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Land Purchase Protects Essential Mississippi Habitat for Endangered Dusky Gopher Frog

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Dusky gopher frog photo courtesy USFWS.

GULFPORT, Miss.—(ENEWSPF)--May 14, 2015. More than 170 acres of critical habitat for the endangered **dusky gopher frog** will be protected from development under a land purchase announced today by the Center for Biological Diversity, Mississippi Chapter of the Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network, the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain and Columbus Communities, the developer of a planned community called “Tradition” in Harrison County, Miss. This land, which will be owned by the Land Trust, will be shielded from development to help ensure the survival of this rare frog and its longleaf pine habitat.



“Dusky gopher frogs desperately needed this good news to survive,” said Collette Adkins, a Center attorney who works to protect endangered amphibians and reptiles. “We were concerned that development so close to the frog’s essential breeding habitat could have driven the species extinct. I’m glad that the developer and the conservation community worked together to protect this area and give us real hope for the survival of this frog.”

The land purchase announced today is the result of years of effort by the developer and conservation groups to negotiate an agreement to prevent development on this site while they worked together to explore options to protect it for the frogs.

“The funding for this project was part of a hard-fought settlement agreement between the Sierra Club and Mississippi Power. It was the vision of longtime coastal activist and Sierra Club member Linda St. Martin who passed away last year,” said Louie Miller, chapter director of the Mississippi Sierra Club. “Linda seized the opportunity to secure funding from Mississippi Power that will protect critical wild spaces while not costing power customers a dime. We’re excited to preserve habitat for North America’s most endangered amphibian right here in Mississippi and plan to name this project in honor of Linda and her lasting legacy.”

The Land Trust plans to restore longleaf pine on the protected site, thus recreating the original habitat not only for dusky gopher frog, but also for the red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise and other rare wildlife that once thrived there. More than 98 percent of longleaf pine forests have been destroyed across the Southeast.

“We are pleased to have acquired the land not only for the protection of the dusky gopher frog but also to restore the native longleaf pine forests that once graced southern Mississippi,” said Judy Steckler, the executive director of the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain.

Once prevalent throughout Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, the dusky gopher frog (*Rana sevosa*) may now be limited to fewer than 100 adults, according to recent surveys. Fire suppression, drought, pesticides, urban sprawl, highway construction and the decline of gopher tortoises have made this frog so rare it now lives in only a few small Mississippi ponds. In response to a Center lawsuit, the Fish and Wildlife Service listed it as a federally endangered species in 2001.

"This is a great victory for the gopher frog, ensuring that habitat critical to its survival will be protected and

restored,” said Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network. “It is also a testament to what can happen when conservation groups and developers work together to balance environmental protection with development.”

Background

The dusky gopher frog (*Rana sevosa*) is a warty, dark frog with ridges on the sides of its back. When picked up, these frogs cover their eyes with their forefeet, possibly to protect their faces until predators taste their bitter skin secretions and release them. Gopher frogs spend most of their lives underground in burrows created by gopher tortoises — hence their name.

Zoos and scientists have been unable to breed the frogs in captivity, so natural breeding ponds and surrounding habitat are critical to the species’ survival. Concerned about development near one of the last known breeding ponds, the Center and Gulf Restoration Network in 2010 notified state and federal agencies and the developer of its concerns and challenged all parties to find a solution to protect the dusky gopher frog. In response the developer and conservation groups entered a memorandum of understanding in which they **agreed** to seek permanent protection of potentially affected gopher frog habitat. The recent purchase of 170.6 acres of critical gopher frog habitat by the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain is the result of that agreement. A financial settlement from the Mississippi Sierra Club’s challenge to Mississippi Power’s Kemper County Coal Plant provided the funds for the land purchase. The Land Trust intends to name part of the protected area in memory of Linda St. Martin, a longtime Mississippi Sierra Club member and advocate for the health of coastal Mississippi.

The dusky gopher frog has been the focus of several pieces of recent litigation. In December 2012 the Center and Gulf Restoration Network launched a lawsuit against the Service for failing to develop a recovery plan for the frogs. In response the agency **drafted** a recovery plan last fall and is now working toward plan completion. Last summer a federal district court in New Orleans **upheld** protections for 6,477 acres of critical habitat in Mississippi and Louisiana for the endangered frogs. That ruling rejected the arguments made by private landowners in Louisiana and the Weyerhaeuser Company, which holds a timber lease on the frog habitat in St. Tammany Parish, La. The case is currently on appeal with oral arguments scheduled for June 2. The Center and Gulf Restoration Network are participating in that lawsuit as “intervenors” to defend the critical habitat designations that resulted from their advocacy and legal work.

Source: www.biologicaldiversity.org