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Hello everyone and welcome to the Nature's Infrastructure audio series, where we're chatting with our partners, stakeholders, and tribal communities to see firsthand how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a difference to communities and conservation nationwide.

In November 2021, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was signed, providing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \$455 million in funding, over five years, to restore nature's infrastructure.

In these two short years, the Service has been putting these dollars to work through projects, which are focused on climate resiliency, community partnerships, and restoring the ecosystems and habitat that are critical to the survival of the fish, wildlife, and plants we are interested to conserve.

We are excited to share some of this important work with you as we discover new and exciting ways that these investments are helping protect, preserve, and promote nature's infrastructure.

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This month, we're focusing on the incredible work that is improving fish passage, while promoting safer community infrastructure and enhancing climate resiliency. Across the country, there are millions of barriers that block viable corridors for fish and other aquatic wildlife to access spawning grounds, food sources, and safe water.

In 2021, as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Service was awarded \$200 million, over five years, for fish passage projects. This funding is being used to provide technical assistance and fund locally led projects that are addressing the challenges associated with hundreds of fish and aquatic barriers throughout the nation.

On today's episode, I'm sitting down with Rick Hopkins, the director for Springville, Alabama's Parks and Recreation Department and Coach James Miller, who coaches tackle football, flag football and baseball to talk about how one of these projects is opening up better recreational access for youth sport teams, and the community. Rick, Coach Miller, thanks for joining us to talk about how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is helping to promote collaboration and conservation in your community.

Hi Sue, on behalf of the City of Springville and the community of Springville, I'm honored to share the story of partnering with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the story of this project for our sports complex.

Hi Sue, I'm happy to be here. Appreciate you inviting us, it's been a great, amazing thing.

I'm really excited to talk to both of you. So Rick, let's start by talking a little bit about the landscape of this fish passage project. This is no ordinary place where one would expect to find or conduct conservation work. Paint the picture for us, what does this look like?

So this was my first encounter with conservation work or any type of fish passage work. We are located in a quaint little small town called Springville, Alabama, just north of Birmingham. Our community is right under 5,000 citizens. To give you an idea of the size of our town, we are just now getting a red light in the middle of Main Street at our four way stop sign. But we have a Walmart shopping center, just right next to the sports complex and the sports complex is a 70 acre sports complex that the city purchased, I want to say about 15 years ago or so. And about 30% of the 70 Acres has been developed with multipurpose fields. And those fields are used for tackle football, flag football, cheerleading, and then also for soccer. And we also have a racket club area with a community storm shelter. So that kind of paints the picture you know this this area is the area where the Appalachian Mountains are ending and so it's mountainous, and then we have valleys but it's also a flat area kind of in a valley along highway 59.

70 Acres is no small amount of land. Coach James, what does this sports complex mean for the community and why is it so important to kids of all ages and to others in the Springville area?

I've been here in Springville all my life. I played youth ball and everything here. When I was growing up we had one baseball field and we didn't have football and stuff at the time. So we brought on football and everything so it wasn't a lot of a lot of places to practice. By having this land we are able to house like I said football, flag football, baseball, soccer. It has opened it up a lot for everyone to enjoy our community more. We're growing every day. Our school is busting out the seams. And it's just give us opportunity to get more and more kids the opportunity to come out and enjoy the weather. When I was growing up, we stayed outside all the time. And now kids, always in the house playing video games, and I'm just gonna start to give them opportunity to come out and just enjoy nature. I think he's just awesome. It just gives us opportunity to just do more for our community.

That's amazing that you've gone from one field to over 70 acres. And Coach, you've been coaching for how long?

37 years.

37 years. So you certainly have seen a tremendous difference in growth, as Rick said, within this community. But my understanding is that with this growth and with the expansion of the fields, you've also had significant weather impacts. So, Rick, why don't you walk us through how storms have impacted your sports programming, the communities use, maintenance, and the Park and Recs Departments resources.

