

# **2009 Annual Report**

## **North Carolina Million Acre Goal**

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

Fall 2010

By the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources  
Office of Conservation, Planning and Community Affairs

## **Progress toward the Million Acre Goal**

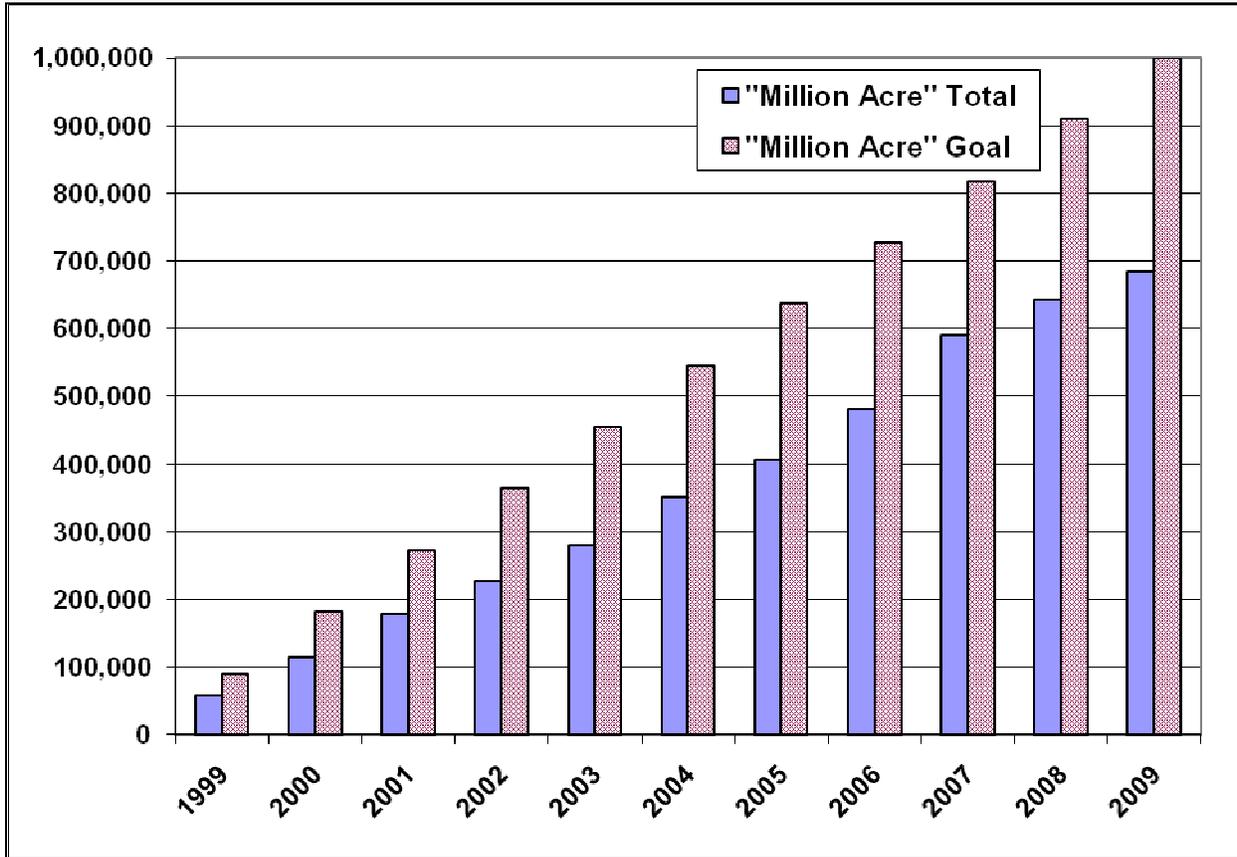
Public and private partners protected an additional **40,251** acres in 2009, bringing the total number of acres conserved under the Million Acre goal to **683,460**. This is a decrease in the rate of land protection in North Carolina from the previous year, due primarily to a reduction in funds available for conservation. The economic downturn has both posed challenges and offered opportunities for those working in land conservation. On the one hand, a slower economy reduced development pressure and decreased land values. On the other hand, it also reduced revenue to the primary funding sources, such as North Carolina's conservation trust funds.

This is the last year required to report on progress regarding North Carolina's Million Acre goal, and we must report that North Carolina did not meet its goal to permanently protect an additional million acres by Dec. 31, 2009 (G.S. 113A-240 and 241). Over the course of the Million Acre Initiative, the average annual rate of land protection was 62,070 acres. This rate of land protection does not 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 2015.

