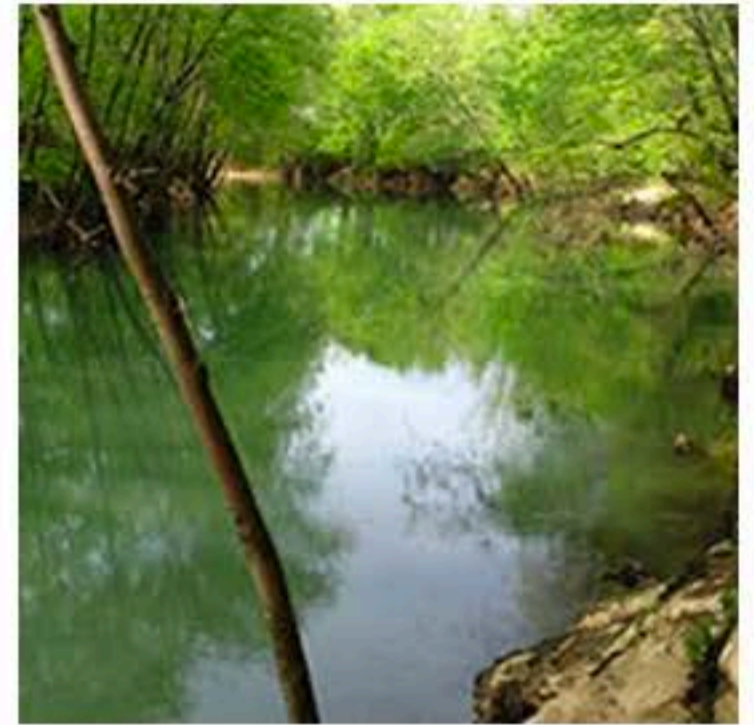


# Painting a Modern Picture of Conservation - The Paint Rock River National Wildlife Refuge



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On Tuesday, February 5th, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) hosted a public forum at the Franklin County Library to discuss the creation of a new wildlife refuge, the Paint Rock River National Wildlife Refuge, in southern Franklin County. The presentation comes after years of tireless efforts by a diverse assemblage of stakeholders. Pending its approval in June of this year, the refuge stands to be just the eleventh refuge created under President Obama. More notably, it will be one of a very few refuges in the country whose focus is protecting threatened upland terrestrial habitat in the southern Appalachians.



National Wildlife Refuges, managed by the USFWS, a bureau of the Department of the Interior, were created in 1903 by President Teddy Roosevelt. They now comprise 95 million acres in 556 sanctuaries and are aimed at not only protecting wildlife but also providing hunting, fishing, environmental education, environmental interpretation, photography, and wildlife watching opportunities for all Americans.

Discussion of protecting the headwaters of the Paint Rock River in Tennessee and Alabama is nothing new. There were two attempts, in the 1980's and early 2000's, to have the area made a National Forest. While both of those attempts failed, the area remained of high protection priority. As a result, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam rated the area as one of Tennessee's top two priorities for 2010's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, which sought "to bring a more effective approach to land management, to encourage collaboration among government agencies and private citizens to protect our outdoor legacy, to fund programs that protect land, provide assistance to communities, and improve opportunities to get young people outdoors."

There is great reason to protect the Paint Rock River watershed in both Tennessee and northern Alabama. The watershed in Tennessee is comprised of 3 tributaries of the Paint Rock River, the Larkin Fork, the Estill Fork, and Hurricane Creek, and gallon for gallon is one of the most biologically diverse watersheds in the United States. The watershed provides habitat for endangered species such as the Gray Bat, Indiana bat, Snail Darter, and American Hart's Tongue Fern as well as 45 species of rare freshwater mussels.

As such, the USFWS has outlined a conservation priority area for the new refuge comprising 40,000 total acres, with plans to create an initial refuge of 18,000 acres, expanding it to 25,000 acres over time. The refuge will connect the Bear Hollow Mountain and Walls of Jericho Wildlife Management Areas with the Skyline Wildlife Management Area. The USFWS has been developing a Land Protection Plan comprised of purchasing lands from willing landowners, arranging easements, and establishing management agreements. A precise map of the refuge specific to the parcel level will be available in April.

While plans for the new refuge have mostly been met with praise, some have expressed concerns regarding perceived changes to the tax base of Franklin County. According to the USFWS, lands under conservation easements will still be taxed by the county. In addition, the USFWS will offset tax revenue lost by lands purchased in fee by paying an equivalent amount to the county for their losses as regulated by the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act. Thus Franklin County's tax revenue should remain unchanged. The refuge is also expected to increase eco-tourism, thus turning the protected land in a net-positive revenue generator for the area.

While the creation of the new refuge can be credited to the tireless efforts of numerous parties, the Cumberland Voices (2011) planning effort coordinated by the University and the Land Trust of Tennessee was instrumental in galvanizing the resolve of several stakeholder groups. Sewanee's Landscape Analysis Lab provided a great deal of geospatial data sources which helped determine the areas of highest priority. The Land Trust, partnering with the University, also helped organize stakeholder meetings in between 2010 and 2011. The Land Trust, established in 1999 with the mission of preserving the unique character for Tennessee's natural and historical landscapes and sites for future generations, has helped secure important tracts and linkages throughout the South Cumberland region.

The Paint Rock River National Wildlife Refuge sits poised to mark a historic moment in conservation for Tennessee and the entire South. Not only will it be Tennessee's first refuge created since 1985, it also highlights the rising importance of protecting biodiversity, a resource we are blessed to be endowed with. The refuge's creation also stands as a watershed moment for our University, setting us apart from our peer-institutions as a key player in not only protecting biodiversity but also facilitating regional landscape level stewardship. While the new refuge's creation may go unnoticed by many, it is something that all of us should take pride in having quite literally in our backyards.