. At this point, no light fire fuels exist in the area to carry a fire. However, ample heavy fire fuels are present, and as trees fall and grass begins to return, the amounts of both light and heavy fuels will increase, making the location prime for another fire. Therefore, reduction of fire fuels is important in the recovery plan, Lewis said.

Helping landowners

Because 75 percent of the burned area in Bastrop is privately owned by a large number of individual owners, Lewis said, the task of recovery is not as easy as it would be with state or federally owned land.

“Recognizing that it’s going to take a whole community to make this happen, the Lost Pines Recovery Team is going to be asking landowners to work with us and allow us to help them in the way of technical assistance and, to the degree that we can, financial assistance,” Hernandez said.

In the coming months, the county will request a Right of Entry with landowners. These legal agreements give landowners the opportunity to work with the recovery team.

In addition to individual landowners, the team also needs involvement from the community.

“We saw a lot of people supporting each other from the start of the fire, and we still see that now. I think we’re going to continue to see that,” Hernandez said.

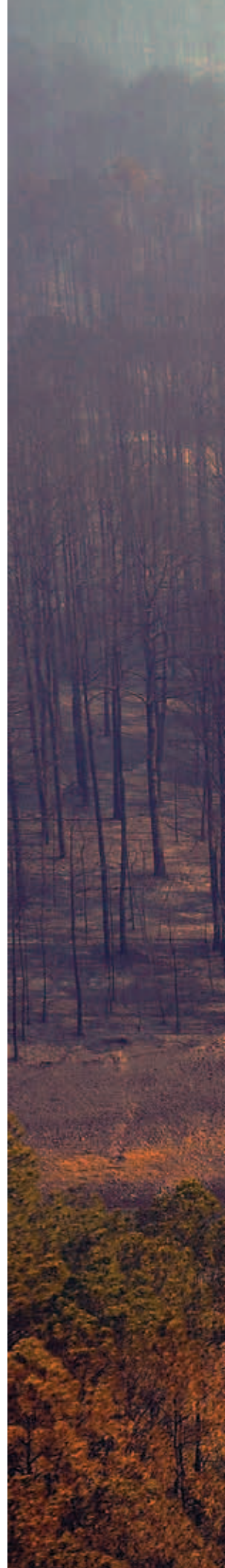
The process of training volunteers brings more complications. Hundreds of volunteers are needed to help with the recovery, and dozens or even hundreds of projects could be occurring simultaneously, Hernandez said. All these projects will require some degree of volunteer training, which makes recovery a difficult task.

