



Preservation News

NC Falls Short of Goal to Protect Million Acres of Open Spaces

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Raleigh--In ten years, North Carolina has permanently protected more than 640,000 acres of parks, forests, farmlands, and such critical areas as Grandfather Mountain, Chimney Rock, and the banks of the Haw River. Yet, according to a new Environment North Carolina study, the state fell well short of a goal set by legislators and former Gov. Jim Hunt to reach the million-acre mark by December 31, 2009.

"North Carolina has made progress in conserving our forests and farmlands," said Elizabeth Ouzts, State Director of Environment North Carolina and co-author of the report. "But we've got a long way to go to preserve our natural heritage."

According to the report, *Unfulfilled Promise: The Million Acre Initiative and the Need to Protect North Carolina's Open Spaces*, the latest figures available show that 643,209 acres have been protected under the Million Acre Initiative, less than two-thirds the amount originally pledged.

In roughly the same time period, North Carolina lost more than one million acres of natural lands, more than any other state in the U.S.

Land conservation advocates argue that protecting and expanding parks and natural areas provide opportunities for Tar Heels to bike, hike, fish and swim at a time when many are looking for low-cost recreational activities. They point to the state's \$17-billion tourist economy, which the state Division of Tourism believes is driven first and foremost by the state's scenery. And they note that preserving natural areas is a critical means of protecting the state's water supplies.

"If we cannot protect the water where it originates we've lost the battle for clean water downstream, where the need for recreation and drinking supply increases," said Jay Leutze of the Southern Appalachians Highlands Conservancy.

The Million Acre Initiative fell short because of insufficient funding throughout its life--even in good economic times. To achieve its goal, the state should have protected 100,000 acres each year on average. Instead, North Carolina cleared the 100,000-acre mark in only one year, 2007.

The recession made matters worse. The board of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund--the state's largest land conservation program--awarded more than \$65 million for open space protection in 2008, but most of that money was reallocated to other areas of the state budget. Last year, the General Assembly put another \$50 million into the Clean Water fund, but the state has released only a small fraction toward land acquisition so far.

The Million Acres Initiative helps to track and coordinate the efforts of private land trusts and those of existing federal, local, and state open-space protection programs. Data for the report comes from the Million Acres Initiative's annual report to the General Assembly.

The report makes several recommendations to address the protection shortfall. Chief among them, Environment North Carolina urged the state to follow through as soon as possible on grant awards already committed by the boards of the state's natural resource trust funds, allowing the expansion and creation of public natural areas to be completed during a time of diminished property values.

"The state should fulfill the promise of one million acres to ensure clean drinking water; opportunities for Tar Heels to fish, hike, and swim; and a strong tourist economy for generations to come," said Ouzts.

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Examples of opportunities today to expand North Carolina's parks and trails:

ANSON, CABARRUS, CATAWBA, CLEVELAND, GASTON, IREDELL, LINCOLN, MECKLENBURG, ROWAN, STANLEY, UNION: The vision for Carolina Thread Trail is to preserve, protect and connect open spaces through hundreds of miles of parks, trails and conservation corridors, touching 2.3 million people in 15 counties and both Carolinas. The Thread will protect natural areas and wildlife habitat, increase recreational opportunities, improve quality of life, and attract tourism and business.

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EVERY: The 113-acre Elk Hollow Creek tract features breathtaking cascades, and its waters hold the genetically distinct Southern Appalachian Brook Trout, a relict species left stranded in the highest elevations after the end of the last ice age. Needing pristine and frigid water to survive, this unique species is disappearing as development increases.

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ORANGE: Southwest of Hillsborough, Orange County has a long-term vision of establishing a Seven Mile Creek Preserve on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail corridor. The County recently acquired 13 acres for a future public gateway into the Preserve and access to the planned Mountains-to-Sea trail, but several key additions are needed for the 1,000-mile trail and to further the vision for this area as a public recreation area.

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ROWAN COUNTY: The Land Trust for Central North Carolina has identified a number of key land protection opportunities, including one to help protect Salisbury's drinking water supply.

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RUTHERFORD COUNTY: Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy purchased a 1,527-acre tract north of Lake Lure that was once part of the 4000-acre "Grey Rock at Lake Lure" residential subdivision. Orlando-based Land Resources filed for bankruptcy in 2008 and abandoned the development. Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy would like to transfer the property to the state to expand Chimney Rock State Park.

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<http://www.environmentnorthcarolina.org/newsroom/preservation/open-spaces-news/-nc-falls-short-of-goal-to-protect-million-acres-of-open-spaces>