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Restoring the Blue River through Collaborative Conservation

ADA, Okla. – The Oka' Institute at East Central University, Chickasaw Nation, and the American Bird Conservancy have been awarded \$4.1 million to restore the habitat of the Blue River Watershed.

“This award is yet another example of our commitment to be great partners within our region,” said ECU President Wendell Godwin. “The vision for the Oka’ Institute at East Central University is to be a nationally recognized hub for water within the U.S. The synergy between ECU, City of Ada, and our tribal partners is allowing us to support our mission of being great stewards of our land and water. This is an example of what we can do through collaboration to leave a lasting imprint on the Blue River Watershed. We are proud of our team for this new award.”

The watershed covers an area of 685 square miles in south-central Oklahoma and spans across Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations treaty territorial boundaries. The Blue River Watershed is home to a wide variety of plants and animals, making it an important habitat for several species. It also serves as a source of water for agriculture, municipalities, and recreation activities.

Renowned for its pristine waters, the Blue River offers excellent fishing and picturesque landscapes. It also carries deep significance for the Chickasaw Nation, symbolizing both an ecological treasure and a cultural legacy. Protected within the Nature Conservancy’s Oka' Yanahli Preserve—Chickasaw for "flowing water"—the river underscores its vital role in nurturing varied ecosystems and meeting community needs. This protection reflects broad-brush partnerships commitment to preserving the river's natural beauty and cultural importance for future generations.

The protection and management of the Blue River Watershed is crucial for maintaining water quality, supporting wildlife, and ensuring sustainable water resources for communities in the region. However, the impacts of climate change and environmental damage, such as extreme weather, habitat degradation, and land-use changes, pose a threat to the watershed's flow. Due to an ever-increasing demand for natural resources, aquatic and riparian ecosystems are declining through water loss and landscape change, which makes this limited resource vulnerable to climate change.

The restoration project aims to implement necessary watershed management practices to improve water quality and quantity. This project will focus on privately owned lands and utilize techniques like prescribed fire, holistic grazing and planting of native species to promote watershed conservation efforts. The ultimate goal of these practices is to improve wildlife habitat, reduce habitat fragmentation, and reestablish healthy riparian systems through habitat connectivity.

A significant portion of the funding will be allocated to private landowners to encourage best practices in land stewardship. In support of increasing existing programs, the Pontotoc Conservation District will also receive a no-till drill to further their restoration efforts in the area as part of this grant award.

The project partners aim to implement extensive, community-based conservation initiatives to promote climate sustainability, enhance water quality and quantity, mitigate wildfire hazards, combat habitat fragmentation, and enhance cultural awareness and wildlife habitat across 15,000 acres of the Blue River Watershed.

For more information on restoring the habitats of the Blue River Watershed, please visit the Oka' Institute website at www.okainstitute.org.