

ENDANGERED FISH:

Property purchase to protect habitat

- The News Courier

A significant land purchase announced last week should ensure the protection of the critically endangered spring pygmy sunfish, discovered near the site of the future Mazda Toyota Manufacturing USA plant.

The Forever Wild Land Trust announced Friday it had purchased 497 acres of property to protect the habitat of fish. Ongoing conservation efforts had previously been the subject of legal pressure against the city of Huntsville the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Last December, two conservation groups — the Center for Biological Diversity and Tennessee Riverkeeper — reached an agreement with MTMUS to protect the habitat of the fish.

The agreement was reached after the CBD raised concerns in a notice of intent to sue related to the Endangered Species Act implications of the potential impact the planned factory would have on the area. The factory is adjacent to Beaverdam Creek west of Huntsville, which is one of only two places the spring pygmy sunfish survives.

In May, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced it would protect 1,330 acres and 6.7 stream miles of critical habitat for the spring pygmy sunfish under the Endangered Species Act.

"We're pleased to see our agreement is yielding real conservation value for the rare spring pygmy sunfish and its freshwater habitat," said Elise Bennett, a staff attorney at the CBD. "Ultimately, the agreement will protect more than 1,100 acres of land in its natural state, a real win for the fish and Alabamians."

MTMUS agreed to place \$4 million in a restricted endowment fund that will provide permanent funding for future conservation projects to benefit the spring pygmy sunfish, including habitat restoration, captive propagation, genetic studies and reintroduction efforts. The other \$2 million is dedicated to immediate habitat restoration and monitoring in the Beaverdam Spring and Creek watershed.

"Conserving large tracts of land is not only great for protecting waterways and wildlife habitat, but it also helps improve air quality and enhances communities," said David Whiteside, founder of Tennessee Riverkeeper. "This is a huge victory for our environment, our economy and the people."

Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle said he was pleased to see a collaboration that would benefit both the environment and economy.

"We salute Mazda-Toyota Manufacturing for their commitment to being good stewards of Alabama's natural resources, and we thank the Forever Wild Land Trust for their important role as conservator of the Beaverdam Spring tract," he said. "Economic Development and respecting our environment should go hand in hand. "

About the spring pygmy sunfish

The spring pygmy sunfish, which rarely grows more than an inch long, has twice been considered extinct. The CBD petitioned to protect the spring pygmy sunfish under the Endangered Species Act in 2009 and sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2018 for failing to protect critical habitat for the spring pygmy sunfish under the Endangered Species Act.

"The spring pygmy sunfish is disappearing because its freshwater habitat was polluted and destroyed," Bennett said. "Conserving their last remaining springs, wetlands and streams is crucial."