

Louisiana receives conservation funding for rare snake, Fort Polk and other projects

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The rare Louisiana pine snake and the Fort Polk military installation share a common bond as beneficiaries of a new round of conservation projects announced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Wednesday.

Louisiana received approval for four of the 115 [conservation](#) projects in the country that will share \$370 million in federal funding through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program approved in the 2014 Farm Bill.

The program was designed to bring together government agencies, nonprofit organizations and private landowners to better leverage conservation money and to take on large projects, said Kevin Norton, state conservationist for Louisiana with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Partners for each [project](#) will bring in another \$400 million for conservation, bringing the total to almost \$800 million, according to USDA.

Two of the four projects are only for Louisiana and will bring in \$1.5 million in additional money to conservation efforts in the state. In addition, Louisiana was part of two other approved multistate projects involving long-leaf pine restoration and rice farm conservation.

One of those multistate projects focuses on restoring or protecting about 20,000 acres long-leaf pine in and around military bases in Louisiana as well as South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

In Louisiana, that project will involve the purchase of 6,300 acres of land near Fort Polk in an effort to provide habitat for the Louisiana pine [snake](#). Although not yet listed under the Endangered Species Act, it's expected that the species will be listed in the future, said Richard Martin, director of forest programs with The Nature Conservancy. Martin said the Louisiana pine snake is possibly one of the rarest vertebrates in the country.

If that listing happens, training exercises on the military base could be seriously hampered and, with base closures across the country, it could be enough to put Fort Polk on the chopping block, he said.

“Fort Polk has said let’s try to get ahead of this,” Martin said.

The best habitat for the [snake](#) is located on nearby private property. The owner of that property is willing to sell an easement and the property for restoration to long-leaf pine, which is the preferred habitat of the rare snake. By providing an easement for the restoration, the large property owner and Fort Polk get a little more protection against accidental killing of Louisiana pine snakes should they be put on the Endangered Species List in the future, Martin explained.

This is not the first collaboration between Fort Polk and The Nature Conservancy. For several years, the two worked together in protecting the endangered red-cockaded [woodpeckers](#), which also depend on long-leaf pine for habitat and call Fort Polk home.

However, unlike the woodpecker, which can be seen in the trees and largely avoided through precautionary measures, the snakes spend a large amount of time underground and are not easily seen when above ground, Martin said.

In addition to the long-leaf pine project, Louisiana also got approval for two state projects including \$25,000 to determine the best conservation projects for five watersheds around the state.

The state Department of Agriculture and Forestry’s Office of Soil and Water Conservation and other partners will use the money to analyze the most effective conservation tools to solve soil and water problems.

“They’re going to look where we can make the biggest impact,” Norton said.

Once those critical areas are identified, other government conservation programs can be accessed to pay for construction or implementation of the developed plans, Norton said.

The rest of the state’s \$1.5 million will go toward a rice stewardship program in the southwestern part of the state. In this program, Ducks Unlimited will be working with rice producers and other partners to develop ways to conserve water, improve water quality and provide improved habitat for wintering birds.

“Rice is good for ducks,” said Alicia Wiseman, Ducks Unlimited Rice Stewardship Partnership coordinator for Louisiana. About 42 percent of the food eaten by wintering ducks in Louisiana comes from these rice fields.

Louisiana is also part of the national Rice Stewardship Partnership project, which expands this rice field conservation work to multiple states and will include ways to monitor the program's success over time.

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