So one of the things I've learned since becoming the Parks Recreation Director is they call it Springville for a reason. We have springs all over this community in our Big Springs Park and in town and other areas. And one of the most common challenges that I face is water runoff and flooding. As James talked about this community is one of the fastest growing areas, St. Clair County in this area in the state of Alabama. Which is good because you know, it's a testament to how much we love this community and how great our schools are and our recreation activities and our parks. But we're growing and as James says the school system is being overran right now are growing. And they're having to build a

new middle school, in fact, as we speak, and so all those things are exciting. But there's some practical aspects for people like me, where I have to find a place for these children in these families to recreate. So one of the things that happened is, we were facing the challenge of over usage on our sports multipurpose fields is what really brought a lot of this on. And what that means is bald spots on your Bermuda, on your turf, on the fields. And Coach James can speak to this too with tackle football, at soccer and tackle football is very hard on the field. And so we were not allowing our fields to rest the time that they needed because we have sports year round. And so because of those challenges, the city decided to add some multipurpose buildings, we had an area that was not being utilized. There have been culverts put in and it had been cleared, but it just we did not have any sod or turf there. So we decided to turf that area and create a walking track around the outside of these fields. What we built was basically two tackle football fields inside, side by side with a baseball softball infield in each corner in the back corner on each side, with a walking track around it. That walking track happened to be going next to the left hand prong Little Canoe Creek. And so after we built these fields, and we were excited to use them the first time we had a flood, significant event of three to five inches of rain. It washed out that baseball softball infield and it created rocks on the playing surface. Our culvert pipe was significantly undersized in that area. And so that's really what brought about this entire project.

So it sounds like it was a collapse culvert that caused the flooding. Why didn't you just replace the infrastructure at the beginning? Why did you spend so much time trying to repair?

We built these fields about two and a half three years ago. So this happened really quickly. Those areas where the culvert was was not being utilized. It was an undeveloped area of the complex. And so Doug Morris and he's our nature preserve for the Big Canoe, Big Canoe Creek Nature Preserve manager. He is an employee within the Springville Parks Recreation Department. And he had a relationship with Lee Holt, the area biologist for U.S. Fish and Wildlife. And they were doing some fish sampling out at the nature preserve. And so the timing really just came about I felt like it felt like it was a God thing. Because the timing was just perfect. They were working on some bio blips and some fish sampling at the nature preserve. And Doug had mentioned about his relationship with Lee. And he said I would I'd like to know what is in this stream here in the left hand prong. And so he said, Let's do a fish sampling. And that happened to be right before this flooding. And so the timing was just perfect. But of course, it would have been, you know, a significant undertaking for the city to try to do this on their own. And it would have been a very much longer process for us to try to fund just on our own.

Let's talk a little bit more about this fish sampling and the results that came about from that. Because as Coach James previously mentioned, you have this 70 acre sports complex. It's used by assumably 1000s of people, kids, families, community members in your community. And as it turns out, you have this little fish, you've got the trispot darter, which makes its home and the Little Canoe Creek. Rick, how did you realize that this urban habitat was home to a fish that's federally listed as threatened. And then what happened after the fish sampling and that realization occurred.

So I remember that day that Lee and some I believe there were some people from the Nature Conservancy and maybe some other organizations that were here as well. But what was exciting about it is, I remember the day they were doing the sampling, I've never seen one, if you've never seen one, it's an interesting process, how they, they have the waders, and they walk through the stream. And then

you know, they have this process where they, they'll have the fish that will come and they'll be able to scoop the fish up and sample them. And I watched them for about 30 minutes in about an area of about 100 feet, I would estimate it was about the width of a football field. And they counted about 18 trispot darter within that, that little, short span. Which was impressive. So it was all within a matter of a couple of months that all this took place of it being labeled as an endangered species. Like I said, I'd never been exposed to those type of things. It opened up an entire exciting world to me.

Did doing this conservation work mean that you had to delay or cancel scheduled sports programming? And if so, how did you get buy in from parents in the community to continue on this conservation approach?

Actually, it was close to the end of our football. So it really didn't affect us that much. Because then we moved on to basketball, which is of course indoors. So it didn't really affect us much. But our parents here is great. I love this community. Likes I said, I was born and raised in this community. And that's why I stay here in this community, because people are caring. People are sharing. We have great parents. Overall, it's a great place and people here they really love our community. One of the things I teach my kids is community is not just about football, basketball, or baseball, it's about taking care of our community. And when we go out, we represent our community. This is our home, our place, you know, and after they leave their kids or whatever, they're still gonna be here.

And Sue, I'll tell you one of the sports that was really affected the most was baseball and softball. During that time. It affected so many teams that were so excited. Here they are, we've got these new baseball softball infield, we only have four baseball softball fields. And it was servicing around 400 plus kids. So that average is about 100 kids a field on our baseball softball complex. So we needed these two new infields. And here they are, within a couple of months of us opening we lose one due to, in fact, we lost both of them due to flooding. You know, that was a significant bummer for a lot of those coaches, because they thought, we're gonna get some relief. And then just within a couple of months, they were shut down due to the flooding.

