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Endangered frog needs habitat protection, locations for new populations, federal agency says

By Robert Rhoden,
The Times-Picayune

Recovery of the endangered dusky gopher frog will require protection of existing populations, searches for new colonies and relocation of frogs to establish new populations, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service said in a draft recovery plan for the amphibian, which hasn't been seen in Louisiana since 1965. Cooperation of private landowners - including those in St. Tammany Parish - is essential for the frog's recovery, according to the proposal whose implementation over a five-year period would cost about \$3.5 million.

The 90-page document, whose objective is to prevent the extinction of the frog, was made public Wednesday (Sept. 10) on the federal agency's website. Fish & Wildlife is accepting public comment on the plan until Nov. 10.



The endangered dusky gopher frog (NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune archive)

The agency said it would have a final plan by next summer.

"The dusky gopher frog is considered to be one of the 100 most endangered species in the world," FWS Southeast Regional Director Cindy Dohner said in a statement. "This recovery plan will help us improve the frog's precarious position and the longleaf pine habitat it and other rare plant and animal species like

the threatened gopher tortoise depend upon."

A federal judge in New Orleans recently upheld FWS's designation of 1,544 acres of land in St. Tammany Parish as "critical habitat" for the frog. Edward Poitevent II of New Orleans, whose family owns most of the land and had challenged the designation with a lawsuit, has said he would appeal the judge's decision.

Poitevent maintains Fish & Wildlife overstepped its authority and that its actions limit his use of the property. By the agency's own estimation, the habitat designation could result in more than \$30 million in lost revenue to his family, he said.

The draft plan serves as a blueprint for how the recovery of the frog could be accomplished, but it does not require private landowners to participate by allowing the introduction of frogs on their land or managing their property in such a way to provide habitat for the species. In fact, Poitevent has said he would never allow the frogs to be placed on his timberland property, which straddles Louisiana 36 west of Pearl River.

"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 Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, which, along with the Gulf Restoration Network, was allowed to intervene in the landowners' lawsuit against Fish & Wildlife. "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."

Fish & Wildlife in 2012 placed the critical habitat label on the 1,544 acres of timberland in St. Tammany and some 5,000 acres of public and private land in Mississippi.

The medium-sized frog, which has warts covering its back and dusky spots on its belly, lives underground in pine forests and breeds in small, temporary ponds. It hasn't been seen in Louisiana in some 50 years.

The frog was placed on the endangered species list in 2001, and only about 100 frogs are currently known to exist in several locations in Mississippi, according to the plan. The species once lived throughout the area between the Mississippi River in Louisiana and the Mobile River in Alabama.

The recovery plan calls for developing a strategy to manage and enhance existing gopher frog populations and their habitat, identifying and securing additional populations and habitat and establishing new populations through relocation. It also

calls for conducting research to guide land management and to provide more information on the frog's life history and ecology.

The main threats to the frog include degradation and destruction of habitat, habitat fragmentation and changes to hydrological patterns due to urbanization and climate change, Fish & Wildlife said. The frog faces a high degree of threat and has a low recovery potential, the plan states.

The downlisting of the frog from an endangered species to threatened species may be considered, the plan says, when various criteria are met, including:

Six viable metapopulations are documented, with one in Louisiana, two in south-central Mississippi, two in south Mississippi, and one in either eastern Mississippi or Alabama. Metapopulations are populations that are physically separated but have some sort of interaction.

Long-term monitoring of each metapopulation documents population viability.

Breeding and adjacent upland habitats within the six metapopulations are pro-

tected long-term through management agreements, public ownership or other means.

The draft plan can be viewed online at FWS's Mississippi Field Office website, <http://www.fws.gov/mississippiES/>.