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 2009 represent important natural areas for habitat, agricultural lands, recreation opportunities, working forests and riparian buffers that maintain water quality and protect floodplains. Chart 1 illustrates the progress toward the Million Acre goal.

**Chart 1: Progress toward the goal of one million acres of permanently protected open space**



## The Million Acre Initiative

The final year of required reporting offers an opportunity to reflect on land conservation over the programs' eleven years. In reflection, it becomes apparent that a number of things have changed over the course of the Million Acre Initiative, while others have remained the same. These two categories provide a framework for examining land conservation in North Carolina:

*What has changed over the course of the Million Acre Initiative?*

- Conservation funding and incentives have changed -- some for the better.** In North Carolina, the General Assembly has increased the appropriation for the Clean Water Management Trust Fund to \$100 million annually; however, this amount is not enough to meet the demand. Three temporary or one-time measures were successful during the course of the Million Acre Initiative: the Ecosystem Enhancement Program's preservation mitigation for wetland impacts; the 2007-08 Certificates of Participation; and, a federal tax incentive favorable to farmers and ranchers that resulted in an increase in donations of conservation easements on agricultural lands. This federal tax incentive expired in 2009; efforts continue to renew it. The success of local open space bonds will be addressed below.
- The science behind, and appreciation of, ecosystem services is growing.** Perhaps foremost among the minds of many is the role of carbon sequestration in mitigating for greenhouse gas emissions. Well-designed carbon sequestration and other ecosystem services projects can also help in adaption to climate change.

- **Local foods movement grows.** According to the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service, “North Carolina is home to more than 200 farmers' markets and tailgate markets, and the number grows every season. Growth in these direct markets has been phenomenal in North Carolina, following a national trend.”<sup>1</sup> Demand for local foods should increase support for farmland conservation in North Carolina.
- **National security is linked to conservation.** Since 2001, national security considerations include global climate change and food supply. In addition, North Carolina has been successful partnering with military installations on conservation projects that provide wildlife habitat, buffer military bases, and increase public access for recreation.
- **North Carolinians value open space, and are willing to pay for it.** From 1999 to present, 36 municipal or county open space bond referendums were held in North Carolina, of which 83 percent passed<sup>2</sup>.

*What has not changed over the course of the Million Acre Initiative?*

- **Environmental health is linked to human health.** Humans need clean water and clean air, and land protection in North Carolina has focused in particular on water quality. There is also a significant body of literature corresponding to scientific research that supports the health-based benefits of parks, trails and open space.
- **North Carolina’s population continues to grow.** We are losing open space. The N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services notes loss of 400,000 farmland acres from 2004-08.<sup>3</sup>
- **People enjoy visiting parks and natural areas.** The N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation reported a record attendance in 2009 of 14.16 million visits, a jump of 13 percent over the previous year, and up 5 percent from the previous record set in 2007<sup>4</sup>. Declines in open space coupled with population growth mean that remaining open space lands are shared among greater numbers of people.
- **Conservation makes economic sense.** While people largely support conservation, funding is always a challenge, especially in difficult economic times. However, it is cheaper and easier to protect important ecosystem functions and services, such as water quality in a stream, than it is to try to restore heavily polluted or non-functioning systems. And restoration is not guaranteed; at times we do not get something back that has been lost, no matter how much money and effort are expended.

## Looking Ahead

In looking ahead, it is important to note where we are. The year 2009 yielded low conservation gains – the lowest of any year during the Million Acre Initiative. A historically bad economy forced tough choices to fill budget gaps. Money that had been appropriated to the state conservation trust funds for acquisition of land was moved elsewhere in the budget, including \$115.5 million transferred out of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. The Natural Heritage Trust Fund lost \$2.8 million and the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund lost \$6 million. Past Million Acre reports have highlighted how vital these trust funds are to conservation in North Carolina, and that the demand or need for these funds is much greater than what is available. This year, CWMTF has received more than \$270 million in grant requests,

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<sup>1</sup> N.C. Cooperative Extension Web site. “Shop at Farmers' Markets, Tailgate Markets and Roadside Stands” Retrieved Aug. 13, 2010. Available at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/content/shoplocally>.

<sup>2</sup> Trust for Public Land LandVote Database. Retrieved Aug.12, 2010. Available at <http://www.conservationalmanac.org/secure/almanac/southeast/nc/lvdata.html>.

