

The Nature Conservancy Receives Grant from 3M Foundation for Conservation in Northern Alabama's Warrior Mountains

The Alabama Chapter of The Nature Conservancy has received a grant of \$500,000 from the 3M Foundation to purchase and manage 130 acres at the northern edge of the Bankhead National Forest, a richly biodiverse region in the Southern Appalachians of northwest Alabama noted for its rugged terrain and extensive forests. This land purchase will help protect the integrity of the forest, improve forest management, and expand public recreation opportunities.

One of the Conservancy's priorities in Alabama is to conserve critical lands, which closely aligns with 3M Foundation Environmental Giving goal to make a lasting positive impact on the Earth's ecosystems and promote science-based environmental and conservation education. "This project reflects 3M's mission of improving every life by protecting the natural habitat of a variety of plant and animal species for future generations," said Kim Price, vice president, 3M Community Affairs. "3M is pleased to partner with The Nature Conservancy to support conservation projects that will have a lasting impact on our ecosystems.

The Conservancy's ability to acquire this land can be credited to the commitment of partners such as 3M. "We are pleased to add to the permanent protection of such a vital landscape as the Warrior Mountains," stated Chris Oberholster, state director for The Nature Conservancy in Alabama. "This would not have been possible without 3M who has supported other projects that have protected thousands of acres of important wildlife habitat in northeast Alabama, including the lands around the Walls of Jericho and other parts of the Paint Rock River Watershed."

The 180,000 acre William B. Bankhead National Forest is an area of major conservation significance, and is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The landscape has been identified as important for a rich array of natural habitats and associated plant and animal species. In addition to extensive cove hardwood and hemlock forests in the canyons, the many clear streams that make up the headwaters of the Black Warrior River are home to dozens of rare mussels, fish and other freshwater aquatic animals. Extensive cliffs, rocky glades, and caves provide habitat for many other special plants and animals. There are even areas of natural montane longleaf pine forest remaining in the southern part of the National Forest.

The Warrior Mountains are the dominant geologic feature of the Bankhead National Forest. Lying within the Bankhead is the Sipsey Wilderness Area, the first wilderness area to be designated east of the Mississippi River. With hundreds of waterfalls and deep chasms, these cool, dark forests support incredible biological diversity and some of the best remaining stands of old-growth cove hardwood forests on the Cumberland Plateau. Some of the plants and animals found here occur nowhere else on Earth. These include the Alabama streak-sorus fern, the Sipsey darter and the Black Warrior waterdog, a type of large aquatic salamander.

Yet with all of this beauty and natural importance, the Bankhead National Forest is one of the most fragmented national forests in the country. Public lands are significantly interspersed with privately owned tracts, making land management more difficult and limiting public access in some parts of the National Forest. Fragmentation of habitats also threatens some of the species which require extensive areas of mature forest to thrive.

Although 3M operates on a global scale, they have two plants located on either side of the Bankhead National Forest—one in Decatur, AL to the northeast, and one in Guin, AL to the west. Improving the quality of life for their employees is important to 3M, and the company has been a longtime supporter of the Conservancy's work. They have worked with the Conservancy in the U.S. and across the world for more than a decade. Since 2002,

3M has provided significant financial support to the Conservancy for conservation work in north Alabama.

The long-term vision for this land is for it to host the proposed Bankhead Center for Research & Education. A local nonprofit, the Bankhead Education Foundation was established to promote the establishment of such a facility. The hope is that the proposed Center would be managed by a state land grant university, and serve as a hub for public outreach, education and field research on the ecology, conservation and management of the forest, freshwater and cave ecosystems of the area.

D.D. Martin, local Conservancy trustee and president of the Bankhead Education Foundation, is an avid supporter of the Warrior Mountains landscape. "The proposed Center would contribute a positive identity to the North Alabama region," stated Martin. "Not only would it improve the quality of life for residents and serve as a gateway for ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities, but it would also provide a much needed outlet for research."

This land was purchased from private landowner Jerry Armor. "My family is very pleased with the Nature Conservancy's plans for a center to study the Bankhead and surrounding area." said Armor. "We lived in this area for six generations and this particular piece of property has been in my family since my grandfather's days. I know that my father and grandfather would be glad to see it used for this purpose."

The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. To date, the Conservancy and its more than one million members have helped protect 130 million acres worldwide. Visit [The Nature Conservancy](#) online.

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Contacts:

Natalie Garcia
The Nature Conservancy in Alabama
ngarcia@tnc.org
205-251-1155, ext. 107

Jacqueline Berry
3M
(651) 733-3611

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