

Scientists to control homes of endangered cave species

By Joe Vargo
American-Statesman Staff

Three caves recently occupied by a group of environmentalists protesting nearby development will be donated to a scientific research group by Austin developer Dr. Fred Purcell.

Purcell said he hopes to donate the land to the Texas System of Natural Laboratories within 60 to 90 days, thus enabling scientists to study "the continuing effects of urbanization" on five tiny animals inside the caves.

The five invertebrates — two species of beetles, a spider, a pseudo scorpion and a kind of daddy longlegs — were declared endangered species last week by the federal government, and are now protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The ruling came after members of the group Earth First! occupied the caves near RR 2222 and RR 620 in northwest Travis County, but federal authorities deny the group's actions spurred the decision.

Officials said the land around the caves, known as Tooth, Amber and

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Kretschmarr caves, is being studied to determine how much of a buffer zone around each cave should be included in the donation. The tiny animals are found nowhere else except a few caves in Travis and Williamson counties, including the three caves on Purcell's land.

"At the request of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we are studying the land so they can make a final recommendation for the area," Purcell said last week. "I am doing exactly what I always said I would do, which is cooperate with the appropriate authorities. I think with the donation, the situation has been pretty well resolved."

In addition to federal authorities, the City of Austin's Department of Environmental Protection also will review plans for the land

donation.

The land gift to the scientific community hasn't stopped Purcell and members of Earth First! from taking pot shots at one another. Purcell called Earth First! "a militant-type terrorist organization that in my opinion is committed to chaos."

"This would not have happened if I had done what every other developer would have done, which is to plug the sinkhole," Purcell said. "I feel manipulated and violated by the Earth First! people, who I feel are committed to breaking the law."

Members of Earth First! responded by saying Purcell wants to "create a Silicon Valley along RR 620."

"He is incapable of understanding someone with motivations that

are not driven by money," said Christi Stevens, an Earth First! member who was arrested while occupying one of the caves. "If we take a no-growth stand, it is only when growth is driving species into extinction. I don't see anything radical about that. One of the things that makes Austin beautiful is the Hill Country around it. We hate to see it keep getting sliced up."

Stevens said Earth First! will continue to monitor the area to make sure the animals are protected.

The areas immediately around the caves will be fenced in to keep out curious onlookers, and the cave mouths will be covered with grates to allow moisture to enter. The caves will continue to be closed to the public, and will be accessible only to scientists and other researchers.

Purcell said fences around the caves could be in place by next week.

Dr. James Reddell, a University of Texas cave expert who discovered Tooth, Amber and Kretschmarr caves 25 years ago, said he is pleased that the land around them

will be controlled by scientists.

Reddell termed the donation of the land "a good solution" to the problem, but said one of the caves on the property — Amber Cave — may already be damaged by surrounding development. A sewer line runs within 20 feet of the cave,

and apparently was put down by developers who did not know Amber cave existed, Reddell said.

"Amber cave may become an experiment to see how much development these creatures can stand," Reddell said. "There's not going to be much cover around it."

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