

October 13, 2006

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**GEORGIA'S PAULDING FOREST TO RECEIVE \$1 MILLION LAND ACQUISITION GRANT FROM U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**

**SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga.** – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced a grant of \$1.0 million to Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division for acquisition and protection of Paulding Forest Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Paulding and Polk Counties. The grant is part of \$67 million awarded nationwide through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund, which provides funds to states for conservation planning and to acquire or restore vital habitat for threatened and endangered fish, wildlife and plants.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources currently leases approximately 25,000 acres that comprise Paulding Forest WMA. Paulding Forest includes the headwaters of Raccoon Creek, a tributary of the Etowah River that supports significant populations of the endangered Etowah darter, threatened Cherokee darter and other rare fish. Paulding Forest also contains remnants of the rare montane longleaf forest, a priority habitat for conservation in Georgia. Paulding Forest was identified as a priority area in Georgia's recently completed Wildlife Action Plan and in the Etowah River Habitat Conservation Plan.

In addition to its importance for rare wildlife, Paulding Forest also provides outstanding wildlife-based recreation and is one of Georgia's most popular WMAs. Hunting, fishing, hiking, biking and birding and other wildlife-related activities are popular at Paulding Forest, which also includes a portion of the popular Silver Comet Trail.

Currently Paulding Forest WMA is leased through an annual agreement. However, as land values in north Georgia rise, leases are more costly and difficult for the state to maintain. Leases may be terminated at any time and the property sold.

Acquisition of Paulding Forest would provide permanent long-term protection of important habitat for conservation of wildlife and for recreation.

The DNR and Paulding County have agreed to pursue permanent protection for this critical wildlife area by acquiring the most important sections of Paulding Forest, about 7,000 acres. Under this concept, the State will acquire part of the area and the county will acquire part of the area. Paulding Forest would continue to be managed as a WMA by DNR's Wildlife Resources Division.

"State acquisition of this productive wildlife management area will contribute mightily to long term protection of public hunting opportunities in the rapidly developing piedmont region of our state," said Dan Forster, Director of the Wildlife Resources Division.

Paulding County residents will vote November 7 on whether to approve a \$15 million bond referendum that would allow the county to move forward with plans to partner with the state in purchasing and managing the 7,020-acre tract's unique natural resources.

"Paulding County is committed to managing this land for wildlife and the natural communities found on it," said Paulding County Commissioner Jerry Shearin, who has championed efforts to conserve Paulding Forest. "This land will be permanently protected and available to the public for hunting, fishing, hiking and camping. It will also serve as an important buffer to the Silver Comet Trail."

"We are happy to be part of this important land acquisition," said Sam D. Hamilton, Southeast Regional Director for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "This kind of partnership between federal, state, and local government is exactly what this grant program was created to support."

Paulding Forest provides critical habitat for wildlife, outstanding wildlife-related recreation opportunities, and watershed protection. The forests filters and safeguards water quality, and its acquisition would provide permanent protection for portions of Raccoon Creek. The forest also is a critical buffer to Sheffield Forest, an adjacent tract of state-owned land.

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