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New plan to restore endangered watercress darter habitat in Roebuck Springs

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Work to rebuild the pond at Roebuck Springs was delayed Wednesday, while biologists studied last week's endangered fish kill and reached a more gentle plan to begin to restore the watercress darters' habitat today or Friday.

A 50- to 60-foot wide pond at Roebuck-Hawkins Park was abruptly and almost completely drained Friday by Birmingham employees working without any permits. That left what one fish expert now says may be as many as 10,000 endangered fish stranded in the grasses and mud.

Following a design by federal agencies, city workers are expected to begin this week to gently place sandbags into a breach and raise the water level about six inches.

"We want the water to really come up slowly, no quick changes," said Bernie Kuhajda, a fish expert from the University of Alabama.

The addition of water should spread out the crayfish, which were able to survive the sudden loss of water and are now concentrated in the remaining small pool, Kuhajda said.

Scientists don't want to raise the water five feet or more all at once, because that would immerse the pond's vegetation, which has been lying out nearly a week decomposing. Rotting plants rob the water of oxygen and would possibly cause another fish kill, Kuhajda said.

Over the next month or two, federal officials plan to devise a way to eventually restore the pond to its full depth of four or five feet deep.

The Alabama Rivers Alliance, which has already been testing water at the springs, has agreed to monitor water quality during the work.

A center director at the park has said that she wrote a work order directing the city's Public Works Department to tear down a dam at the edge of the pond without consulting federal agencies because the pond occasionally flooded adjacent tennis courts.

Carol Duncan, Birmingham councilwoman for the park area, said she could not comment on the employees responsible for destroying the weir.

"When I finish conducting my investigation, I will make statements available," she said.

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