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News Release

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Conservationists, state and federal agencies meet on future of woodpecker recovery effort

MEMPHIS, Tenn., May 27, 2005 – Representatives from The Nature Conservancy met in Little Rock May 23 with officials from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to strengthen a partnership aimed at protecting the recently rediscovered ivory-billed woodpecker in eastern Arkansas. The woodpecker, once thought to be extinct, was sighted a number of times within Eastern Arkansas' Cache River Basin. Corps of Engineers leaders from Memphis, Little Rock and Vicksburg, Miss. were all present at the meeting.

“This meeting was a great opportunity for the Corps of Engineers to learn about the great work The Nature Conservancy and others have been doing with the ivory-billed woodpecker, and to begin working cooperatively with them and the federal and state resource agencies to ensure the recovery of this magnificent bird,” said Col. Charles Smithers III, commander of the Corps' office in Memphis. The ivory-billed sightings have occurred in his area of responsibility.

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Speaking of the recovery effort, Scott Simon Arkansas Director of The Nature Conservancy told those gathered at the AGFC headquarters in Little Rock, “From the start, this has been a partnership effort. I couldn’t be happier to have you all here today.”

Simon began the meeting by telling the attendees about the months of effort and manpower that went into verifying the existence of the ivory-billed woodpecker. He said researchers formed a team of conservationists, academia and government leaders that took a very conservative approach to the question of whether or not the woodpecker sightings were even valid. In the end, the team came up with five solid pieces of primary evidence to support their findings that the ivory-billed woodpecker indeed had survived since the last confirmed U.S. sighting in the 1940s.

The Corps of Engineers and The Nature Conservancy signed a national Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2000, in which they agreed to work together to manage important biological resources within the context of the Corps’ civil work and regulatory missions. A key element of that MOU was to, “Cooperate in the monitoring and management of rare and endangered species and their habitat potentially affected by projects and programs pursuant to this MOU.”

Allan Mueller of the USFWS office in Conway, Ark., then talked about the official woodpecker recovery team that is now being formed.

“We are planning an announcement on the recovery team this week,” he told the approximately 25 people at the meeting. “We hope to have a draft recovery plan by June 2006.”

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Mueller and the group discussed Corps of Engineers projects near Bayou DeView, the Lower Cache River Restoration Project, the Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Project and the Bayou Meto Project. They also discussed comprehensive studies on the White and Cache rivers and the importance of assessing any potential effects the projects could have on the woodpecker and its habitat. In addition, the group discussed the need to identify ivory-billed woodpecker recovery opportunities during the course of these studies.