I have three and a half acres. So we went to my house and practice and other people do also. Like it's a very tiny community.

Coach, you had mentioned that a big part of your coaching strategy includes education and making sure that your kids take responsibility for their community and their community resources. Were you able to interweave any environmental education or conservation education into what you were doing with the kids when the fish sampling and this process was going on? Did you have discussions about what was happening with those folks in waders?

I don't fish. So I don't know much about fish. I think it was cool thing, just that it was an extinct type fish. It was close to being extinct. So I thought that was cool. And we don't discussed that. I'm more of a sports guy than actually wildlife.

So here you are. And Rick, you had mentioned that you had been working with Lee Holt from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. You have this problem, you have fields that are flooding. You still have an issue

with having too many kids and not enough space, even though you thought that you had just alleviated that problem. Can you walk us through how the actual culvert replacement process was put into motion and also how the idea for applying for Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding came about.

That was first mentioned by Lee to us in a meeting when right after we had the fish sampling, we had a meeting talking about this culvert. And it was scary Sue, this culvert was collapsed in the middle. And it was I want to say, what 24 inch pipe, something like that, you know, you've seen these corrugated type pipes. And that's what we had before. And if you were standing at the baseball field and you look down this pipe, you would see the middle of it collapse down, you know, several feet and see these vehicles passing over at some time. So that caught my attention when I saw that I had not noticed how dangerous it was. So that's when we started talking. And we were out there meeting and about what is our possibility, and Doug Morrison, I can't give him enough credit, he really pushed this project, as well as Lee. They were the ones who mentioned the possibility, I wasn't aware of the possibility. But this federal money, what I can't stress enough is, there are real people who enjoy the benefits of this federal money. There are real kids out here. There are real moms, when all this projects done, there's going to be moms walking around this walking track that are going to enjoy the beauty of nature, and stop by and read these plaques talking about the trispot darter, and you know, we're on step two of 20 right now. But when all of this is done, and we have all of our restoration work, and we've done all this work. It's really going to be a beautiful sight for people who enjoy nature and just improve the quality of life of our community.

So the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding paid for the replacement of this old culvert that you're talking about with a new, environmentally friendly, bottomless arch shaped culvert, which restores the left prong of the Little Canoe Creek to its natural state. And also lets the trispot darter move freely in better and improved water conditions. But Coach James, it also helps protect your six athletic fields that you've already said you use for a number of different sports. I'd like to talk a little bit more about the walking trails that you both have mentioned, and also the road improvements that are the next steps in this larger project. Coach, how is this going to create an even better experience for your kids, for your parents, for the teams and for the spectators?

One it's going to create a safer environment with traffic flowing in and out. Knowing one thing is we always want to keep our kids safe. The walking track is awesome. I have taken a walk in a little bit more. To be able to walk and have a beautiful view that helps you. Like I said, the biggest thing is the safety of the roads coming in and out. It's a narrow road. So to be able to expand the road a little bit more. Fix the parking lots a little bit more because it had gravel, they got dips and stuff in it. So just overall improvement is a beautiful sight to see. We welcome everybody here. When people come to our park, we want them to feel welcome and feel safe. And just love it as much as we do and want to come back.

Another important part of this, Rick, as you've already mentioned, is the educational piece. Talk a little bit about how you're going to implement environmental education into this project and the impact that you think that this will have on future generations.

One of the things that my goal that I had for 2023 was to get an updated master plan. I mentioned that the city purchased this land in the early 2000s. And at that time, they commissioned a master plan for this seventy acre complex. Well, that was outdated, some of the things had changed, just like these new fields. They were not really part of that. And so I needed an updated master plan. And one of the things that's really important is this bottomless culvert bridge is key to the future development of the back 40 acres of this sports complex. This is going to be where most of the passage is going to be to get that back 40 acres of this complex. But along those ways. We've got an area that's right behind the baseball, softball, multipurpose field, behind home plate that's going to be a grass area. We're looking to put some wildflowers and some pollinators in that area and leave it as natural as possible. But there'll be some sod in that area, a sitting area for parents to observe their kids during recreation and sports and practicing. In those two locations. Our plans are to have some outdoor education placards and has some information plaques for people to read to walk up, learn about the trispot darter, learn about the BIL money that was used here on the bottom is culvert. And so as people are walking, the vision is you know, eventually people are walking around these fields while all their kids are out there running around and enjoying recreation and exercising and they're out there with Coach James coaching them up. But these people would also get the outdoor education component. And they can stop by and read the plaque learn about the trispot darter and know just how blessed we are to have that little fish here in our passageway and, and why it's so important to have safe fish passage for these fish to develop by. I walk over that little culvert. I did it today many times and I see little fish in there. And I can't tell from that distance. But I'm pretty sure those are the trispot darters. So I'm thankful for the fish.

