

Benton firm wins ecology honors

ECO helps Fayetteville win
conservationist award

By Matt Burks

Staff Writer

A Benton-based business has helped the city of Fayetteville win the prestigious Arkansas Wildlife Federation's Corporate Conservationist of the Year award.

Environmental Consulting Operations, off Interstate 30, has been in business since 1990 as an environmental consulting firm. The business started in Little Rock but moved to its current home in Benton in 1998.

Despite the fact that AWF has always chosen individuals as recipients of the Conservationist of the Year award for 72 years in a row, it was ECO's partnership work on the Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary (next to a sewer plant) in Fayetteville that finally earned a municipality the the 2009 conservationist award. The project was named after the Woolsey family, who settled on the property in 1830.

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The AWF formed in 1936 and with conjunction of the National Wildlife

Federation, began an awards program to honor outstanding volunteers and professionals in the natural resources field. The event, now called the Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards Banquet, is held the second Thursday in August each year in Little Rock. According to the AWF Web site www.arkansaswildlifefederation.org, "awards are designed to honor individuals, organizations and businesses that have gone beyond the call of duty to promote the conservation of our natural resources."

That is what ECO has been working towards for almost 20-years, integrating economy and ecology, said company president Bruce Shackleford.

"Our major objective is to seek the most environmentally sound and cost effective solutions to environmental problems," he said. "With today's financial resource requirements for compliance, the dynamics of environmental regulations, the survival of many organizations is dependent upon finding the "happy medium" between cost and compliance."

The Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary, the project that garnered Fayetteville the award, was formed four years ago as part of a wetland mitigation site for

the Westside Wastewater Treatment plant. ECO and McGoodwin, Williams & Yates Consulting Engineers in Fayetteville together developed the mitigation site. Shackleford said ECO worked on the hydrology and ecosystem planning of ecology restoration. He said the planning was to restore native wetland vegetation. ECO also helped the overall management of the site and construction portion of the design for the wetlands.

The project involved creating and restoring more than 40 acres of rare prairie wetland habitat. Shackleford said they first removed cattle on the overgrazing areas, did hydrological modifications to retrain water on the site, had two prescribed burns (Feb. 2008 and Feb. 2009) and prescribed and planned for low-impact natural herbicides.

"We had a great emphasis on bring back the native plants in the project," Shackleford said. "What we found was though many native plants had been dormant for many years, they plants started coming back to life."

He said in 2003 a plant inventory showed around 47 plants species actively grow-

ing in the area and around a third of those plants were non-native. Shackleford said every year this is a plant inventory conducted and the site now has over 350 plant species. He said 80 percent are native to the wetland and none were planted by the company.

"We saw some of the most amazing things there," he said. "Of course you never really know what mother nature will do, but Woolsey Wet Prairie has proven to be a living, outdoor laboratory, and is a microcosm of what once was some 100,000 acres of natural prairie in northwest Arkansas."

He said there are still some non-native plants on the site and some of the native plants growing back are "extremely expensive."

"The flora and fauna that regained a foothold at the site are in many cases rare, endangered, and can only be found on this property," Shackleford explained.

The tract of land has also become a model classroom for students, teachers and other interested in natural restoration and conservation in Northwest Arkansas, Shackleford said. The project also received

national recognition from Audubon, Cornell University and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality even selected the project as one of five finalists for the ADEQ Environmental Stewardship award.

"It's a nice, unique example of what can be done next to a sewer plant," EPA's Deputy Associate Administrator for Intergovernmental Relations Randy Kelly said. "It's not being copied by any city in the nation — yet. It's clear Fayetteville and that region truly does want to create a green valley."

ECO and their partners have even lowered funding on the project. The original 2005 cost estimate for wetland construction was \$412,040. It was completed for \$131,578. That is a savings of \$289,462 Shackleford said.

"What's more exciting than being well under budget," he said, "is the fact that the site has generated a surplus of 91 wetland credits that has received Corps approval for sale to outside parties, potentially including the Arkansas Highway Department that will be

building new highways in Northwest Arkansas with stimulus funding. This sale of credits is anticipated to generate revenues to fund the expansion of the prairie/savannah complex by an additional 100 acres as the first Wetland Mitigation Bank of its kind in this part of the State."

ECO is also hoping to work on projects near and dear to Benton, Shackleford said, including possibly the Central Arkansas Fairplex project. The Fairplex is an events center proposal developed by the Benton Advertising and Promotion Commission. Shackleford said he hopes to work on stormwater management around the Saline River.

"The river is the diamond gym to the city," he said. "We want to work on minimizing pollutant runoff into the Saline River. We are also talking about possible nature trails or wetlands restoration on the Fairplex projects, but that is all just preliminary talks."

ECO is located at 17724 Interstate 30 in Benton. For more information about the Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary, contact ECO at 315-9009.