

For The Love of The Land



From top, American Yew, mountains at sunset, Kate's Mountain Clover, and forest cliffs.

By Nanci Bross-Fregonara

In a rugged, limestone cave area of Greenbrier County, livestock grazing and erosion are threatening some of the highest concentrations of freshwater cave invertebrates in the country. In Randolph County, some of the largest colonies of the federally endangered running buffalo clover on earth are threatened by invasive plants and habitat alteration. And at Smoke Hole Farm in Grant County, site of one of the state's largest concentrations of rare, threatened, and endangered species, habitat restoration is desperately needed. Without action on these unique private properties, some populations of West Virginia's rare species could be lost forever.

Fortunately, a program recently adopted by the DNR Wildlife Resources Section can now provide private property owners with some financial tools and planning assistance needed to help them conserve and manage rare species. Called the West Virginia Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), it is part of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiative designed to assist landowners who wish to conserve the habitat of rare species on their properties. "This is an opportunity for landowners who are concerned about the future of West Virginia's natural treasures," says Brian McDonald, program coordinator. "LIP is for private landowners who want to conserve, but need assistance."

The assistance can include advising landowners about which species occur on their property, creating a management plan to help conserve species of concern, or entering into a conservation easement that will protect all or part of their property from loss of habitat through development. The results benefit all West Virginians by maintaining habitat for all species, if not also benefiting the greater global community.

"This is one of the richest places on earth for the diversity of freshwater fish and mussels, land snails, deciduous broadleaf trees, lungless salamanders, cave invertebrates, crayfish, and other types of plants and animals," says McDonald. "Many of these species are found only in the Central Appalachians or even in a small portion of West Virginia."

At the same time, substantial threats face this diversity, including the legacies of past land uses and the impacts of current land uses. "West Virginia has the second highest rate of vacation home development in the nation and has the highest per capita rate of sprawl," McDonald explains. "This places pressure on lands that were once remote and undeveloped."

This in turn places pressure on landowners. McDonald points out, "Some landowners may be at risk from losing their property because of the inability to pay higher taxes that come with rezoning or just the increase

Elizabeth Byers

Ron Snow

Craig Stihler

associated with the push of development and annual reassessment.”

This is where LIP can help. Depending on the location of the property and the types of species found there, a landowner may be eligible for assistance. The priority species list includes all those listed as threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, species found only in West Virginia, and species meeting other criteria. WRS biologists will coordinate a variety of state and federal agencies and private conservation organizations to maintain a set of rating criteria.

While other state and federal landowner assistance programs exist for creating and sustaining suitable habitat for game species, this is the first program targeting non-game species. “Despite West Virginia’s biological richness and the concentrations of rare species on private lands,” says McDonald, “there has been no previous, comprehensive program providing private landowners with resources to undertake conservation activities benefiting rare species habitat.” For West Virginia,

this is a significant new venture. “Many people don’t realize that more than 85 percent of the state’s fish and wildlife habitat is privately owned,” he says.

The results of this new Landowner Incentive Program will benefit all West Virginians, if not also the greater global community, by maintaining habitat for all species.

WRS biologists, working with The Nature Conservancy and other partners, have identified three priority areas which harbor the highest number of species at risk: the Greenbrier Valley Karst, or limestone cave, region; high Allegheny Mountain forests and wetlands; and the Smoke Hole-North Fork Mountain region. In addition, threatened, endangered and globally rare species sites statewide are included. “We are emphasizing habitats that are most threatened by commercial and residential development, mining, acid precipitation, stream sedimentation, forest health issues, invasive species, water pollution and loss of in-stream, wetland and riparian habitat,” says Walt

Kordek, assistant chief of the Wildlife Diversity Unit.

Over the next year, specific parcels of land will be identified that both support a diversity of species of special conservation need and which are severely threatened by one of the factors mentioned above. Once

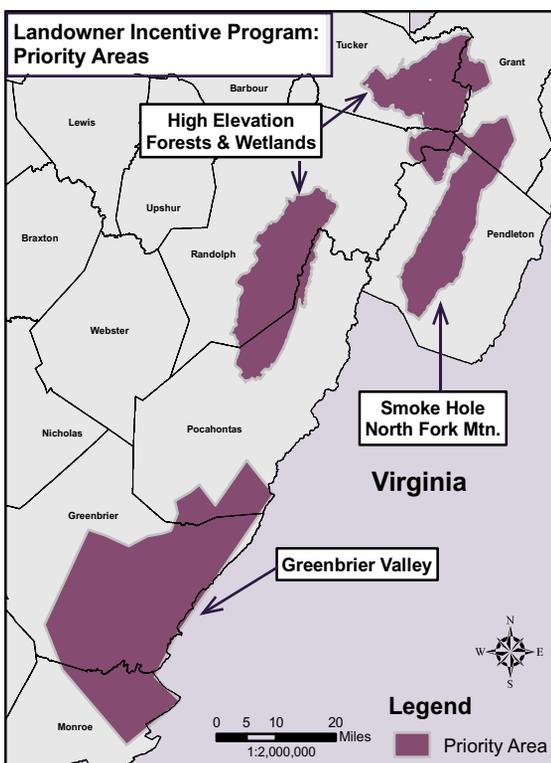
these parcels are identified and evaluated, WRS personnel will partner with willing landowners, other state and federal agencies, and conservation organizations to reduce the threat and conserve the resource.

Whether resulting projects include cave gating, stream stabilization or other habitat conservation actions, it is a major expansion of the WRS land conservation program.

Presently, the DNR has purchased or holds long-term leases on over one-half million acres to provide hunters and anglers with land and water to pursue their sport. While these purchases provide significant benefit to non-game species and non-consumptive users, that hasn’t been the primary program focus. The new program emphasizes the habitat needs of all wildlife and includes a much broader range of conservation actions including conservation easements, habitat restoration and plant propagation.

“What LIP does,” explains McDonald, “is give landowners the freedom to do what they want to with their land -- that is, conserving West Virginia’s natural heritage in perpetuity. Often people have tears in their eyes when they are signing their easement agreement for conservation purposes,” he adds. “They feel strongly about their land and protecting it. It comes from the heart.”

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What help is there for landowners?

Planning activities, including giving landowners’ advice and assisting with the writing of management plans and grant applications, are done at no cost to the landowners. Applications submitted to the program to obtain financial assistance for the implementation of conservation actions are accepted if landowners meet certain criteria.

Grant applications for implementation actions require a 25 percent match of the total cost by the landowner although it is anticipated that partnerships among a number of organizations will help with raising the required match. If an easement is desired, partial donation may meet the match requirements. For more information, email: wvlip@wvdnr.gov or contact Brian McDonald at 304-637-0245.