Coach, it sounds like with this master plan, if you're going to be expanding the fields, your programs must be growing exponentially on an annual basis. Do you think that this master plan, the expansion of the fields and all of these things that it sounds like are in store for Springville would have been possible without this culvert being replaced?

Like Rick said earlier, it would have been tough because the back part, we needed access to it. So it is very important to it also, because we're going to have to expand. Even though we have expanded now, like I said, we're growing rapidly. In one part of Springville, they put like 500 homes, so there's gonna be more and more kids coming here. So it's very important that we do this and we get this expansion. These little fish came as our blessing. So we have the opportunity to expand the way we are. I can tell you from my point of view, it is very, very important. And I think we would have got to it eventually, but not as quick.

I agree with what James just said, I think the city might have eventually got around to replacing this culvert. But it really fast tracked the process for us.

Well a culvert and it sounds like a roadway, and walking trails, and educational placards, so people can understand the importance of everything that you're doing within this master plan. Rick, if you had one big takeaway, maybe a lesson learned or some words of wisdom, what would you share about this project and your experience with it?

Well, first, I want to make sure that I mentioned Mayor Thomas, he has been a big part of this project and supporting this project, and really encouraging us to partner. You know, not all, not every mayor is

as excited about partnering with government, you know, federal agencies. And that's been one of my biggest takeaways is, I think some municipalities are fearful of working with federal agencies, because they're worried about the red tape or worried about, you know, some of the guidelines. It has been a joy for me to work with Lee, and work with other federal agencies working with the specially U.S. Fish and Wildlife. You know, my fear was they'll come in and tell us what to do, and say, Rick, you can't and do this, or can do this. It has not been that at all, they have come in and just said how can we help. And they understand, you know, the recreation side of this as well. And that was one of the big takeaways is I think you can have both. I think there can be a win win. I think you can have outdoor education, you can have conservation, you can match nature with people, I think you can do all those things, and have recreation and exercise and athletic sports. And at the same time, consider the safe fish passage. But I believe you have to begin with consulting the experts. There's always people out there that can help you and guide you, because like I said, this was not an area of my expertise. But someone like Lee coming in and Doug and other people, they just really gave me the expertise and trusted them and they guided us well and they had good motives.

I have one last question. Coach James I have to ask, Are you considering renaming any of your teams to the trispot darters?

Now I love being a Tiger. I was born and raised a Tiger so probably always want to be a Tiger but yeah, that's a cool name. That's not out of the way.

I definitely see that logo on some teams in the future. Yes. And once we get more awareness of that logo and we plan on having you know the trispot darter logo or the fish we already have that on our official Big Canoe Creek Nature Preserve logo, and I could see it on our gate. We're working on a gate, a front entrance. And I think I could definitely see that the trispot darter on our gate one day

And they have to be tough. They lasted this long and they still surviving so yeah.

Thank you, Rick and Coach James for taking time to sit and chat about all the important work that's happening in Springville and the impactful ways that the bipartisan infrastructure law is making a difference in your community and listeners.

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Thank you for taking time with us to learn more about our National Fish Passage program since 2022. The service has awarded over \$143 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding for 122 fish passage projects, in 40 states and Puerto Rico. Once complete, these projects will address 346 barriers, reopen more than 12,000 stream miles, and reconnect almost 925,000 acres.

As the Service continues to work with partners like the City of Springville to restore habitat connectivity for aquatic species, improve water quality, and reduce flood risks and public safety hazards. These projects will be critical to our shared success on behalf of ecosystems and wildlife nationwide. Be sure to tune in again, as we continue to chat about ways the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is investing in our communities to help protect, preserve and promote nature's infrastructure. We'll see you next time.