UL students help restore coastal prairie

LAFAYETTE — Final exams at UL Lafayette conclude this week, but some university students still have work to do.

A joint prairie restoration project between the UL Lafayette chapter of AmeriCorps and the National Wetlands Center will relocate 5,000 square feet of endangered prairie grasses to the UL Center for Ecology and Environmental Technology with the help of student volunteers.

Larry Allain, a botanist with the National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, said what was once two and one half million acres of prairie land in Louisiana has nearly been wiped out by the building of towns and cities and the cultivation of farmland.

Coastal prairie land has dwindled to less than 100 acres in Louisiana. Most of the coastal prairie grasses can be found along railroad tracks.

Louisiana coastal prairie information:

The Louisiana coastal prairie ecosystem once contained 2.5 million acres. Now it covers less than 100. The ecosystem extended roughly from Lafayette to Lake Charles and the coastal marsh to the longleaf pine savannah. Wiped out mostly by farming, the ecosystem boasted 500 species of plants and was the home to bison, elk, prairie chickens and mountain lions, among other species.

SOURCE: Larry Allain

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Larry Allain said the process of transplanting perennial plants and grasses is labor-intensive since so little is left. About 5,000 square feet will be transplanted, Allain said.

A team of UL Americorps student members will assist with the collection, transport and planting of the seeds.

“I think it’s an excellent project,” said Erin Butler, UL Americorps program director. “It helps create awareness among UL students about environmental issues.”

Allain said education is crucial for coastal prairie land in Louisiana to survive. “It’s considered to be one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America,” Allain said.

Robert Twilley, director of the Center for Ecology and Environmental Technology, said the National Wetlands Center has been allotted two 3-acre tracts on which to cultivate prairie grasses.

“IT sort of represents a refuge of coastal prairie species,” Twilley said. “But it is also used for research, restoration and education.”