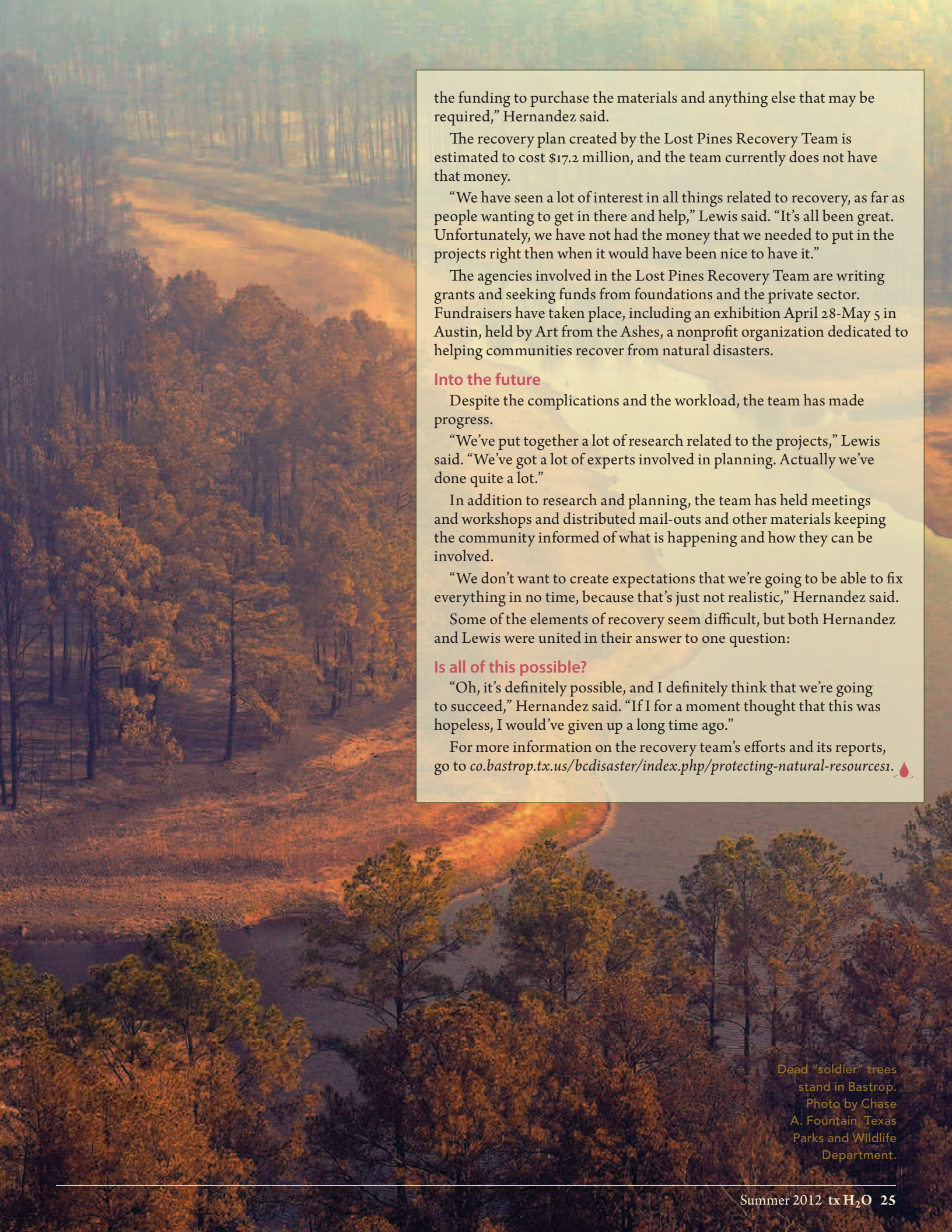
Even as people are offering assistance now, the recovery process will need help from volunteers for many years.

“We’re all having to build this up,” Lewis said, “and I think one of the challenges will be, the further we get past the date of the fire, the more this event fades in people’s minds unless they are living right there in the footprint.”

Finding funding

“I am less concerned about our ability to harness volunteer resources and organize those to implement projects than I am about finding





the funding to purchase the materials and anything else that may be required,” Hernandez said.

The recovery plan created by the Lost Pines Recovery Team is estimated to cost \$17.2 million, and the team currently does not have that money.

“We have seen a lot of interest in all things related to recovery, as far as people wanting to get in there and help,” Lewis said. “It’s all been great. Unfortunately, we have not had the money that we needed to put in the projects right then when it would have been nice to have it.”

The agencies involved in the Lost Pines Recovery Team are writing grants and seeking funds from foundations and the private sector. Fundraisers have taken place, including an exhibition April 28-May 5 in Austin, held by Art from the Ashes, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping communities recover from natural disasters.

Into the future

Despite the complications and the workload, the team has made progress.

“We’ve put together a lot of research related to the projects,” Lewis said. “We’ve got a lot of experts involved in planning. Actually we’ve done quite a lot.”


In addition to research and planning, the team has held meetings and workshops and distributed mail-outs and other materials keeping the community informed of what is happening and how they can be involved.

“We don’t want to create expectations that we’re going to be able to fix everything in no time, because that’s just not realistic,” Hernandez said.

Some of the elements of recovery seem difficult, but both Hernandez and Lewis were united in their answer to one question:

Is all of this possible?

“Oh, it’s definitely possible, and I definitely think that we’re going to succeed,” Hernandez said. “If I for a moment thought that this was hopeless, I would’ve given up a long time ago.”

For more information on the recovery team’s efforts and its reports, go to co.bastrop.tx.us/bcdisaster/index.php/protecting-natural-resources1. 

Dead “soldier” trees stand in Bastrop.
Photo by Chase A. Fountain, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.