

Crucial purchase adds more than 1,000 acres to Patoka Wildlife Refuge

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A public-private partnership is being credited with preserving a crucial piece of Southwestern Indiana wildlife habitat, something a legal block has kept the federal government from doing on its own.

The nonprofit Sycamore Land Trust has purchased 1,043 acres of former Peabody Energy mine land in Gibson and Pike counties in the land acquisition area of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge. In return for helping do what its legal policies prevented, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is buying a conservation easement from the trust so the government can manage the land as part of the wildlife refuge.

The former Columbia Mine property is the largest land protection project yet for the Bloomington, Ind., regional nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Southern Indiana's natural and agricultural heritage. The nearly \$2 million project includes \$1.6 million for the land purchase, plus additional interest and project costs, said Christian Freitag, trust executive director. The loan will be repaid with the conservation easement and grant funding from Ducks Unlimited and the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust, Freitag said.

Acquiring the land has been a top priority of the wildlife refuge since Peabody first offered to sell it in 2002, said Bill McCoy, refuge manager.

"It was such a critical piece of property because of its location, size and habitats," McCoy said. "We don't have to worry about all the houses being built there or the trees being sold off for timber any more."

Although Peabody Energy had stalled selling the land for 10 years while federal officials worked to find the money and way to buy it, Freitag noted that wasn't an indefinite status.

"It was going to be broken off into little pieces and sold," he said.

Federal officials had the property appraised twice and at one point purchase papers were even drawn up, McCoy said, but government policy barred it from including a clause Peabody sought that would shield the company from liability in lawsuits.

So McCoy turned to the land trust for help.

Patoka is one of three national wildlife refuges in Indiana. It is 20 miles long from east to west and includes a meandering 30-mile stretch of the Patoka River. However, instead of being the single, large pristine natural area conceived when at its 1994 creation, the refuge is a confusing patchwork of public and private land. Its growth has been hindered by a lack of federal funding for acquiring lands, McCoy said.

That is one of the reasons the Columbia Mine tract is so important, McCoy said. It connects two larger pieces of the Patoka refuge to create a 5,000 acre habitat. With the inclusion of the new conservation easement, just over 8,000 acres are now under refuge management.

"We are about 36 percent there right now," McCoy said.

However, that isn't the only reason the land is important.

"It's got such diversity of habitat," McCoy said.

Everything from marshes, wetland and upland forests, and grasslands are contained within the property. It is home to a dizzying diversity of wildlife including several endangered and threatened species, such as the Indiana bat, copperbelly watersnake, river otters, bobcats and cerulean warblers, Freitag said.

"This is an important project. When you think of Indiana, you don't think of wetland forests and grasslands and marshes. The land, I think, almost speaks for itself," Freitag said. "The land itself is truly remarkable, but the partnership that got this together also was truly remarkable. Everybody worked together to make sure the right outcome happened. We made it happen together."

Peabody had mined about 700 acres of the site, leaving the rest untouched. McCoy credited Peabody's reclamation of the land, which won national awards, for going beyond simple restoration and creating a range of habitats.

Sue Vernier, a member of the Evansville Audubon Society who frequents natural areas such as Patoka, is excited about the acquisition.

"Patoka is so fragmented. The significance of this acreage is it unites two other fairly decent-sized areas. I no longer have to worry about am I trespassing on private land or not," she said. "We have some really nice state parks and a nice national forest but overall, we don't have much public land. A lot of areas are no longer available. What it comes down to is that public land is needed for hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation."

McCoy noted the new area won't be available for general public use until sometime next year. While Patoka has the rights to manage it as a natural area, an agreement has not been worked out about public use since the property is owned by the land trust.

However, all involved agreed that the ultimate goal is to make it available to the public, Freitag said, noting that was a requirement of the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust grant.



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