

Land Trust buys sunfish habitat near Mazda Toyota plant

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The home of the threatened spring pygmy sunfish near the Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant in Limestone County has been purchased by the Forever Wild Land Trust.

The land trust, a program administered by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources through its State Lands division, purchased the Beaverdam Spring tract for \$10 million.

That habitat, and the preservation of the sunfish, resulted in such controversy in 2018 that it temporarily led to a halt on site prep work for the giant \$1.6 billion auto plant that will begin production next year. The Center for Biological Diversity and, later, Tennessee Riverkeeper threatened to sue Mazda Toyota as well as the city of Huntsville to protect the tiny, 1-inch fish's home.

In December 2018, the sides reached a settlement in which [Mazda Toyota promised to invest \\$6 million to protect the habitat](#).

The land trust purchase, first approved by its board in November 2018, was finalized on Wednesday.

"This purchase will not only protect Limestone County's rich natural resources, but our alignment with Mazda Toyota Manufacturing will show other companies that economic development and conservation can indeed go hand in hand," Chris Blankenship, chair of the Forever Wild Land Trust Board and Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said in Friday's announcement.

According to the announcement, agreed upon protections within the acquired property include, but are not limited to: no extraction, withdrawal, diversion and impoundment of ground and surface water; no use of pesticides, rodenticides; and no use of heavy equipment or machinery within the springs, creeks and wetlands — or within a 150-foot buffer zone along said areas.

"The Beaverdam Spring Complex purchase shows that industrial recruitment and business development can coexist with protection of our valuable natural resources and biological diversity," Alabama Secretary of Commerce Greg Canfield said in the announcement.

The CBD also applauded the transaction.

"The Center for Biological Diversity and Tennessee Riverkeeper are pleased to see their agreement with Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA is yielding real conservation value for the rare spring pygmy sunfish and its freshwater habitat," Elise Bennett, a staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. "Ultimately, the agreement will protect more than 1,100 acres of land in its natural state, a real win for the fish and Alabamans."