



## The Birmingham News

### **Birmingham Mayor Larry Langford has a good plan to help restore and protect rare fish population at city-owned pond drained by mistake.**

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THE ISSUE: Birmingham Mayor Larry Langford has a good plan to help restore and protect the rare fish population at a city-owned pond drained by mistake.

All it took was a short tour around the drained natural pool at Roebuck Springs-Hawkins Park to change Birmingham Mayor Larry Langford's perspective from defensive to constructive.

More than 11,000 endangered watercress darters were stranded and killed when city employees removed a dam and drained the pool. Roebuck Springs is one of five urban pools in Jefferson County that make up the only habitat for the tiny watercress darter. How the loss of the 11,500-plus fish from last month's draining will affect the species' overall population won't be known for years.

On the plus side, not all of the darters died. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists contend the population can rebound with proper care at the site, though questions about the overall, long-term damage inflicted is unclear because of the possibility of inbreeding problems. Birmingham could be fined thousands of dollars for draining a wetland and killing endangered species.

At first, Langford defended the city workers who drained the pond and sounded less concerned about the fate of the rare, 1- to 2-inch fish. After his tour of the pond this week, however, Langford not only softened his position and tone, but came up with a good idea to help restore the pond.

"This is very serious business," Langford said, and he's absolutely right. So serious that the city could be fined \$500 for each dead fish. Do the math: That's more than \$5.5 million. Nobody really expects penalties that high; after all, the city workers did not intentionally kill the darters. Fines and restitution amounts for previous aquatic kills have ranged from \$25,000 to \$1.5 million when private companies were involved.

Somebody involved in work around the pond should have been aware of the endangered creatures that live in and depend on it, though the worker who ordered the pond drained said she was unaware the fish were endangered.

Langford admitted the city made mistakes in draining the pond and said the city will repair the damage, help restore the fish population and preserve the pond. The mayor and the city should cooperate with a team of biologists and other scientists who will make recommendations on how to save the darters.

Langford also wants to build a nature trail around the springs, installing signs and photographs that describe the endangered fish that live there.

Those are excellent ideas. The Fish and Wildlife Service should consider Langford's apology and clear commitment to making sure such a mistake doesn't happen again before deciding on any penalties against the city.

Should the springs become a city attraction, complete with an education program about the darter and the need to preserve and protect endangered species, as Langford suggests, a catastrophic mistake where city workers unknowingly drain a pool full of rare fish is unlikely to happen again - at least by accident.

The other areas where the watercress darters live - and other endangered species, too - should be, at the

very least, clearly marked so somebody doesn't repeat the city's mistake at Roebuck Springs.

In the end, should the watercress darters at Roebuck Springs and elsewhere get a new level of monitoring and protection because the pond was drained, that would be a positive outcome from a horribly careless blunder.

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