

2007 Annual Report NC Million Acre Goal

Presented to the Governor of North Carolina and the Environmental
Review Commission of the North Carolina General Assembly

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By the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources
Division of Natural Resources Planning and Conservation

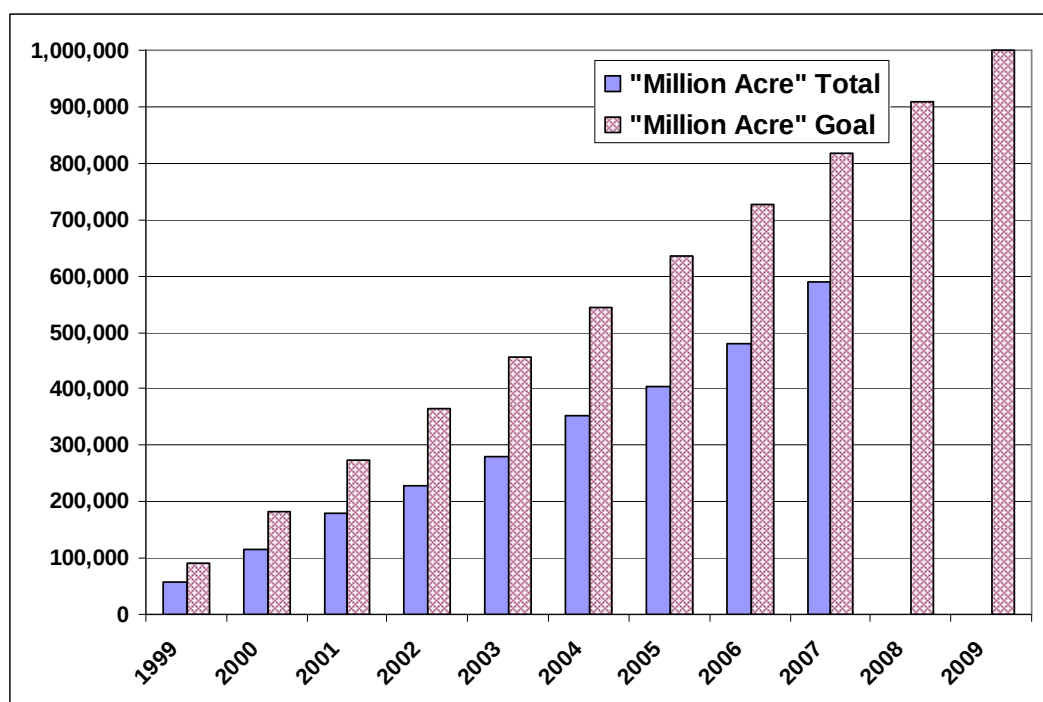
The Latest Numbers

Public and private partners protected an additional **108,370** acres in 2007, bringing the total number of acres conserved under the Million Acre goal to **589,685**. This is an increase in the rate of land protection in North Carolina from the previous year, due in part to an increase in State funds available for conservation. The General Assembly authorized special indebtedness financing of \$50 million in certificates of participation in the 2007-2008 budget.

In 2006 the US Congress passed changes to federal tax incentives and the Farm Bill that improve the financial incentives for conservation easement donations. The changes are especially favorable to farmers and ranchers and have resulted in an increase in donations of conservation easements on agricultural lands. This effect may be temporary, however, as the incentives are currently set to expire in 2009.

The table at the end of this report describes in detail the number of acres protected by sector (state government, local government, etc.), by program, and by time period. To avoid confusion, only official reports of new acquisitions (from surveys, interviews and questionnaires) are counted in the final total. Estimates for non-respondents are not included. The lands protected in 2007 represent important natural areas for habitat, recreation opportunities, working forests, and riparian buffers that maintain water quality and protect floodplains, among others. Notable projects completed in 2007 include the addition of the 996-acre Chimney Rock Park to the State Parks System, a 1,088-acre conservation easement conveyed from the Town of Sylva to the State of North Carolina on the largest remaining unprotected tract in the Plott Balsam Mountains, and the transfer of nearly 60,000 acres of former International Paper land from The Nature Conservancy to the State. Table 1 illustrates our progress to date toward the Million Acre goal.