<sup>3</sup> 2009 Agricultural Statistics. Retrieved Aug.13, 2010. Available at <http://www.ncagr.gov/stats/2009AgStat/AgStat2009.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> “State Parks Report Record Attendance in 2009” N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation Press release Jan 8, 2010.

including \$132 million in proposed acquisitions, for its 2010 grant cycle. Like other years, the request for funds far exceeds the amount it will have to award.<sup>5</sup>

As in previous years, the small amount of available federal funding for conservation has placed the burden of land conservation on the state of North Carolina. However, there is initiative at the federal level to restore Land and Water Conservation Fund funding to its full level. Other interesting things to look for include the role carbon sequestration will play in open space conservation. Perhaps other ecosystem service market-based measures will have a major impact on land conservation.

Given the uncertainty of economic and political futures, and recognizing that there may be a lag in conservation funds in the short-term, efforts to conserve land will need to be creative, flexible and remain poised to take advantage, selectively, of opportunities as they become available. These criteria place an emphasis on two things – planning and partnerships. Both help in effective conservation; planning to guide conservation of the most important places, and partnerships to stretch limited resources to make projects possible, and help innovative ideas be realized.

### *Planning*

When the Million Acre Initiative began in January 1999, approximately 2.8 million acres — 9 percent of the state — was permanently protected in North Carolina. At least 683,460 additional acres were permanently protected through December 2009. Upon reaching the million acre goal, (which should be around 2015, at the current rate), North Carolina will contain at least 3.8 million acres of permanently protected open space through federal, state and local governments, and private, nonprofit groups. That's approximately 12 percent of the state's 31 million acres of land. How much is enough? Enough, that is, to protect water quality, provide outdoor recreation opportunities for a growing public, provide local food and to provide sufficient habitat to sustain North Carolina's native wildlife. This is not a question with an easy answer. Conservation should be strategic, which is why the One NC *Naturally* planning tool exists, to help guide conservation efforts.

The statewide Conservation Planning Tool (CPT) was developed by the staff of the N.C. Natural Heritage Program for One North Carolina *Naturally* and introduced in 2007. The planning tool 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** are the natural processes that support life on earth, and the assessment attempts to map 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** address the essential landscape functions that support agriculture, forestry, fisheries, water supply protection, recreation and open space. Each of these assessments consists of a GIS data layer, which can be used on its own or in concert with the others. The CPT is available through an online interactive map viewer on the One NC *Naturally* Web site, as well as through data downloads for users with GIS software. Assessment development continues to be an iterative process, with updates every six months.

The goal of the Conservation Planning Tool is to be 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 planning tool highlights opportunities for collaborative conservation that will contribute to sustaining the most significant natural resources across

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<sup>5</sup> Land for Tomorrow. "2010 Green Book." Retrieved August 10, 2010. Available at <[http://www.landfortomorrow.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/919f2bf5f8c6858f149ddae88d53789c/misc/gb\\_combined.pdf](http://www.landfortomorrow.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/919f2bf5f8c6858f149ddae88d53789c/misc/gb_combined.pdf)>

the state. 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.

### *Partnerships*

As the current reporting period concludes, efforts to protect critical lands and landscapes will continue, and the goal of one million additional acres of permanently protected open space will be met. Several established regional partnerships have demonstrated success. The Sandhills Conservation Partnership, which celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2010, claims credit for 25,000 acres of lands protected through its efforts, including a new state park (Carvers Creek), additional Wildlife Resource Commission game lands, and other open spaces.

In a recent assessment of the Sandhills Conservation Partnership, participants, (which include federal and state resource agencies, military installations, private landowners, nonprofit conservation organizations and researchers) responded to a survey that the Sandhills Conservation Partnership has had a very positive impact. Partners noted numerous benefits, including: project support; information-sharing; increased internal recognition; stronger interagency relationships; direct funding, as well as leverage; increased training; demonstrated success; access to expertise; scientific credibility; improved communication; access to GIS data; and, knowledge gained.

Other partnerships have also demonstrated conservation success, and not just in terms of acres protected. They each have completed important protection projects, and each of the partnerships is also leading in some individual way. For instance, partners in the Onslow Bight Conservation Forum have protected almost 70,000 acres during the Million Acre Initiative, but have also recently established the Onslow Bight Stewardship Alliance, a memorandum of understanding between interested land-managing agencies and organizations that will work to increase the capacity for and reduce obstacles to conducting prescribed burning, and allow land managers to cooperate across ownership boundaries. The Cape Fear Arch Conservation Collaboration is a diverse coalition that includes local governments among its partner members, and has set ambitious short-term conservation goals in North Carolina's rapidly developing Southeast Coastal Plain. The Greater Uwharrie Conservation Partnership is another partnership that continues to move conservation forward in its region, and has been one of the leaders in use of the Green Growth Toolbox developed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. The Chatham Conservation Partnership has set out to develop and implement strategies for a community conservation vision that builds awareness, protection and stewardship of Chatham County's natural resources. These conservation partnerships, and others, will continue in their efforts to meet their various specific goals, which include quality of life, habitat conservation, buffering military installations from incompatible uses, sustainable economic development and other public benefits.

