## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool**

The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) recognizes the need to coordinate statewide conservation efforts as population pressures threaten our state's finite natural resources. By 2030, North Carolina's population will increase by 50 percent to 12 million. Currently North Carolina leads the U.S. in lost farm and forest lands - more than one million acres in 10 years. At least 383 acres per day are converted to new roads, shopping malls and housing developments. This breakneck pace challenges each community to provide an adequate supply of clean water, unpolluted air and outdoor recreation areas to maintain the health of current and expected residents.

Developed in response to this need, the North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool provides a framework for decisions about future growth, while also ensuring that significant benefits provided by our state's natural resources will be preserved for future generations. In 1999 North Carolina's General Assembly established the goal of permanently protecting one million acres of natural lands by the end of 2009. Through the efforts of public and private partners, 683,460 acres have been conserved to meet this goal as of 2009. Achieving the million acre goal would increase preserved land to 12 percent of the state's total land area (3.8 million of 31 million acres).

The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool was envisioned to streamline the process of identifying and prioritizing the areas in North Carolina's landscape that are essential for conservation. The selected planning approach draws upon the expertise of the Natural Heritage Program and is based on "Green Infrastructure" principles, which emphasize the importance of maintaining an interconnected network of green space that conserves valuable natural ecosystem functions, while also providing associated benefits to human populations. This analysis pinpoints areas that are already protected as well as those areas in the landscape that represent protection "gaps" in a functional ecosystem network.

Recognizing the dual role that ecosystem functions play for wildlife and humans, separate assessments were developed to more accurately rank the functions of each. The assessment series, which is composed of geospatial data layers, does not value one kind of benefit over another, but separates them into six individual assessments. The values used to assess necessary ecosystem functions are different enough that no meaningful combination into a single scale can be made. For example, it would not be reasonable to compare the significance of drinking water to the value of a rare species.

The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool includes six natural resource assessments:

- Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitat,
- Open Space and Conservation Lands,
- Water Services.
- Farmland Preservation,
- Forestry Lands, and
- Marine and Estuarine Resources.

This comprehensive planning tool can be used by local and state governments, regional planning organizations, and non-profit organizations to inform decisions about conservation and other land use planning efforts in North Carolina. The data and maps included in the assessments can be used independently or in combination. By coordinating assessment data, various programs can quickly identify lands that provide multiple benefits for compatible uses. The ranking system helps prioritize conservation funding decisions, resulting in cost-effective investment of tax dollars towards our most precious and vulnerable remaining lands.

The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool and associated assessments are intended to be updated every six months, ensuring that the most recent available data is included. In addition, new partners and on-going collaboration will continually provide new information and data layers that will be vital for the ongoing analyses and assessments.

Strategically planning for growth in North Carolina in an environmentally sensitive way will benefit all of our state's citizens. The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool can help to identify essential areas in the landscape for conservation, while at the same time helping guide development to those areas where it might have the least amount of impact. North Carolina will be known as the state that planned for growth by wisely incorporating environmental, conservation and natural resource concerns into our decision-making process.

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For more information:

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