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### **Power Companies, Tribe, Agencies Take Steps to Save Rare Fish**

Asheville, N.C. - Power companies, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and state and federal agencies have come together to conserve the sicklefin redhorse, a fish found in only six Appalachian counties worldwide and being considered for the federal endangered species list.

The sicklefin redhorse is found in Jackson, Macon, Swain, Clay, and Cherokee counties, North Carolina; and Towns County, Georgia. It was only recently discovered to be a distinct species, triggered by the 1992 observations of Roanoke College's Robert Jenkins. In 2005, driven by concern over impacts from migration barriers, water quality, non-native fish, and other factors, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) designated the fish a candidate for the endangered species list. In the ensuing years, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) led efforts to conserve the fish and increase population sizes.

“Although the sicklefin redhorse has a very limited distribution, it's future is brighter today,” said Mike Oetker, deputy regional director for the Service's Southeast Region. “While it faces some significant conservation challenges, we've really seen partners come together to ensure its continued existence and that it will once again thrive across its former range.”

The voluntary agreement, called a Candidate Conservation Agreement, is designed to address imperiled species conservation through proactive measures before the plant or animal needs the full protection of the Endangered Species Act. In this case, the agreement formalizes and expands upon conservation efforts established by the WRC, Duke Energy Carolinas, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the Service are parties to the agreement, which also receives support from cooperators Brookfield Renewable Energy Partners, and Conservation Fisheries, Inc.

The agreement is part of a larger effort by the Service working with partners to conserve plants and animals before they need the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2010, the Service was petitioned to determine whether the candidate species should be protected by the ESA. A decision on that is expected later this year. So far as part of the Service's At Risk species conservation effort, the Service has determined that 56 species do not require listing in part due to proactive conservation steps taken by partners.

“For some time now we’ve had a core group of people working with this fish,” said Steve Fraley, an aquatic biologist for the WRC. “This agreement brings in some new partners and helps ensure not only our continued work, but should provide opportunities to expand our efforts.”

Signatories agreed to a suite of annual measures for the next ten years, including:

- Collecting and fertilizing sicklefin redhorse eggs from the Little Tennessee, Oconaluftee, Tuckasegee, and Hiwassee rivers.
- Hatching and rearing the animals at the Service’s Warm Springs National Fish Hatchery in Warm Springs, Georgia and the Conservation Fisheries, Inc. facility in Knoxville, Tennessee.
- Using these captive-reared fish to stock North Carolina and Georgia streams.

In addition to those annual actions, several broader measures will be undertaken, including:

- Opportunities will be sought to expand stocking into areas currently inaccessible to the fish due to dams.
- Duke Energy will manage the company’s reservoir levels and dam releases to decrease negative impacts to sicklefin redhorse, including minimizing downstream impacts when reservoirs have to be drawn down or sediment and debris removed.
- TVA will continue to implement commitments in TVA’s Reservoir Release Improvement Plan and River Operations Study that facilitate multiple uses of the reservoir system in a manner that ensures protection of all aquatic life and enhances their populations.
- Technical support will be offered to local governments, the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service, and citizen-based watershed groups to conserve and improve stream habitat.
- The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission will manage Needmore Gamelands, a 4,400-acre state-managed site along the Little Tennessee River, to conserve sicklefin habitat.
- The partnership’s efforts will be evaluated by periodically surveying and assessing the sicklefin redhorse’s distribution, abundance, and status.

“The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are proud to contribute to this long-term cooperative effort focused on conserving this rare native fish that once provided an important component of Cherokee subsistence,” said Mike LaVoie, program manager for fish and wildlife management for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

“Protecting and improving aquatic biodiversity is key to TVA’s mission of service and supports our stewardship efforts across the Tennessee Valley,” said Rebecca Tolene, vice-president, natural resources, TVA. “This partnership is a great example of how we can work together to positively impact the future of both an individual species and its watershed community.”

“We are pleased to partner on this agreement to conserve, manage, and enhance the sicklefin redhorse population and its habitat,” said Steve Jester, Duke Energy Carolina’s vice president, water strategy, hydro licensing and lake services. “The agreement aligns well with Duke Energy’s commitment to produce electricity safely and reliably while protecting our vital natural resources.”