

# Forever Wild Land Trust buys tract that's habitat for rare fish

- By Marian Accardi Staff Writer

The Forever Wild Land Trust has acquired about 497 acres, known as the Beaverdam Spring tract, that's near the Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant being built in Huntsville-annexed Limestone County.

The \$10 million transaction provides that the habitat for the rare spring pygmy sunfish in Beaverdam Spring will be publicly owned and protected, according to the land trust's announcement. The sunfish is listed as a federally threatened species, known to exist in only two locations in Alabama, including the Beaverdam Spring area.

“One of the primary benefits (of the transaction) is enhanced watershed protection — both as to water quality and quantity — due to the tract acreage including the recharge area for the Beaverdam Spring, which directly feeds the sensitive habitat” for the sunfish, said Patti McCurdy, the director of Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resource's State Lands Division. The land trust is a program administered by the Alabama department.

“This type of habitat conservation in relation to both water quality and water quantity is critical in order to consistently maintain the aquatic vegetation necessary for survival” of the fish, she said.

As part of the acquisition, protections include a prohibition on extraction, withdrawal and diversion of ground and surface water. The terms of the acquisition also prevent the use of pesticides or rodenticides and the use of heavy equipment or machinery within the springs, creeks and wetlands or within a 150-foot buffer zone along those areas, according to the land trust.

The purchase of the privately owned property from Belle Mina Farm Ltd. was finalized last week, according to McCurdy. The property was nominated to be considered for acquisition by the land trust for long-term conservation and management through its regular public nomination process, McCurdy said. After an evaluation process, the deal was originally approved by the land trust board in November 2018.

The land trust receives funds from a portion of the interest earned from offshore natural gas royalties deposited into the Alabama Trust Fund.

“It will take about a year before a management plan for the tract is finalized and approved by the (land trust’s) board,” McCurdy said.

The parcel is within an area that Mazda Toyota committed to preserve as a conservation corridor as part of an agreement last December with two environmental groups. The \$1.6 billion automotive plant near the parcel is expected to start production in 2021.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Tennessee Riverkeeper had threatened to sue the company in an effort to protect the sunfish and its habitat.

“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 sunfish and its habitat, said Elise Bennett, a staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Ultimately, the agreement will protect more than 1,100 acres of land in its natural state, a real win for the fish and Alabamans.”

Chris Blankenship, chairman of the land trust board and commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said in a statement that the deal will protect Limestone County’s rich natural resources, and “our alignment with Mazda Toyota Manufacturing will show other companies that economic development and conservation can indeed go hand in hand.”

