

Protecting Endangered Species Requires Attention to Detail

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Hundreds of thousands of plant and animal species share the planet with us. Over time, many have evolved to form other species and many more have become extinct. As man's knowledge of various species has grown, members of enlightened cultures of the world have made significant efforts to protect those plants and animals that are in danger of slipping away. Today in the United States, more than 400 animals and 600 plants are considered to be endangered.

Two members of the animal kingdom and one plant on the endangered list have habitats in South Mississippi Electric's service area. Each requires special care and handling, especially along the Association's 1,700 miles of transmission rights-of-way. SME employees work closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service (U.S.F.S.) to ensure compliance with all regulations regarding each species.

The protected species have a particularly high profile when their habitats are located on government-owned land, although they also can be found on private property. Wesley Graham, right-of-way supervisor, has worked for several years with the Forest Service to monitor and protect endangered species on over 600 acres of SME right-of-way that run through three separate U.S. Forest Districts – two in the DeSoto National Forest that stretches from Wayne County to the coast, and also one in the Bienville National Forest located in and around Scott County.

"We have developed good working relationships with personnel in each of the districts," said Graham, who has mapped every foot of right-of-way in the national forests over the past four years and maintains GPS coordinates of any areas where endangered species are active. "The rangers understand that we take our responsibility very seriously. We share information and have earned their respect, I believe, because of the thoroughness of our approach."

Although found throughout Mississippi, the red-cockaded woodpecker impacts SME rights-of-way mostly in the Bienville Forest. The birds confine themselves primarily to the tops of the forest's tall pines, so any exposure for employees or contract workers is in cutting danger trees along the edge of a right-of-way. "If we have to cut trees in that area, we normally remove the top to a safe height and leave the snags standing in case the woodpeckers have built any nests."

Louisiana quillwort is found only in the wetlands of nine coastal Mississippi counties and two Louisiana parishes. A member of the Isoetaceae family, the plant is a relative to ferns and must have very specific conditions to thrive. Graham spent five weeks in May of 2010 hiking through the wetlands and creeks in the known habitat area and confirmed that there were none located along SME lines.

"The species looks like a grassy weed, so identifying it is difficult because of the environment you are working in," said Graham. "We had to search 150 feet upstream and 300 feet downstream to ensure the species was not present. We will go back every two years to confirm there are none along our lines."

The gopher tortoise, on the other hand, can be found in numerous locations along SME rights-of way. Graham has identified twelve highly visible colonies and sporadic activity at 40 to 50 other locations. Crews must stay 25 feet away from gopher tortoise burrows once they are identified.

Graham has received permission to expand SME's vegetation management practices to lines located on Forest Service land. Prior to any spraying or other clearing, he and right-of-way inspectors William Murphy and Tommy Garrard scout ahead of the crews to look for new burrows and confirm the ones already identified. If any burrows are found, the area is well marked so that the crews can proceed with caution. These areas are avoided during May and June if they require mowing, so as not to interfere with the tortoises' nesting season.

SME's line crews are also well-versed in their responsibilities when they know that they will be working around gopher tortoise habitats. Graham has taken a proactive approach by providing information, including conducting tailgate sessions with crews and contractors. Before SME activity is conducted in the sensitive areas, Transmission Planner Tracy Stiglets notifies Graham so that the work is coordinated in compliance with the special-use permit granted to SME by the U.S.F.S.

"There were once more than twenty species of tortoises in North America, and now only four remain," Graham noted. "We should have respect for these creatures and do the right thing whenever we are working around their habitat. The penalties for not abiding by the federal regulations are severe."

The spraying process has helped to reduce the heavy vegetation along many of the lines, which has actually turned the rights-of way into a habitat more desirable for the gopher tortoise. "Gopher tortoises are herbivores and they like sandy soil, long leaf pines and upland savannah environments," he said. "Their burrows, which can be thirty or more feet long, offer protection from predators and also provide shelter for other small animals and snakes. As our corridors become more grassy, the tortoises will move their burrows closer to the edge of the right-of-way."

There are also numerous gopher tortoise dens located on Plant Morrow's property, which Graham checks on regularly. The colonies are far from plant activity and seem to be thriving; he has seen numerous baby tortoises the size of fifty-cent pieces. Adults can grow to an average of a foot long and weigh more than thirty pounds.

"It is a full-time job keeping up with all the regulations associated with endangered species, but we have chosen to go above and beyond whatever is necessary," Graham noted. "Gopher tortoises have been around for more than sixty million years, and they are an important part of the local ecological systems."