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Conserving the Southeast's At-Risk Species

“Private landowners are wonderful stewards of the Southeast’s grand diversity of fish, wildlife and plants. Our goal is to work with them – and our public partners – to proactively conserve as many at-risk species as possible through voluntary and innovative measures. Together we can pass down our outdoor traditions to future generations, and help keep farms, forests and other lands working for both people and wildlife.”

Cindy Dohner
Southeast Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In 2011, the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) began working with states, federal agencies and other partners to evaluate more than 450 fish, wildlife and plant species for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). These evaluations are required due to litigation and petitions.

Our Goal

Work with private and public partners to protect working lands and our outdoor heritage by precluding the need to federally list as many at-risk species as possible through proactive conservation and the best available science.

Definition of At-Risk Species

Biologists commonly refer to species as “at-risk” if they face grave threats to their survival. For the purposes of this conservation strategy, the Service’s Southeast Region has defined “at-risk species” as those that are:

- Proposed for listing under the ESA by the Service;
- Candidates for listing under the ESA, which means they are in the queue to be listed; or



The gopher tortoise is a federally threatened species in its western range and a candidate for listing in its eastern range, credit Chris Potin/Mississippi Army National Guard.

- Petitioned for listing under the ESA, which means a citizen or group has requested that the Service add them to the list of protected species.

As the Service develops proactive conservation strategies with partners for at-risk species, the states’ Species of Greatest Conservation Need (defined as species with low or declining populations), will also be considered.

Our Partners in Conserving At-Risk Species

Fifteen southeastern states, working through the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA), are leading the effort to conserve at-risk species. Other partners include all Federal agencies in the Southeast; private landowner groups; Georgia Power and other energy utilities; and other corporations.

Working with Private Landowners

The Service’s Southeast Region recognizes the enormous contribution private landowners make to wildlife conservation. From the gopher tortoise in open pine forests, to the darter fish found in the riffles of mountain streams, the abundance and diversity of species found only in the Southeast are largely due to the conservation ethic of private landowners and the efforts of the states’ fish and wildlife agencies.



The longleaf pine ecosystem is home to some at-risk species, including the gopher tortoise, credit Randy Browning/USFWS.

The Service also recognizes that the majority of lands in the Southeast are privately owned and include habitat for federally listed and at-risk species. To more fully engage private landowners in managing their lands and waters to benefit these species, the Service has developed several voluntary tools that both protect private land interests and provide incentives. These tools, which include conservation agreements and conservation banks or mitigation lands, can be used in combinations to cover both listed and at-risk species.

Early conservation — before a species requires listing under the ESA — maximizes management options for landowners, minimizes the costs, and reduces the potential for restrictive land-use policies by addressing the needs of the species before regulatory requirements for listed species come into play.

Southeast Regional Strategy for Conserving At-Risk Species

The Southeast Region is working in five action areas to accomplish the goal of conserving at-risk species:

- Prioritize species in need of conservation;
- Promote voluntary conservation actions;
- Work with partnerships;
- Improve data collection and sharing; and
- Outreach.



Georgia aster by Michele Elmore, TNC-GA

Accomplishments to Date

- Two Candidate Conservation Agreements have been signed, for the Yadkin River goldenrod in North Carolina and the Georgia aster. The Yadkin River goldenrod and the Georgia aster were removed from candidate status.
- SEAFWA and the Service have prioritized wide-ranging at-risk species for collaborative conservation efforts. An example is the gopher tortoise, which is a candidate for listing across its eastern range in parts of Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina. The Service is coordinating with the states to provide Section 6 funding for surveys and to develop proactive conservation agreements.
- 28 species that were petitioned for listing have been withdrawn and do not require federal protection.
- More than 20 conservation agreements are under development in the Southeast Region, including a comprehensive agreement for cave species in Arkansas.
- The Service and six states (Alabama,

Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina) are coordinating on a first-ever conservation strategy for the gopher tortoise that includes the listed range.

- Working through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Working Lands for Wildlife program, the Service is providing regulatory predictability to landowners who receive funding for on-the-ground conservation of the gopher tortoise.
- With a \$200,000 Landscape Pilot with the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the Service is working with private landowners of longleaf pine forests in Alabama and Georgia to provide regulatory certainty for conserving at-risk species.
- The Service is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to modify existing programs to improve habitat and water quality for at-risk aquatic and aquatic-dependent species.
- The Region's Candidate Conservation website is a model for open government, developed in response to partner complaints about lack of information on listing decisions.
- A searchable database, called the At-Risk Species Finder, is available on the Southeast Region's website. Partners and the public can readily sort lists of candidate and petitioned species, their status, location, range, and field office contacts.

A History of Success

Over the years, the Service's biologists working with state partners have determined that 80 species either did not need federal protection as a result of conservation actions, additional information such as updated survey data, a lack of substantial information, and/or reevaluation of threats to their survival. Another 13 species protected by the ESA now require less protection or no protection at all as a result of



The Eastern hellbender has been petitioned for listing, credit USFWS/Troy Wilson.

recovery actions. In the Southeast, by working closely with states, other federal agencies, private landowners, non-governmental organizations and many other partners, the Service has been able to remove the label "candidate for federal listing" from the Florida black bear, Adams cave beetles in Kentucky, the Camp Shelby burrowing crayfish and the Yadkin River goldenrod.



The robust redhorse is a large sucker fish once thought extinct, credit Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Another success story is the robust redhorse, a large sucker fish once thought to be extinct before it was rediscovered in 1991 in a Georgia river. Thanks to the pre-listing recovery work detailed in a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances signed in 2002 by Georgia Power, which is part of the Southern Company, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the fish has not been listed.

Next Steps

In order to do enough proactive conservation to the point that ESA protection is not needed for as many at-risk species as possible, the Service and its partners must:

- Target resources (partners, staff time, and funding) to proactive conservation actions in the Southeast, such as purchasing conservation easements in habitat essential to at-risk species.
- Conduct essential research and surveys to determine the habitat and life history requirements of priority at-risk species. Better information will enable the Service and its partners to maximize conservation impact.
- Better use existing tools and programs, and explore new ways to provide regulatory flexibility to landowners for proactive conservation actions.

All hands and all lands are engaged in this effort to conserve **all wildlife**.

Contact

For more information about how you can participate in the efforts to conserve at-risk species, please contact Southeast Regional Director Cindy Dohner at cynthia_dohner@fws.gov or 404/679 4000.