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Recovery Plan Proposed for Endangered Mississippi Frog

Plan Calls for Restoring Frog Across Its Range, Including St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana and Mississippi

GULFPORT, Miss.— According to a settlement agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity and Gulf Restoration Network, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a draft [recovery plan](#) for endangered [dusky gopher frogs](#). The plan calls for reintroduction of the frogs to additional ponds in Mississippi and Louisiana, as well as monitoring, research and protection of their vanishing long-leaf pine habitat.

“With a recovery plan, we can fight threats like habitat destruction that have driven these frogs to the razor’s edge of extinction,” said Collette Adkins Giese, the Center’s attorney dedicated to conserving amphibians and reptiles. “Fewer than 100 adult frogs remain, making dusky gopher frogs one of America’s most highly endangered amphibians. We need to be doing everything we can to save these guys.”

Although gopher frogs have been protected under the Endangered Species Act for more than a decade, the Fish and Wildlife Service had not developed a required recovery plan to guide management of the species. In December 2012 the Center and Gulf Restoration Network filed a [formal notice](#) of intent to sue the Interior Department for its failure to develop such a plan for the endangered frogs. The plan released today is the result of a 2013 agreement with the conservation groups.

Recovery plans are the main tool for identifying actions necessary to save endangered species from extinction and eventually remove their protection under the Endangered Species Act. Research by the Center has found that the status of species with dedicated recovery plans for two or more years is far more likely to be improving than of those without. Timely development and implementation of recovery plans is critical to saving species because the plans identify all of the necessary actions to save the species, such as research, habitat restoration and protection.

“Recovering endangered species is what the Endangered Species Act is all about. I’m so glad the Service has drafted a plan to help ensure the frogs’ recovery,” said Adkins Giese. “The Act requires these recovery plans to save species, and the plans are part of why this law is so effective. They give us a roadmap for getting from Point A to Point B to save these unique animals from vanishing.”

In response to another lawsuit by the groups, the Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for gopher frogs in 2012. Supporting the recovery plan, the designation includes areas in both Mississippi and Louisiana. Private landowners and a timber company unsuccessfully challenged in court the habitat protections in St. Tammany Parish, La., because the frogs have not been seen there since the 1960s.

“Today’s draft recovery plan makes clear that recovering the dusky gopher frog will mean recovering them across their range, including St. Tammany Parish,” said Adkins Giese. “I hope the owners of the St. Tammany lands will come to realize the value of recovering these little animals and their wetland home, and work with the Service to get the frogs back to the small part of those lands that’s needed to support them.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service is accepting public comment on the draft plan for 60 days. Under the agreement dusky gopher frogs will receive a final plan by June 2015.

Background

Dusky gopher frogs (*Rana sevosa*) are warty, dark-colored frogs with ridges on the sides of their backs. When picked up, the frogs cover their eyes with their forefeet, possibly to protect their faces until predators taste their bitter, milky skin secretions and drop them. Gopher frogs spend most of their lives underground, in burrows created by gopher tortoises — hence their name.

Once abundant throughout Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, dusky gopher frogs are nearly extinct. More than 98 percent of long-leaf pine forests — upon which the frog depends — have been destroyed. 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, with only one pond showing consistent frog reproduction. According to surveys, there are likely fewer than 100 adult frogs of the species left in the world.

In response to a Center lawsuit, the Fish and Wildlife Service listed dusky gopher frogs as a federally endangered species in 2001. Also in



Photo courtesy USFWS. This image is [available](#) for media use.

response to a lawsuit and advocacy by the Center, the Service in June 2012 designated 6,477 acres of protected critical habitat in both Mississippi and Louisiana for the species. Last month a federal court [denied](#) three consolidated lawsuits challenging the 2012 rule that established the habitat protections. The environmental groups are also working with a land developer to protect the gopher frogs' last viable breeding pond through land purchase or exchange.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 775,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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