Table 1: Progress toward our goal of one million acres of permanently protected open space



However, the amount of land currently protected each year is insufficient to meet the goal of permanently protecting an additional million acres by December 31, 2009 (G.S. 113A-240 and 241). In fact, at our current pace, land protection efforts do not even match the rate at which natural and agricultural lands are being lost to development in North Carolina, which currently amounts to about 100,000 acres per year. At the current average rate of land protection and funding levels, we will not reach the Million Acre goal until 2014.

Although they do not count toward the Million Acre goal (per the 2000 legislation), temporary conservation measures often contribute to the permanent conservation goals of the Initiative. For example, the NC Natural Heritage Program maintains a registry of landowners who have voluntarily agreed to manage their land for the protection of a Significant Natural Heritage Area on their property. Currently over 18,000 acres have voluntary protection as part of this program. Indeed several of these agreements have led to permanent conservation measures. For example, the World's Edge Registered Heritage Area is now part of Chimney Rock State Park and habitat for eight rare plants within the Eno River Diabase Sill Registered Heritage Area was permanently protected by the NC Plant Conservation Program in 2007. Also, the NC Division of Soil and Water Conservation oversees the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program which encourages farmers to place environmentally sensitive land near streams or water bodies into vegetative cover for a period of time. Since 1999, CREP has enrolled 18,684 acres into the 30-year easement program including 1,728 acres in 2007. Additional conservation programs, such as the Wetlands Reserve Program or Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, authorized in the federal Farm Bill encourage other conservation measures on private lands.

The Program

In addition to working to increase the rate at which land is being protected in North Carolina, the Million Acre Initiative continues to work towards making information about land protection tools and techniques more broadly available, and to encourage conservation planning. As part of the One North Carolina *Naturally* program, the Million Acre Initiative and other partners continue to slowly but steadily increase awareness among North Carolinians about the need for additional land conservation to protect our valuable natural ecosystems.

The most significant improvement in this area is the statewide Conservation Planning Tool, developed by the staff of the One North Carolina *Naturally* program and introduced in 2007. The Conservation Planning Tool is a comprehensive reference that provides accurate information to support land use planning efforts. It uses scientific and strategic analysis to identify and prioritize the essential high quality natural resources across the state, as well as identify crucial protection gaps in our state's network of supporting ecosystems. The plan highlights opportunities for collaborative conservation that will contribute to sustaining the most significant natural resources across the state.

The plan consists of six assessments that identify the most essential and ecologically functional areas of land and water across the state. These assessments address two primary themes: ecosystem functions and ecosystem resources. Ecosystem functions consists of: the essential supporting landscape needs for terrestrial wildlife and its habitat, requirements for aquatic

wildlife and its habitat, overall landscape function and connectivity, and areas that are critical for maintaining ecosystem processes (e.g. wetlands, floodplains, stream buffers, and fire-adapted systems). Ecosystem resources addresses the essential landscape needs that support agriculture, forestry, fisheries, water supply protection, and recreation, and open space. Three of these assessments have been completed: Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitat, Open Space and Conservation Lands, and Water Services. The remaining three will be completed by early 2009: Agricultural Lands, Marine/Estuarine Systems, and Forest Lands. Each of these assessments will consist of a GIS data layer, which can be used on its own or in concert with the others. The CPT is available both through an online interactive map viewer on the One NC *Naturally* website as well as through data downloads for users with GIS software. Development of the assessments will be an iterative process with updates every six months.

