



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, INTERNATIONAL PAPER JOIN TO CONSERVE THREATENED SPECIES

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today joined International Paper Executive Vice-President Mark Suwyn in announcing plans aimed at balancing timber activities with conservation of two rare species found in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

International Paper and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have completed development of a habitat conservation plan to protect the Red Hills salamander, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In addition, the company has committed to developing a similar plan for the western population of the gopher tortoise, also listed as threatened.

Both plans will allow some timber harvesting to go forward within the historic ranges of the two species.

"International Paper is making a good faith effort at protecting these species while at the same time acknowledging the community's needs for a reasonable timber supply," said Secretary Babbitt. "They deserve a great deal of credit for looking down the road and trying to head off problems before they occur."

"These kinds of plans show the Endangered Species Act has the flexibility to allow companies to operate while preserving threatened ecosystems," said Secretary Babbitt. "In the South, these cooperative efforts are especially important because 90 percent of the region's timber land is privately owned."

Service Director Mollie Beattie, whose agency has direct responsibility for administering this habitat conservation plan, said, "Today we have gained the wisdom to know that the health of reptiles, amphibians, and other life forms tells us a great deal about the health of the world we live in. Someone once said the desert tortoise is not about the tortoise -- it's about the desert. And the future of the Red Hills salamander is not just about the salamander -- it's about the forests of the Red Hills of Alabama."

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"We applaud this effort," said Maitland Sharpe, executive director of the Izaak Walton League of America. "This plan is an example of the kind of honest cooperation among industry, government, and environmentalists that will be needed to stop the loss of endangered species and resolve other environmental problems."

The plan provides for long-term conservation of the Red Hills salamander on International Paper lands while allowing limited "taking" of the salamander during some forest management activities.

Under the provisions of the plan, International Paper will establish no-harvest zones on more than 4,500 acres of high-quality salamander habitat, and maintain forested buffers around these zones. Within buffers, limited timber practices will be allowed. In addition, International Paper will train employees to identify salamander habitat, establish buffers, and conduct timber activities within buffer zones in compliance with terms of the plan.

International Paper owns about 569,000 acres of forestland in Alabama, including 29,500 acres within the historic range of the salamander. The habitat conservation plan covers 6,400 acres in southern Alabama, including areas of optimum habitat which support the highest known concentrations of the Red Hills salamander.

International Paper also announced it has begun work on a similar -- and potentially much larger -- plan for the western population of the gopher tortoise, found in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. The company owns 125,000 acres of potential gopher tortoise habitat in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama.

"We'll see an increasing number of habitat conservation plans in the future as other private resource-based companies follow the lead of corporations such as International Paper," said Secretary Babbitt.

"One additional fact will bring about more habitat conservation plans as well," said Secretary Babbitt. "We now have an Administration that is committed to making our environmental laws work. We're committed to working with private landowners in a cooperative, not combative, spirit."

"We took the initiative in developing the habitat conservation plans because we recognize our stewardship responsibilities as a major landowner in this country," said International Paper's Suwyn. "Since we own a significant portion of land which is prime habitat for the salamander, and a very

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large acreage of potential habitat for the gopher tortoise, it is only logical that we set the industry standard for these species. We view these projects as examples of private industry and governmental agencies developing creative solutions to natural resource issues."

Under the Endangered Species Act, "take" of listed species is prohibited. Take includes shooting, harming, harassing, or killing listed species or in some cases, destroying their habitat. However, the Act allows "incidental take," or limited take associated with otherwise legal activities, once a habitat conservation plan is approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Currently, there are 17 habitat conservation plans nationwide covering about 25 endangered or threatened species. There are approximately 80 plans in the works.

The Red Hills salamander is a fairly large amphibian, measuring about 10 inches in length. Its biological significance is enhanced because it is the only member of its genus. It inhabits small burrows on steep wooded slopes dominated by mixed pine and hardwood trees. The species declined as its habitat was altered by timber practices and other uses. It was listed as threatened in 1976.

The gopher tortoise is associated with original longleaf pine sites and dry sandy soils. Numbers of tortoises in some regions declined due to habitat alteration and illegal taking, and in 1987 the population west of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers in Alabama, south Mississippi, and extreme southeastern Louisiana was listed as threatened.