



## Conservation group receives \$5M grant to fund habitat restoration for Houston Toad

By **John Lomax V**, *Staff writer*

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 Gift Article



From the archives, 2012: A female Houston toad is housed in the Houston Toad Conservation Quarantine Facility located inside the Houston Zoo.

Houston was once home to a species of toad that has long since vanished from the streets and bayous of Space City. Today, the Houston Toad is found in just a handful of Texas counties and was one of the first amphibians to be listed as an endangered species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The species has suffered habitat loss brought about by expanding urban areas and repeated droughts throughout the sandy pine forests it calls home, according to the Brazos River Authority. It's a trend conservation experts hope to reverse. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy was recently awarded a \$5 million grant that it hopes to use to restore some of the toad's lost habitat.

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“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,” said ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca in a Thursday news release. “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.”

The grant was awarded by the National Resource Conservation Service, and will fund the reconstruction of more than 8,200 acres of Post Oak Savannah in east central Texas. The region, once dominated by open grasslands and native flora, has become heavily forested as a result of fire suppression and improper land use, according to the ARC.

Dense woodlands are unsuitable for Houston Toads, and the changing habitat has contributed to their decline. The grant was awarded to the ARC in collaboration with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and is geared toward bringing private landowners and conservation experts together through outreach programs and incentives.

“The majority of their historic habitat is on private lands,” Apodaca said. “The Houston Toad’s recovery can’t solely occur in the places that already have protection, such as state parks and other public lands.”

The ARC hopes to equip individual farm and ranch owners with the assistance and funding needed to encourage conservation and habitat preservation on the local level.

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Paul Crump is the state herpetologist — a field of zoology specialized in reptiles and amphibians — for TPWD and previously headed amphibian conservation efforts at the Houston Zoo. He said incentivizing conservation for individuals can often produce better outcomes than large-scale public initiatives.

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“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,” Crump said. “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.”

The Houston Zoo, which maintains a 1,200 square-foot facility dedicated to breeding the plucky amphibian, has been involved with the species’ recovery since 1981. As of 2022, the zoo’s recovery program has released more than 11 million eggs in ponds around Bastrop County — one of the few areas where the toad can still be found.

“This kind of large-scale habitat restoration is what’s been missing in the decades-long recovery program for this species,” Crump said. “It 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.”



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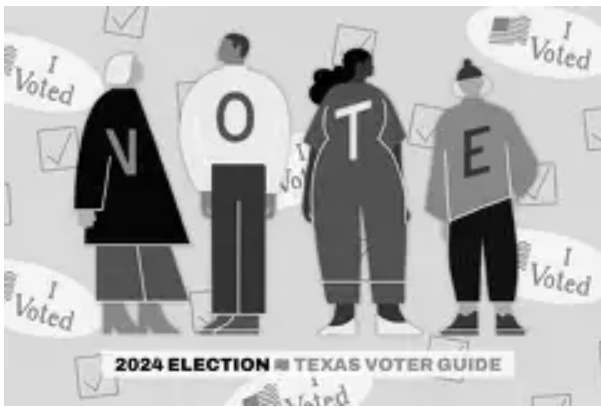
**BREAKING NEWS REPORTER**



John Lomax V is a breaking news reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

A recent graduate of the University of Houston and a lifelong resident of the city, John is passionate about government watchdog reporting and driven by the mission of digging deep to find out information people want to know. He is the son of renowned Houston journalist John Nova Lomax, who wrote for numerous publications and was a former senior editor at Texas Monthly.

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