### **Conclusion**

North Carolina's population is expected to increase by 50 percent in the next 25 years, and some of North Carolina's counties are among the fastest growing in the United States. With this growth, agricultural and natural lands are converted to residential and commercial development, making the Million Acre Initiative as important as ever. With the help of dozens of public and private partners, significant progress has been made toward the Million Acre goal. Coordinated planning efforts such as the statewide Conservation Planning Tool have made progress prioritizing areas for conservation in order to maximize the long-term value of investment in conservation lands. Even though it will take longer than anticipated to achieve the *quantitative* Million Acre goal, we have made significant progress towards the more valuable *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). We plan to continue working toward the larger goal as well as tracking the progress.

### Acres Under Permanent Protection

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

<b>State Agency</b>	<b>category</b>	Acres Protected 1/99 - 12/07	Acres Protected 1/08 - 12/08	Subtotal through 12/08	Acres Protected 1/09 - 12/09	"Million Acres" total
<i>DENR - FOREST RESOURCES</i>	state forest or easement	7,978	1,640	9,618	1,048	10,666
<i>DENR - SOIL AND WATER (*)</i>	CREP	4,727	291	5,017	383	5,400
	hog farm buyout	1,843	33	1,876		1,876
	other protected lands		242	242		242
<i>WILDLIFE RESOURCES</i>	game lands	209,427	16,831	226,258	9,550	235,808
<i>DENR - Ecosystem Enhancement Program</i>	wetlands & riparian mitigation	14,172	889	15,061	689	15,750
<i>DENR - PARKS AND REC.</i>	state park	39,830	3,295	43,125	5,806	48,931
	state natural area	9,039	299	9,338	518	9,856
	state trails	1,028	762	1,790	180	1,970
	state rec area	2	0	2		2
<i>DENR - COASTAL MNGMT.</i>	coastal reserves	28,961	23	28,984		28,984
	submerged lands	0	0	0		0
<i>DoA&amp;CS - PLANT INDUSTRY</i>	state nature preserve	10,388	354	10,742	60	10,803
	other lands	0	0	0		
<i>DCR - HISTORIC SITES</i>	state historic sites	1,223	194	1,418	173	1,591
<i>STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM</i>	university property	0	0	0		0
SUBTOTALS		328,617	24,854	353,471	18,407	371,878
<b>Local Governments</b>						
CITY AND COUNTY GOVERNMENTS (**)	parklands, greenways, watershed protection, etc.	27,872	3,460	31,332	2,480	33,812
SUBTOTALS		27,872	3,460	31,332	2,480	33,812
<b>Federal Agency</b>						
US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE	national wildlife refuge	12,813	119	12,931	399	13,330
USDA FOREST SERVICE(***)	national forests	7,135	10	7,145	64	7,209
USDA-NRCS WETLAND RESERVE PROGRAM	wetlands reserve	17,312	3,925	21,237	624	21,861
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE	national park	7,855	301	8,156		8,156
SUBTOTALS		45,115	4,354	49,469	1,087	50,556
<b>Local Land Trusts</b>						
NC LAND TRUSTS (****)	protected lands	133,408	15,151	148,559	17,383	165,942
SUBTOTALS		133,408	15,151	148,559	17,383	165,942
<b>Other Conservation Groups</b>						
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY(*****)	nature preserves	37,096	4,736	41,832	731	42,563
AUDUBON SOCIETY	nature preserves	0	0	0		0
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST	farmland	0	0	0		0
PRESERVATION NC	historic preservation	755	25	780	104	884
NC COASTAL FEDERATION	nature preserves	9,972	204	10,176	59	10,235
DUCKS UNLIMITED	waterfowl habitat	7,247	343	7,590		7,590
SUBTOTALS		55,070	5,308	60,378	894	61,273
<b>TOTALS</b>		590,083	53,126	643,209	40,251	683,460

\*Other Protected Lands include land acquired to form Eagle Island Conservation Area.

\*\*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.

\*\*\*\*Twenty-five local land trusts that regularly partner with the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. Local land trusts also conveyed 1,641 acres to local, state, and federal governments in 2009.

\*\*\*\*\*The Nature Conservancy protected a total of 2,498 acres in 2009. Of those acres, 1,767 are expected to transfer to State ownership.