



Woolsey wetlands recognized by state

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FAYETTEVILLE — Sanctuary wetlands that the city of Fayetteville created near the new West Side Wastewater Treatment Facility were recognized by the Arkansas Wildlife Federation for protecting wildlife and natural resources.

It's the first time a municipality won the Governor's 2009 Corporate Conservationist of the Year award since the federation was formed in 1936.

The city created the 28-acre Woolsey Wet Prairie Wetlands in 2006 to replace 10 acres of wetlands displaced for the new plant. This was required by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Mayor Lioneld Jordan said following the award that the wetlands and an 1840 s-era farmhouse on the property are important to the natural and cultural heritage of Northwest Arkansas.

"I want this house to be the first Heritage Park in Fayetteville, and with people coming to the prairie and farmstead, it should become a great tourist destination," Jordan said.



Anthony Reyes A Monarch butterfly rests on grasses Friday at the Woolsey Wet Prairie Wetlands east of the West Side Wastewater Treatment Plant in Fayetteville. The prairie is home to many different types of plants, animals and insects.

Jordan and David Jurgens, city utilities director, went to Little Rock on Aug. 8 to receive the award at the 72nd annual Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards banquet.

Representing what was once 100,000 acres of natural prairie, the Woolsey wetlands have become an outdoor laboratory filled with flora and fauna - some rare and endangered.

Students interested in natural restoration and conservation, particularly from the University of Arkansas, use the land as a classroom.

The construction of earthen berms established wet meadow wetlands, marsh and open-water habitats and forested wetlands.

"To many people, it looks unkempt, chaotic, a massjumble of different types of things," Billy Ammons of OMI Inc., which operates the treatment facility, said. "There's actually a much higher quality and greater diversity of plant life than before. They've created an ecosystem that's much better for the environment and for insect and bird life. There's a very robust diversification of plant species."

Cattle were removed, and berms constructed in early summer 2006. In August 2006, 166 plant species were identified. That number increased to 265 by May 2007 and 334 by November 2008 - with no seeding.

Native plant can lie dormant for decades, Ammons said, until the right conditions are available.

Plant ecologists consider prairie the rarest and most fragmented of NorthAmerican ecosystems, and in this region, only about 2,000 acres of tall grass prairie remain, according to information from www.ecoarkansas.com. Environmental Consulting Operations Inc. helps manage the project.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, farmers planted wheat across Northwest Arkansas, and the prairie habitat began to decline.

The Woolsey family settled the property in 1930, according to the Web site.

When Samuel and Matilda Gilbert moved to the area from Hempstead County, the land likely had abundant elk, bison, prairiechickens, passenger pigeon, ruffed grouse and Carolina parakeet.

The family had 13 children; many are buried at the Woolsey Cemetery on the property, along with their parents.

Tours of the wetlands can be arranged by calling (479) 443-3292.

News, Pages 1, 5 on 08/17/2009