The tool can be used by nonprofit organizations, state and local agencies, or funding groups to inform decisions about conservation and/or land use planning. Indeed, the staff of the One North Carolina *Naturally* program has presented it to many stakeholders and future users, especially the planning staff of local governments. The Natural Heritage Trust Fund first incorporated the tool into its application in the Fall 2007 cycle. Additional funding agencies are expected to follow suit as the applicable data layers are developed. Use of this and other planning tools will help ensure that the limited funds available for conservation will be spent on the most significant resources and in the most efficient manner. Even the preliminary data has yielded new insights such as the locations of the most significant natural resource core areas and connectors that do not have formal protection. Future layers will identify areas critical to the protection of ecosystem resources from an economic perspective.

Looking Ahead

The year 2007 was an unusually strong year for land conservation due in part to the significant increases in funding from the North Carolina General Assembly. With little federal funding available, the burden of funding land protection must be borne by the State. Nevertheless, funding requested in 2007 from the State's four major trust funds exceeded the funding available by \$109.5 million, according to Land for Tomorrow.¹

As noted in earlier reports, it will be difficult to meet the Million Acre goal without a working lands component targeted towards maintaining local production of agricultural and forest products. While partners in agricultural conservation have made exciting progress in mapping priority areas, funding for farmland preservation and conservation of forestry lands remains in short supply. In 2008, the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund received applications requesting \$29 million, with only \$7.6 million available. We look forward to including these protected acres in future Million Acre reports.

The primary finding and recommendation of the 2007 report from the Joint Legislative Commission on Land and Water Conservation was that "additional funding is needed to finance

¹ Land for Tomorrow (May 20, 2008). "State's land and water conservation trust fund shortfalls totaled \$109.5 million in 2007." Press release. Retrieved September 29, 2008. Available at www.landfortomorrow.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/7c34ac47f77ea1984b374d64102ee30a/misc/press_release.pdf.

land and water conservation,” and that “a larger dedicated source of revenue is needed to adequately address conservation and preservation needs.” In recognition of this finding, the General Assembly authorized \$120 million in Certificates of Participation in the 2007-2008 budget. This action enabled a number of agencies to take advantage of significant short-term opportunities, such as Chimney Rock Park and the International Paper tracts. This is reflected in the increased rate of land conservation in 2007 and will continue into 2008. Much like a bond, however, the 2007-2008 Certificates of Participation will have to be repaid by the Natural Heritage Trust Fund and the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, limiting the amount of funding available for conservation opportunities in the more distant future. The General Assembly improved this situation in the 2008-2009 budget by authorizing \$50 million in Certificates of Participation that will be repaid from the general fund, ensuring that future conservation opportunities will not be compromised by repayment obligations.

We should also note that the COPs financing authorized in the 2007-2008 budget included \$20 million for the newly established Waterfront Access Marine Industry Fund. While the 13 projects that received funding are of critical importance for the continued health of North Carolina’s marine economy and ecosystems, they tend to be small in size or are developed land that will not contribute significantly the Million Acre goal.

Conclusion

With at least 383 acres of natural lands converted to residential and commercial development each day, North Carolina cannot afford to wait any longer to conserve the most important of its natural resources. With the help of dozens of public and private partners, we have made significant progress towards the Million Acre goal. Nevertheless, with two years remaining to achieve the Million Acre goal, it has become clear that we will not reach that mark without additional funding for conservation. Coordinated planning efforts such as the statewide Conservation Planning Tool have made significant progress prioritizing areas for conservation in order to maximize both the cost-effectiveness and the long-term value of investment in conservation lands, but land costs are greater than when the Million Acre goal was announced. The Tool is also helping to raise awareness – at local, regional, and state levels – of the importance of planning for growth and protecting the natural resources that deliver so many benefits. 2007 demonstrated that increased funding leads directly to increased conservation accomplishments. In fact, 2007 was the only year in which net conservation land increased, that is the acreage of natural and agricultural lands permanently protected exceeded the acreage lost to development. With the powerful Conservation Planning Tool nearly completed, now is the time to make the necessary funding available to help implement its recommendations. Even though it will take longer than anticipated to achieve the *quantitative* Million Acre goal, we have made significant progress towards the *qualitative* goal at the heart of the Initiative: “to protect the water quality, wetlands, drinking water sources, natural beauty, and ecological diversity of North Carolina as well as provide opportunities for public recreation” in order to “provide a high-quality environment for present and future generations” (SL 2000-23).

