

Mulch Madness

By STEVE FLEISCHLI

New York Times, Published: October 12, 2006

TOWERING cypress once covered much of southern Louisiana — 1,000-year-old trees darkened ancient, moss-laden, water-saturated forests. These wetlands not only gave the bayou its flavor, its culture and its mystery, they also acted as critical natural “speed bumps” for major storms.

It’s been estimated that every 2.7 square miles of wetlands reduces storm surge by a foot, and yet over the last century Louisiana has stripped away 1,900 square miles of swamp, an area the size of Delaware. Evidence shows that such improper land management, reducing the cypress-tupelo swamps to a small fraction of their original grandeur, worsened flooding in New Orleans during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Yet at a time when the nation should be investing billions to restore the Gulf Coast’s wetlands for protection against future storms, these cypress swamps continue to face many challenges, including development, saltwater flowing in and rising water levels. The most dangerous threat of all, however, may be garden mulch — the stuff that gardeners usually use to protect their plants.

As they exhaust the cypress forests along Florida’s coast, mulch companies are moving into Louisiana with shady operators among them grinding up entire cypress forests, 70 percent to 80 percent of which will never grow back. This is hurricane protection lost forever — habitat and flood control converted to quick cash, one bag of mulch at a time.

The Environmental Protection Agency has finally begun to require permits for logging in southern Louisiana, which has still not stopped the wholesale clear-cutting of cypress forests.

The situation was further exacerbated by a Supreme Court ruling this summer ordering government agencies and lower courts to undertake a painstaking, case-by-case analysis of waterways, with only those wetlands determined to be of special significance afforded federal protection. It’s a move that could effectively stymie preservation efforts.

So in the meantime, the safety of our nation’s already depleted wetlands comes down to sellers and consumers of cypress mulch.

Big mulch retailers — like Lowe’s, Home Depot and Wal-Mart — have been slow to take real action about the mulch in their stores. But all three companies should put into place formal, meaningful policies that guarantee their cypress mulch comes from sustainable sources rather than the imperiled swamps of the Gulf Coast. Many retailers have done so with lumber and they can do it for cypress mulch.

Until then, consumers would do best to avoid cypress mulch altogether, switching instead to mulches made from pine bark, pine needles or straw. These work just as well and do not have the same environmental impact.

Already, several Florida municipalities, after witnessing the destruction of their wetlands, have banned the use of cypress mulches. In Louisiana, Gov. Kathleen Blanco is exploring her authority to carry out a broader moratorium.

Consumers need to remember that their mulch purchases may be leaving New Orleans and other coastal communities vulnerable. Every bag of cypress mulch for you could mean another sandbag for someone else.

Steve Fleischli is the executive director of Waterkeeper Alliance.