
Nonprofit buys 170 acres from developer for endangered frogs

Janet Mcconnaughey, Associated Press
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A Mississippi environmental nonprofit has bought more than 170 acres of land from a residential development to reforest and protect as critical habitat for the critically endangered Mississippi gopher frog.

The Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain will replant it in longleaf pine as habitat for the burrowing frogs and other rare animals, according to a news release Thursday from the trust, the Sierra Club and two other environmental nonprofits.

“We don’t want to give too many details about the location of the land because we don’t want to encourage people to go there and disturb the frogs,” Collette Adkins, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said in an email.

The 3½-inch-long frogs, which cover their eyes with their forefeet when picked up and breed only in ponds so shallow they exist for just part of the year, once lived in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Now an estimated 125 to 150 adults live in three spots in Mississippi, with about 700 in zoos across the country, according to Steve Reichling of the Memphis Zoo, who keeps the gopher frog “studbook” for captive breeding arrangements.

The Harrison County land is among 5,000 acres in Mississippi — much of it public land — and 1,500 in Louisiana designated “critical habitat” for the frog. The designation means the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must approve any federal contract involving the land.

The parcel in question was bought from a development called Tradition after efforts to work out a land swap with the U.S. Forest Service failed, Adkins said.

The developer’s property line had been within a few hundred yards of a temporary pond where the frogs lay their eggs. It’s now about 1,000 meters, or nearly two-thirds of a mile, from the pond, according to the Land Trust.

“It’s been so nice to work with them. They want to be considered a green development and do right by the frog,” Adkins said.

Longleaf pine forests once covered about 90 million acres across the Southeast but have been nearly eradicated by lumbering, development, fire suppression and other issues. Other rare creatures that once thrived in the fire-dependent ecosystem include red-cockaded woodpecker, Louisiana pine snakes and gopher tortoises, which make the burrows where gopher frogs live.

Money for the purchase came from last year's settlement to end litigation over construction of a coal-fired power plant in Kemper County. The agreement included \$2 million to protect habitat for the frogs, according to last year's announcement from the Sierra Club.

"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."