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Leverage Point to Recover One of the First Amphibians Listed Under the Endangered Species Act: $5 Million Grant Aimed at What Past Efforts for Houston Toad Missed

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy to Lead 8,200-Acre Habitat Restoration Effort

COLLEGE STATION, TEXAS, October 31, 2024 - One of the first amphibians to be listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the Houston toad, will receive a major boost through large-scale habitat restoration, the critical piece of its decades-long recovery that's been missing. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, will lead the effort.

In collaboration with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and an extensive partnership network, ARC has been awarded a $5 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This grant will fund the restoration of more than 8,200 acres of Post Oak Savannah in east central Texas.

"Houston toads are barely holding on in the unconnected pockets of habitat that remain, and for such a rare species, that's a recipe for disaster," explained ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca.

They're found in a narrow area nestled between Houston, Austin, and Dallas and nowhere else in the world. Unfortunately, though, the Houston toad hasn't been spotted within the limits of its namesake city, Houston, since the 1970s.

The charismatic but secretive Houston toad was only first discovered by scientists in the 1940s and was described in 1953. Then, throughout the 1950s, its populations declined sharply. For this reason, it was one of the first amphibians federally listed as an Endangered species. It was listed in October 1970 under the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, a precursor to the Endangered Species Act.

Their decline is due to the widespread degradation and destruction of Post Oak Savannah because of fire suppression and other issues related to the urban and agricultural development of the region. As such, "the majority of their historic habitat is on private lands, and so, Houston toad recovery can't solely occur in the places that already have protection, such as state parks and other public lands," said Apodaca.

This funding will bring together private landowners and conservation experts to restore and maintain the open savannah landscapes essential for the Endangered Houston toad's survival. Through outreach programs combined with conservation incentives, ranchers, farmers, and other landowners will be provided with the technical assistance and funding they need to restore and maintain crucial habitats, all while improving the quality and economic viability of their land.

"From what we've seen from past efforts, there is lots of interest from landowners in the Houston toad's range for programs like this," stated Paul Crump, state herpetologist for TPWD. "People generally view these incentives as a true win-win, helping them pay for needed projects while enhancing conditions for all wildlife that depend on open savannah conditions, including the toad."

Historically, the Post Oak Savannah ecosystem consisted of open, sunlit areas that encouraged the growth of perennial grasses like little bluestem, switchgrass, and yellow Indiangrass. Over the years, fire suppression and improper land use have transformed this ecosystem into dense woodlands, unsuitable for Houston toads, but also of little value to Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, and Texas horned lizards, all species which also were much more common in the Post Oaks historically.

This program will connect populations of the toad through restoration and conservation efforts on private and public lands throughout the area, including selective brush reduction, herbicide application, prescribed fires, and sustainable grazing practices.

"This kind of large-scale habitat restoration is what's been missing in the decades-long recovery program for this species," explained Crump, "and will build upon the excellent work done by our zoo and academic partners who have been bolstering populations in Bastrop County with the captive breeding and release program." The fact that high-quality habitats remain scarce poses a major barrier to re-establishing healthy Houston toad populations.

As Apodaca stated, "This is an important leverage point for the toad and enables us to give this species its best chance at being delisted from the Endangered Species Act."

Plus, beyond the toad, this RCPP grant will have broad ecological and economic benefits, mitigating wildfire risk, enhancing aquifer recharge for the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer (a key water source for 2.5 million Texans), and fostering sustainable land management practices.

In addition to ARC and TPWD, the partnerships that will help implement the program include the Boy Scouts of America – Capitol Area Council, Fort Worth Zoo, Pines and Prairies Land Trust, South Central Texas Prescribed Burn Association, Skytec LLC, and the Native Prairie Association of Texas.

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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