

# Indiana permanently protects 4,000 acres with new southern Indiana fish and wildlife area



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Nature has reclaimed an old coal mine in southern Indiana, and state environmentalists have collaborated to ensure the land will belong to all Hoosiers.

Indiana's Department of Natural Resources, working with the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape initiative and The Conservation Fund, have acquired nearly 4,000 acres of diverse habitat that will become the Busseron Creek Fish and Wildlife Area in Sullivan County.

"I am really excited to have this property and can't wait to see how it turns out," said Dan Eckstein, the southwest public lands supervisor with DNR's Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The newly acquired state land has an interesting variety of landscapes, Eckstein said. There is quite a large area of bottomland forest and marshlands year round. The site also boasts grasslands, dry forests and upland areas — just about every habitat southern Indiana has to offer.

"Some of that bottomland forest does not appear to have ever been mined and has really good natural plant communities in there," Eckstein said. "I'm excited because we don't see that a lot on reclaimed mine lands we get."

DNR had previously leased the land from a subsidiary of Peabody Energy, a coal producer based in Missouri. The lease allowed DNR to open and manage the Minnehaha Fish and Wildlife Area on the land for 30 years before the lease ended in 2016 and the land went back into private holding.

During the lease, Indiana worked to convert the land from a mining operation into a public recreation area.



### Busseron Creek Fish and Wildlife Area in Southern Indiana

The DNR plans to add hunting units, parking areas and trails before opening the land to the public. The hope, Eckstein said, is to get the area open before youth turkey season begins this spring.

### Purchasing the land

The Busseron Creek property cost the state \$10.8 million, with support coming from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program. Additional money came from the U.S. Navy and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

When staff at the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape found some of the land listed on the open real estate market, they acted quickly to begin coordinating a purchase so DNR could once again take over. The SISL is part of a national project with the U.S. Department of Defense, Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture.

DNR does not have the ability to quickly buy land when it pops up on the market, Eckstein said. Groups like The Conservation Fund do have that ability



so they may buy land and hold it until the state can purchase it from them, which is what happened in this case.

Michale Spalding, coordinator for SISL, said the Busseron Creek partnership came together due to the overlapping interests of conserving land around military sites. The land is close to the U.S. Navy's Lake Glendora test facility and within the Southern Indiana Sentinel Landscape boundaries.

The land SISL saw on the open market was being divided up and sold to multiple landowners, and Spalding saw an opportunity for Indiana to conserve the area permanently.

"The (sentinel landscape) designation is just that," Spalding said. "It enables this partnership to exist and to bring priority conservation to that land area. If you're a private landowner in that area, there is nothing you have to do different. but we might have resources to help."



Busseron Creek winds through the landscape at Busseron Creek Fish & Wildlife Area, on Tuesday, November 19, 2024, in Sullivan County. *Brent Drinkut, Brent Drinkut/Indiana DNR*

## Beautifying Busseron Creek

DNR is currently developing a management plan for the fish and wildlife area, which will involve dealing with invasive plant species, establishing grazing leases and planning for prescribed fires.

As the state works to restore and maintain the various habitats, it is also planning on making sure the property is accessible and welcoming.

“It will take several years to get the property outfitted with the infrastructure you really want like getting boundaries marked, sign-in kiosks up and parking lots built,” Eckstein said. “That’s what we will begin working on this winter.”

Emily Biesecker, TNC’s director of land strategies, said The Nature Conservancy’s Indiana Chapter joined DNR on early site visits and gave a grant to The Conservation Fund to support the due diligence for the real estate acquisition.

“Work was necessary to perform an environmental assessment and identify hazards or histories that needed to be addressed,” Biesecker said. “That research can be very expensive and TNC’s grant to The Conservation Fund was able to remove the financial risk of investing before any of us knew if the project would cross the finish line.”

While reclaimed mine lands might seem irredeemable or unusable after intense use, the history of the property as a fish and wildlife area shows there is still value to the land, Biesecker said.

“The context of such a big acquisition in Indiana history is really a generational opportunity,” Biesecker said. “And it’s a great success to return an important recreation and wildlife habitat asset to the state.”

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