

First Bear Cubs Born in Mississippi's Delta in 30 Years USDA Officials to Celebrate with Stakeholders

Jackson, Mississippi, April 9, 2007—Homer L. Wilkes, Mississippi State Conservationist for USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), will welcome Gary Mast, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, to Mississippi on **April 12, 2007**, to celebrate the birth of the first black bear cubs in Mississippi's Delta in 30 years. There will be a news conference and short field tour/demonstration and Mast will also discuss key provisions in the Bush Administration's Conservation Title of the 2007 Farm Bill proposals. These proposals include improving and streamlining USDA's conservation programs, targeting lands that are most environmentally sensitive, and increasing funding to better serve farmers, the environment, and all Americans. The event will be held at the Branning Lodge north of Vicksburg in Issaquena County (map provided).

The birth of the two healthy female Louisiana black bear cubs occurred on private land enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) – the first documented reproduction in the Mississippi Delta since the mid-1970's. On March 2, 2007, a den check to gather data on the bears' vital statistics was conducted by Brad Young, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks' (MDWFP) bear biologist, with assistance from Shauna Ginger, biologist for United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), several other MDWFP personnel, the WRP landowner Hunter L. Fordice and family, and several other volunteer participants. The cubs were estimated to be 3 to 4 weeks old and each weighed 3.5 pounds.

Young has been keeping track of the sow bear via satellite GPS radio collar since July 2005 when she crossed the Mississippi River and made her residence in Mississippi. MDWFP is providing USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with data obtained from her collar and collars from other bears across Mississippi. This data shows the extensive usage of lands where habitat has been restored through both WRP and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The cubs' 220-pound mother chose to give birth on a 10-year old WRP easement. Her den selection strongly supports the value of WRP and CRP as quality habitat for this federally listed species. "We knew that reforested land would grow to make valuable wildlife corridors, but discovering this productive den site in an early-successional WRP tract goes to show that bears are not just passing through this habitat, they're setting up house," said Shauna Ginger. She added, "This potential breeding population of Louisiana black bears in Mississippi moves us one step closer to recovery and delisting for this species."

The primary emphasis of WRP is to protect, restore, and enhance the functions and values of wetland ecosystems to attain habitat for migratory birds and wetland dependent wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. NRCS biologists and the local district conservationist (in consultation with USFWS and MDWFP) assisted Fordice in developing a conservation plan to provide habitat restoration and management guidelines for the WRP easement area. Fordice expressed his feelings about the recent events, "As a landowner, it is extremely gratifying to see the habitat restoration efforts of WRP actually coming to fruition with the birth of these black bear cubs.

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The fact that the den site of the first black bear cubs born in the Mississippi Delta in over 30 years is situated in the middle of a WRP field is evidence that the habitat restored under this program is suitable for supporting these animals and I am proud to be a part of their return to this area."

Currently, Mississippi ranks third in the nation for total acres enrolled in WRP, with over 430 easements that total approximately 150,000 acres in the state. The majority of these easements are located within the Mississippi Delta. According to Wilkes, "The success that is being seen with WRP, CRP, and other conservation programs shows the great interest of agricultural producers and other private landowners in helping sustain America's natural resources while maintaining our economic viability." The WRP is a voluntary program that offers landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. NRCS manages the program and provides technical and financial support to landowners participating in WRP. Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs or www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov/programs for more information on WRP and other USDA conservation programs.

Branning Lodge

Directions:

From Vicksburg:

Take Highway 61 North and go through Valley Park. Turn right on Omega Road about 2.5 miles north of Valley Park. Turn right on Dummy Line Road, Branning Lodge will be first dwelling on right, go through green gate. (Following signs to Delta National Forest from Highway 61 will take you to Branning WRP.)

From Rolling Fork:

Take Highway 61 South and go through Onward. Turn left on Omega Road about 5 miles south of Onward Store. Turn right on Dummy Line Road, Branning Lodge will be first dwelling on right, go through green gate. (Following signs to Delta National Forest from Highway 61 will take you to Branning WRP.)

Map:

