



June 7, 2008

## Conservation group beats goal

*Jon Ostendorff*

A coalition of 13 land trusts is ahead of schedule in protecting 50,000 acres in Western North Carolina from development by 2010.

With a month to go before the halfway mark, Blue Ridge Forever said this week that it has protected 25,508 acres. The coalition made the announcement timed with North Carolina's Land Trust Day, which is today.

Advocates say the up-tick in conservation is largely thanks to more awareness among WNC residents about protecting open land.

"There is a growing perception in our communities that development and the changes to our landscapes are getting out of hand," said Kieran Roe, executive director of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy.

The increase comes as the public and governments in the region are spending more time and money on conservation.

Buncombe County has committed \$2 million this year for conservation projects.

In the region's seven westernmost counties, residents, government leaders and builders recently wrapped up a weeklong meeting on voluntary growth guidelines that focused in part on conservation.

Advocates are hoping the increase will continue with another year left on a special federal law that allows a big tax break for conservation.

## Conservation goal

Blue Ridge Forever is made up of 10 local land trusts, two that work nationally and one that focuses on the Southeast.

Here's a look at some of the coalition's statistics since 2006:

- n Closed on 178 projects averaging more than one closing every week. Of those projects, 138 protected water resources and 54 protected farmlands.

- n Raised more than \$19 million in private money and \$59 million in public grants for land protection.

- n Received \$115 million in donated land value from landowners who wanted to permanently protect their land from development by donating property or its development rights at appraised value, or by selling the land or development rights well below appraised value.

Leveraging money from private donors has been the key to protecting land in a region, where property values have doubled and tripled in the last decade, said Phyllis Stiles, Blue Ridge Forever campaign director. She said the coalition since 2006 has tapped grants to turn each privately donated dollar into another \$3 and another \$6 worth of donated land value.

Conservation agreements allow property owners to get partial compensation for the value of their land or tax benefits in return for giving up the right to develop or subdivide the land. The owner can keep the property in the family or sell it, but subsequent owners remain bound by the requirements.

More interest nationally in "green" issues like energy conservation and environmentally friendly buildings has focused the public on land conservation, said Kristy Urquhart, associate director of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.

Stiles said word of mouth about the benefits of conservation agreements also has helped. That factor was important last year in rural parts of Buncombe County, where farming families started buying into

the idea and telling their neighbors.

Another reason for the increase came from federal lawmakers.

Congress in 2006 changed the tax law to allow landowners to deduct 50 percent of their income from their taxes for 15 years in exchange for land they placed in conservation agreements.

Working farmers can do even better, with a 100 percent deduction. Before the change, the law only allowed a 30 percent deduction over 6 years.

The change had an immediate effect, said Roe of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, which works in Henderson, Transylvania and parts of Buncombe, Jackson and Rutherford counties.

He said his organization in 2006 doubled the number of agreements from 10 the year before to 20 — the most so far.

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