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Endangered Mississippi Frog Receives Recovery Plan

Plan Calls for Restoring Frog Across Its Range, Including St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana and Mississippi

GULFPORT, Miss.— According to a settlement agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity and Gulf Restoration Network, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a [final recovery plan](#) for endangered [dusky gopher frogs](#). The plan calls for reintroducing the frogs to additional ponds in Mississippi and Louisiana, as well as monitoring, research and protection of their vanishing longleaf pine habitat.

“With a recovery plan, we can fight threats like habitat destruction that have driven these frogs so close to extinction,” said Collette Adkins, a Center attorney who works to conserve amphibians and reptiles. “This plan gives us hope for one of the country’s most endangered amphibians.”

Although gopher frogs have been protected under the Endangered Species Act for more than a decade, the Fish and Wildlife Service had not developed a required recovery plan to guide management of the species. In December 2012 the Center and Gulf Restoration Network filed a [formal notice](#) of intent to sue the Interior Department for its failure to develop such a plan for the endangered frogs. The plan released today is the result of a 2013 agreement with the conservation groups.

Timely development and implementation of recovery plans is critical because recovery plans are the main tool for identifying actions necessary to save endangered species from extinction, such as research, habitat restoration and protection. Research by the Center has found that the status of species with dedicated recovery plans for two or more years is far more likely to be improving than of those without.

In response to another lawsuit by the groups, the Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for gopher frogs in 2012. Supporting the recovery plan, the designation includes areas in both Mississippi and Louisiana. Private landowners and a timber company unsuccessfully challenged in court the habitat protections in St. Tammany Parish, La., where the frogs have not been seen since the 1960s.

“The plan makes clear that recovering the dusky gopher frog means recovering them across their range, including St. Tammany Parish,” said Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network. “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.”

Background

Dusky gopher frogs (*Rana sevosa*) are warty, dark-colored frogs with ridges on the sides of their backs. When picked up, the frogs cover their eyes with their forefeet, possibly to protect their faces until predators taste their bitter, milky skin secretions and drop them. Gopher frogs spend most of their lives underground, in burrows created by gopher tortoises — hence their name.

Once abundant throughout Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, dusky gopher frogs are nearly extinct. More than 98 percent of longleaf pine forests — upon which the frog depends — have been destroyed. Fire suppression, drought, pesticides, urban sprawl, highway construction and the decline of gopher tortoises have made this frog so rare it now lives in only a few small Mississippi ponds, with only one pond showing consistent frog reproduction. According to surveys there are likely just 135 of the adult frogs left in the world, making dusky gopher frogs one of America’s most highly endangered amphibians.

In response to a Center lawsuit, the Fish and Wildlife Service listed dusky gopher frogs as a federally endangered species in 2001. Also in response to a lawsuit and advocacy by the Center, the Service in June 2012 designated 6,477 acres of protected critical habitat in both Mississippi and Louisiana for the species. In 2014 a federal court [denied](#) three consolidated lawsuits brought by private landowners and a timber company challenging the 2012 rule that established the habitat protections; that ruling is currently under appeal. More than 170 acres of critical habitat for the frog will be shielded from development though a land purchase announced in May that was facilitated by a coalition including the Center and Gulf Restoration Network.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 900,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.



Dusky gopher frog photo courtesy USFWS. This photo is [available](#) for media use.