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Hartselle, Alabama, July 25, 2006,

Robinsong Ecological Resources, Inc. will give Morgan County the deed to the Flint Creek Wetland Mitigation Bank. The transfer of ownership will occur at the NRCS Facility on Highway 36 at 1:30 on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July. The ceremony is open to all and provides an opportunity to see just what can be accomplished with public-private co-operation.

The transfer of ownership is the culmination of an agreement between Robinsong Ecological Resources and the Morgan County Commission made in 1998. Robinsong committed to restoring a 647-acre cattle farm to a hardwood bottom wetland and donating that wetland to Morgan County and its citizens; Morgan County agreed to provide the long-term care for that wetland preserve. To compensate for the long term stewardship, Robinsong deeded 4 acres to the County at the start of the process so that a facility could be built onsite to house the offices of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Morgan County Soil and Water Conservation District and Flint Creek Watershed Conservancy.

The story began eight years ago when environmentalist Cynthia Robinson walked into a bank and came out with just what she wanted—a loan to purchase 647 acres of farmland that had been ruined by over-grazing and was to become the Flint Creek Wetlands Mitigation Bank (see *What's a mitigation bank*, below).

Who in their right mind would do that? An entrepreneur and environmentalist ahead of her time, that's who. At the time, very few people understood the need for mitigation banking as an innovative way to encourage entrepreneurs to restore the nation's wetlands.

Cynthia was motivated by her dedication to the environment and her desire to harness the all she had learned about wetlands in a variety of ecologically-oriented endeavors. She was also motivated by the work being done by the Flint Creek Watershed Initiative, a home-grown effort to improve water quality in Morgan County. She knew that the County's Flint Creek had some of the dirtiest water in the United States; in 1998 Flint Creek was number three on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of the nation's most polluted waterways. At that time, Morgan County, EPA and local citizens had formed the Flint Creek Watershed Conservancy. Restoring a wetland in that watershed would help; the wetland would filter out sediment and other pollutants. Cynthia concentrated her land search to that watershed and discovered the 647 acre farm on Highway 36.

Robinsong structured a deal among the Corps of Engineers, Morgan County and others that would convert the farm into the state's first privately-owned wetlands mitigation bank, the Flint Creek Wetlands Mitigation Bank. The bank lies within the Flint Creek Watershed roughly halfway between Hartselle and Wren on Highway 36. The project would require nearly a decade of planning, grueling field work and finally monitoring by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before reaching the level of success necessary for Robinsong to step aside and turn the wetlands over to Morgan County.

The project was begun on land that Cynthia recognized as ideal for wetland mitigation. To meet the Corps of Engineer's approval, only land that was formerly wetlands—usually drained for farming under the encouraged practices of the 1930s and 1940s—would qualify. This farm had historically been a wetland, a wetland that had been clear-cut and drained for agricultural purposes. The land was frequently flooded by backwater from Flint Creek and the Tennessee River. Restoring a wetland in this particular location where the wetland could filter the Creek's backwater would be very beneficial to Flint Creek. The farm was large enough to have a significant impact on the health of the Creek and large enough to provide good habitat for native wildlife.

Once the Corps of Engineers approved the permit for the project, the bulldozers began to undo the earthworks that had originally drained the wetlands to allow a sorghum and cattle operation. After the water flowed back into its original basin, 160,000 trees in ten different native species were planted, including several species of oak, bald cypress and river birch. Next came five years of monitoring, that is, sampling and report writing to document the progress of vegetation and hydrology. With the monitoring done, the Corps of Engineers approval in hand, and all credits sold to meet the demands of a burgeoning north Alabama economy, the Flint Creek Wetlands Mitigation Bank has done its job. Now the Bank is a wetland preserve that will be protected in perpetuity by Morgan County and can be enjoyed by its citizens.

The land will be given to Morgan County for educational use by the Morgan County Soil and Water Conservation District and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in return for their stewardship over the property. At the handover event, the property surrounding the NRCS Building, the property on which the entire wetlands bank project sits will become property of Morgan County sanctioned as a wetlands preserve.

Foy Kirkland, Morgan County District Conservationist, quantifies the ecological success of the Flint Creek Bank and highlights some of the conservation activities it now supports:

"Prior to authorization of the Flint Creek Wetland Mitigation Bank, Approximately 524 acres of the Mitigation Bank were managed for silage crops that contributed an estimated 15 tons per acre per year of

sediment to the down-stream watershed. With the land cover change to trees and grasses, quality wildlife habitat was created and a 524 acre filter has been restored that now contributes less than 1 ton per acre per year and also removes sediment and nutrients from hundreds of acres up stream. In addition, the Mitigation Bank site is actively being utilized as a 657 acre Outdoor Conservation Education Classroom, for area students, by Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Morgan County Soil And Water Conservation District."

### **What's a mitigation bank?**

Wetlands are the link between water and land, and have been historically abundant in the southeastern United States. They are the "kidneys" of our waterways, employing the power of plants to scour and filter water returning to nearby streams. The result is less sediment and fewer chemicals in our water, and less expensive wastewater treatment demands for taxpayers. Wetlands slows water on its way to rivers and streams, too, giving deluged streams a chance to lower themselves before flooding sets in. Houses are sometimes permitted to be built on traditionally safe land that eventually becomes flood-prone as one by one these natural buffers disappear. And then there's habitat for wildlife and the thousands of ways our lives are invisibly touched by animals, insects and plants. Mosquito control, crop and fruit tree pollination and enhance property values are boosted by an attractive environment.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), more than half the wetlands in the 48 contiguous U.S. States disappeared between about 1780 and 1980. The rate of growth and development of this country was not going to see another 200 years for the other half to disappear. By the mid 1980s, wetlands were being lost at the rate of nearly a third-million acres each year.

The days when wetlands are indiscriminately filled are largely past us. In the mid 1980s, the EPA found the political clout to reverse the losses. Laws were enacted that allowed companies—and later individuals—to reserve restored wetlands in a "bank" of credits to be used by companies and municipalities whose projects brought impact to wetlands.

When an airport expansion project requires the extension of runways into a wetland area, for instance, the amount of impact in acres of wetlands removed by the project is calculated, and the airport buys credits from a wetlands bank that has received credentials from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to sell its credit inventory.

### **This is where mitigation banks come in handy:**

- Credits, when needed, can be available in a few days instead of months or years since they already exist at the bank

- The regulatory agencies already know and trust the mitigation banker
- Centralized, large scale mitigation banks create more viable habitat for more species of plants and wildlife than does an unconnected patchwork of small projects
- Centralized, large-scale mitigation banks may be monitored more efficiently than a patchwork of small projects.

### Summary

The Flint Creek Wetlands Mitigation Bank was begun by Robinsong Environmental Resources in 1998. It was the first privately-owned mitigation bank in the state of Alabama. It was created to allow individuals, companies and municipalities a place to buy pre-approved credits to mitigate the impact their projects might have on wetlands. All credits available in the bank have been sold, and the property is being deeded to Morgan County.

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