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CLIMATE CHANGE,
One Bright Idea
at a Time

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Forever Wild in Alabama

In 1992, Alabama faced a unique situation—a surplus of income from offshore drilling. Voters overwhelmingly backed a plan that would use the money to save the state's rapidly vanishing landscape. The program was called Forever Wild and since its inception it has purchased more than 100,000 acres of land and wetlands.

Greg Lien, who oversees the program for the state's Department of Environmental Management, says the process to acquire a tract is quite simple. "Anyone can nominate a tract, but the land must be of historical or environmental significance," he explains.

The Forever Wild board of directors must then approve the purchase, but that doesn't mean it's a done deal. There must be a willing seller, or the process ends there.

Such was almost the case with a 12,500-acre tract known as the Walls of Jericho, an area in northern Alabama that encompasses the headwaters of the Paint Rock River and is the habitat for more than 100 species of mussels and fish, 17 of which are on the federal Endangered Species list. After a relentless 10-year pursuit by Forever Wild and the Nature Conservancy, the land was finally purchased in 2002 for \$13.9 million.

It hasn't been all roses for the program. In April 2005, state senators proposed diverting 30 percent of Forever Wild's funding to other agencies. When the bill was announced, voters became outraged and flooded the phone lines at the state capitol. The bill died before the ink had dried.

"It shows that support for the program is stronger now than when originally passed," Lien says. "It validates the job we're doing."

There are some concerns that the program is not looking at the bigger picture when it comes to protecting the state's wildlife. Rick Guhse of the Alabama Hiking Trail Society would like to see more of a corridor approach. "The way the program is currently structured, it picks out parcels of land on a spot basis, ensuring the preservation of smaller species rather than larger migratory ones," he says. "This approach is better than none at all but it doesn't lend itself to protecting environmental regions and large mammal movement."

While Forever Wild receives funding from offshore drilling and matching federal grants, the money received is strictly for the purchase of land, not its



On Forever Wild's Bartram Canoe Trail in Alabama's Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

management. Lien's assistant, Chris Smith, says a program has been instituted to address this issue. "Residents can purchase Forever Wild license plates for their vehicles, with proceeds going to help fund tract management," he says.

"So far, the tags have netted an additional \$200,000 for Forever Wild." CONTACT: Alabama Department of Environmental Management, (334) 271-7700, www.adem.state.al.us. **E**

—Joe Cuhaj