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New National Framework Brings Imperiled Salamander Recovery to Private Lands

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy to Coordinate Aquatic Salamander Conservation Under USDA Working Lands for Wildlife Program

UNITED STATES, January 20, 2026 - People across the US depend on farmers to produce food, and now some of those same farmers are playing a critical role in safeguarding the Southeast's most imperiled salamanders. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit dedicated to conserving imperiled wildlife, has joined the US Department of Agriculture's Working Lands for Wildlife Aquatic Connectivity Framework (ACF) as a coordinating partner focused on aquatic salamander protection, helping advance voluntary, federally-supported conservation on private lands.

In the southeastern United States, where more than 90 percent of land is privately owned, the ACF provides a way for landowners to voluntarily participate in species recovery. With Framework partners, ARC will help connect farmers and other landowners with federal incentives to improve water quality and restore aquatic habitat to support the recovery of three imperiled salamanders: the federally Threatened [Neuse River waterdog](#) in North Carolina, the federally Endangered [Black Warrior waterdog](#) in Alabama, and the [eastern hellbender](#), a species proposed for federal listing across its range.

“Without private lands, recovery for many imperiled species is simply impossible,” said JJ Apodaca, ARC Executive Director. “In regions like the Southeast, public lands alone do not provide enough habitat. This framework helps align species recovery with the realities of working lands, creating solutions that support landowners at the scale these species need.”

Launched in 2023, the ACF is a national strategy that brings farmers and conservation partners together to keep soil on farms and out of nearby streams. This relatively simple but crucial outcome provides big benefits for aquatic ecosystems, especially for sensitive species like salamanders that depend on clean, connected waterways.

ARC's role within the Framework focuses on fully aquatic salamanders that are especially sensitive to changes in water quality and stream condition. The organization has hired Katie Maddox as its Working

Lands for Wildlife Herpetofauna Coordinator and plans to add Private Lands Biologists who will work directly with landowners in focal watersheds.

“Private lands work is where conservation becomes real,” said Maddox. “Most landowners want to do right by the land. Our job is to help connect them with tools that support both their land use goals and wildlife recovery.”

Some of the region’s rarest salamanders rely on clean, well-connected streams to survive. The Neuse River waterdog, found only in North Carolina’s Neuse and Tar Pamlico River Basins, needs free-flowing, highly oxygenated waters and is extremely sensitive to sediment and pollution. In Alabama’s Black Warrior River Basin, the Black Warrior waterdog depends on rock crevices and low sediment for breeding, shelter, and foraging, and even moderate sedimentation can destroy critical habitat.

Eastern hellbenders, now the focus of recovery efforts in ACF priority watersheds, spend their entire lives in cool, permanent streams and breathe almost entirely through their skin, leaving them especially vulnerable to poor water quality and habitat loss.

“These species are indicators of stream health,” Apodaca said. “When water quality declines and habitat connectivity is lost, salamanders are often among the first to disappear. Improving those conditions benefits entire watersheds.”

Under the Framework, ARC’s Private Lands Team will help farmers achieve their conservation goals and ensure that projects align with species recovery strategies. ARC will work closely with USDA NRCS and other national partners, including the Working Lands for Wildlife Aquatic Connectivity Framework Coordinator, Josselyn Lucas.

“This watershed-scale approach is important because what happens on one property doesn’t stop at the fence line,” said Lucas. “Streams connect neighbors and entire watersheds, and if everyone assumes someone else will take care of them, these systems continue to degrade. Through the ACF, farmers are stepping up as leaders by protecting not only their investment, but their land and water, while helping restore the rivers and streams that benefit their communities and the wildlife that depend on them.”

For ARC, the partnerships with farmers and agencies represent a critical step toward making recovery possible where it needs to happen. “This is about conservation that works,” Apodaca said. “On private lands, with invested landowners, together we’re doing what it takes to save species while they still have a chance.”

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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