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Freshwater Land Trust Reveals Three Major Pronouncements to Impact Region at 30-Year Celebration

Largest-ever conservation easement, $1,000,000 species recovery initiative, and official name revealed for greater Birmingham metro's future 36-mile trail loop

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. – Freshwater Land Trust marked its 30th anniversary Friday evening, highlighting three decades of work, honoring notable individuals, and revealing three major pronouncements that will shape the region in conservation and outdoor connectivity. The pronouncements included the largest conservation easement in the organization's history, a $1,000,000 conservation initiative to benefit the endangered vermilion darter, and the official name of the Red Rock Trail System®'s future 36-mile connected loop around the greater Birmingham metro.

The news was shared Friday evening with approximately 600 supporters, partners, and community leaders at Freshwater Fête: From Idea to Impact, held at The Club in Birmingham.

Freshwater Land Trust Protects 2,115 Acres in Blount County

Freshwater Land Trust announced its recent closing of the largest single-property acquisition in its history; approximately 2,115 environmentally significant acres in Blount County conserved through a conservation easement (a voluntary legally binding agreement) with landowner, Kenneth Goode.

The property, which lies near Blount Springs in the Locust Fork watershed, includes an expansive landscape of forests, streams, and a number of caves. The Locust Fork watershed and surrounding habitat support rare fish, mussel, and snail species, including some that are federally listed or considered imperiled in Alabama.

The acquisition represents a significant addition to Freshwater Land Trust's conservation footprint in Central Alabama, boosting the organization's total number of protected acres to over 15,000 in 14 different counties across the state.

Million Dollar Recovery Initiative Announced for Vermilion Darter

Freshwater Land Trust also revealed its role in a major conservation effort focused on the vermilion darter, a federally endangered fish found only in the Turkey Creek watershed. Through the Phoenix Species Project, an initiative sponsored by the Bezos Earth Fund and Leonardo DiCaprio's conservation fund, Re:wild, the

vermilion darter was selected as one of nine North American species among 100 critically endangered species targeted for global conservation.

Freshwater Land Trust is currently positioned to receive a $1 million grant to lead a five-year recovery initiative for the species, with work anticipated to begin in 2027. The effort will build on years of restoration work done by Freshwater Land Trust and its partners to benefit the endangered vermilion, rush, and watercress darters.

"This investment from the Bezos Earth Fund is huge for our conservation efforts here in Jefferson County," said Sam McCoy, Freshwater Land Trust's Land Stewardship Director. "We've been doing the right and needed things for the vermilion darter for many years through our past restoration projects in the Turkey Creek watershed, but this gives us a leg-up to do much more to ensure the long-term survival of this special species."

Red Rock Trail System®'s Future 36-Mile Connected Loop Gets Official Name

Freshwater Land Trust revealed the long-awaited official name for its Red Rock Action Plan "Loop," the Red Rock Trail System®'s (RRTS) planned 36-mile trail connector encircling the greater Birmingham metropolitan area. The organization enlisted Birmingham-based creative agency, Scout Branding, to plan and execute a strategic naming process, and, after extensive research and review, selected the name "B1," reflecting a transit system style to link the geographic location to the "oneness" that the system creates.

B1 will connect six municipalities—Birmingham, Fairfield, Homewood, Irondale, Midfield, and Mountain Brook—and three of the region's largest greenspaces: Red Mountain Park, Railroad Park, and Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve, through the development of 19 new trail miles that will connect to existing trail segments. Once complete, it will grow the RRTS to more than 200 walkable and bikeable miles, advancing the organization's goal of placing a trail or greenspace within one mile of every Jefferson County resident's home.

Since launching the 15-year Red Rock Action Plan in 2023, Freshwater Land Trust has made marked progress across the priority corridors, with three of the seven trail projects already fully funded or under construction.

Honoring the Past and Looking to the Future

The three pronouncements followed a reflection of Freshwater Land Trust's past accomplishments and the individuals who made them possible. Honorees' names are included on the attached page, and their commitment and passion helped shape the organization's impact over the last three decades.

"At the initial stages of Freshwater Land Trust, there was an idea, and a group of people willing to take it seriously. Because of them, everyone in our community has been touched by Freshwater Land Trust," said Rusha Smith, Freshwater Land Trust's Executive Director. "Our organization wants to make an even bigger impact in the region as we look to the future."

Freshwater Fête showcased the breadth of Freshwater Land Trust's work: protecting large landscapes and the waterways within them, progressing sustaining efforts for rare species, and connecting communities to the outdoors through an expanding regional trail network.

From Sewer Crisis to Conservation Legacy

Freshwater Land Trust's story began with one of the largest water pollution cases in U.S. history. In 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), along with the Cahaba River Society and private citizens, sued

Jefferson County over wastewater pollution affecting the Cahaba and Black Warrior Rivers — the primary drinking water sources for much of Central Alabama. The case was settled by a federal consent decree in December 1996, which included a $30 million Supplemental Environmental Project (SEP), one of the first and largest of its kind mandated by the EPA. The funds were entrusted to the newly formed Black Warrior-Cahaba Rivers Land Trust to protect land along the affected waterways. The SEP helped secure the land trust's first 4,000 acres in Jefferson County, which the organization kept adding to as the independent nonprofit later renamed Freshwater Land Trust.

30 Years of Impact

Since 1996, Freshwater Land Trust has:

- Conserved more than 15,000 acres across 14 Central Alabama counties
- Become the first nationally accredited land trust in Alabama
- Launched the RRTS, now with more than 175 miles of trails and greenways complete
- Helped create landmark greenspaces such as Red Mountain Park and Turkey Creek Nature Preserve
- Restored habitat for the federally endangered watercress, vermilion, and rush darters
- Removed more than 26,000 pounds of trash from local waterways through Project Litter Gitter

The Next 30 Years

Funds raised at Freshwater Fête will support Freshwater Land Trust's goals for its next three decades: protecting 30,000 additional acres, completing the 36-mile B1 and creating over 200 miles of pedestrian and non-motorized infrastructure for Jefferson County, and opening six new preserves for public access.

To support Freshwater Land Trust or become a monthly sustaining "Freshwater Friend," visit freshwaterlandtrust.org/get-involved/donate

About Freshwater Land Trust

Freshwater Land Trust conserves and cares for environmentally significant land throughout Central Alabama and connects the Red Rock Trail System® throughout Jefferson County, creating and preserving dynamic green spaces for future generations. Founded in 1996, it was Alabama's first nationally accredited land trust. Learn more at freshwaterlandtrust.org.