Prairie restoration project aims to save ecosystem

LAFAYETTE — Not many people care about the work Larry Allain does.

But Allain, who’s spearheading a project to restore dwindling coastal prairie habitat in Louisiana, hopes that changes.

“It’s a rare ecosystem, and unless you care about natural places, it’s hard for the average person to get their mind around that,” said Allain, a botanist with the Natural Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette. “Everybody talks about the rain forest, but we have a tremendously diverse endangered ecosystem here.”

Allain is using UL Lafayette students for labor and the UL Center for Ecology and Environment (CEET) in Carencro as a safe haven for the ecosystem.

In transplanting some of the habitat to two three-acre tracts of land at CEET, Allain hopes to provide a safe haven for coastal prairie land and a centralized location where students, scientists and the general public can study coastal prairie habitat.

What was once 2.5 million acres stretching from Lafayette to Corpus Christi has all but disappeared. Allain said that less than 100 acres of coastal prairie land — which can include over 500 species of plants — exists in the state.

Robert Twilley, director of CEET, said the prairie is important because “it represents part of what we call our ecological heritage.”

Allain said demand for coastal prairie seeds for grasses such as big blue stem and Indian grasses would grow with an ample supply.

He said the seed can be used for revegetating coulees and abandoned oilfield drilling rig sites. Allain said the presence of prairie habitat helps retard the growth of invasive species like the Chinese tallow tree (chicken tree).

It is the home to a species of plant, mountain mint, that kills e-coli bacteria and is used by some Louisianians as a spice in sausage. Coastal prairie habitat also provides cover for a variety of animals once populous in Louisiana such as cougars, prairie chickens and elk.

UL Americorps volunteer Lisa Mahoney of New Iberia said the restoration process is crucial since so much of the grassland has been lost.

Fellow volunteer Emily Neustrom agreed.

“I think it’s important because humans depend on our native ecosystems,” Neustrom said. “At the rate of extinction of plants and animals, it won’t be long before we see the effects on our existence.”