Acres Under Permanent Protection

(note: a blank cell means no data were collected. 0 means no land was protected)

State Agency	category	Acres Protected 1/99 - 12/05	Acres Protected 1/06 - 12/06	Subtotal through 12/06	Acres Protected 1/07 - 12/07	"Million Acres" Total
<i>DENR - FOREST RESOURCES</i>	state forest	7,861	117	7,978	0	7,978
<i>DENR - SOIL AND WATER</i>	conservation reserve enhancement program	2,770	1,191	3,961	766	4,727
	hog farm buyout	1,669	20	1,689	154	1,843
<i>WILDLIFE RESOURCES</i>	game lands	105,734	39,258	144,992	64,435	209,427
<i>DENR - Ecosystem Enhancement Program(*)</i>	wetlands & riparian mitigation	11,464	1,229	12,693	1,479	14,172
<i>DENR - PARKS AND REC.</i>	state park	29,723	4,503	34,226	5,604	39,830
	state natural area	6,004	643	6,647	2,392	9,039
	state trails	765	189	954	74	1,028
	state rec area	2	0	2	0	2
<i>DENR - COASTAL MNGMT.</i>	coastal reserves	28,961	0	28,961	0	28,961
	submerged lands	0	0	0	0	0
<i>DoA&CS - PLANT INDUSTRY</i>	state nature preserve	9,547	274	9,821	567	10,388
	other lands	0	0	0	0	0
<i>DCR - HISTORIC SITES</i>	state historic sites	639	519	1,158	65	1,223
<i>STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM</i>	university property	0				0
SUBTOTALS		205,138	47,943	253,081	75,536	328,617
Local Governments						
CITY AND COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (**)	parklands, greenways, watershed protection, etc.	21,936	1,178	23,114	4,360	27,474
SUBTOTALS		21,936	1,178	23,114	4,360	27,474
Federal Agency						
US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE	national wildlife refuge	12,679	0	12,679	133	12,813
USDA FOREST SERVICE(***)	national forests	7,084	17	7,101	34	7,135
USDA-NRCS WETLAND RESERVE PROGRAM	wetlands reserve	12,190	1,122	13,312	4,000	17,312
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE	national park	7,640	134	7,774	81	7,855
SUBTOTALS		39,593	1,273	40,866	4,249	45,115
Local Land Trusts						
NC LAND TRUSTS (****)	protected lands	93,955	19,505	113,460	19,948	133,408
SUBTOTALS		93,955	19,505	113,460	19,948	133,408
Other Conservation Groups						
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY(*****)	nature preserves	28,884	4,141	33,025	4,072	37,096
AUDUBON SOCIETY	nature preserves	0		0	0	0
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST	farmland	0	0	0	0	0
PRESERVATION NC	historic preservation	680		680	75	755
NC COASTAL FEDERATION	nature preserves	8,353	1,619	9,972		9,972
DUCKS UNLIMITED	waterfowl habitat	6,981	135	7,116	131	7,247
SUBTOTALS		44,898	5,895	50,793	4,278	55,070
TOTALS		405,521	75,794	481,315	108,370	589,685

*Formerly Wetlands Restoration Program.

**Local governments include LWCF projects closed, PARTF projects funded, CWMTF local projects closed, and counties that responded to information requests.

***National Forests in North Carolina report on fiscal year.

****25 local land trusts that regularly partner with the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. Local land trusts also conveyed 9,319 acres to local, state, and federal governments in 2007.

*****The Nature Conservancy transferred 65,137 acres to other agencies in 2007. Most of this was former International Paper property acquired by TNC in 2006.