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## Development possible with some protections for Cave Springs recharge area

By [Ron Wood](#)

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A new study recommends cities limit development in critical parts of the Cave Springs recharge area but planned highway projects aren't likely to be affected.

The 19-square mile recharge area is home to endangered gray bats, salamanders and several sensitive crustaceans, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The service estimates about half of all the known Ozark blind cavefish in the world are in the Cave Springs recharge area. The Ozark blind cavefish is listed as threatened on the federal Endangered Species List.

### On the Web

For more information on the Cave Springs Recharge Area Study go to this website:  
[www.cavespringskarststudy.com](http://www.cavespringskarststudy.com)

Source: Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission

The recharge area includes the southwest corner of Rogers, much of Lowell and the area around Cave Springs where a cave opens on Lake Keith. It is part of the Illinois River Watershed. A recharge area is an area of land where water easily infiltrates into an aquifer.

The Illinois River Watershed Partnership acquired 30 acres in 2012 around where the recharge area empties into Lake Keith and the cave to protect the area.

Tom Hopper, an engineer with Crafton Tull, said the area can be developed and the cavefish and springs can be protected.

"You can have both, it's not an either or," Hopper said.

Hopper said the cavefish is considered to be an indicator species.

"It's really about water quality up here," Hopper said. "We know this is going to be a hard sell to the community."

The study urges Cave Springs, Springdale, Rogers and Lowell to adopt protections for the recharge area through their development regulations. A model ordinance is being drafted as part of the project.

Cave Springs Mayor Travis Lee said he wants to look at the study further before taking action.

"I want to make sure I understand the impact on landowners, the cavefish and water quality," Lee said. "They're all very important."

The study recommends buffer areas be maintained along both sides of certain streams and recommends detention ponds to control run off in other areas. Buffer areas could also be used for trails, open space and the like. Flood plains will naturally restrict development in parts of the recharge area, according to the study.

Hopper said the added protections could actually increase property value in the area.

The recharge area has about 10 square miles of indirect recharge area and 9.6 square miles of direct recharge area. The indirect recharge area has mostly surface water that doesn't impact the springs a lot. It also has native soils that provide good filtration of water and, therefore has less impact on cavefish than water in the smaller direct recharge area.

The recharge area became an issue after wildlife officials expressed concern in late 2012 about the effect of road improvement projects.

Interstate 49 is in the indirect recharge area. The U.S. 412 Bypass and a proposed airport access road skirt the recharge area. Projects on those highways shouldn't adversely affect the recharge area. Arkansas 112 runs through the direct recharge area but could be moved just west of downtown Cave Springs to be clear of the recharge area, Hopper said. Arkansas 264 runs through the direct recharge area.

Highway projects such as improvement to Arkansas 264 from Lowell to Cave Springs, the U.S. 412 Bypass and the creation of an Arkansas 112 corridor have been on hold waiting for the new study. The airport access road got caught up in the fray even though the proposed route lies outside the study area.

A study of the recharge area in 1978 and 1979 caused the Highway Department to swing Interstate 540 to the east to protect the cavefish and other aquatic plants and animals.

There have been other studies of the recharge area, including one in 2001 for the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport access corridor. A 2007 study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service looked at community growth and best management practices for the conservation of karst recharge zones.

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