

Conservationists look to a better 2010

Conservationists hopeful after N.C. took back millions in '09

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N.C. conservationists hope for a recovery this year after a 2009 that saw state land-protection money dry up.

That's the theme of a report released Thursday by Land for Tomorrow, a statewide conservation coalition.

Three state trust funds that make conservation grants had to turn over \$124million to help close a state budget shortfall. Grants were delayed, creating a backlog of projects.

Adding to the frustration of conservationists is that land prices have dropped and tracts once slated for development are now available.

"It is a great time for opportunities, but unfortunately along with a souring economy our revenues are drying up," said Richard Rogers, executive director of the state Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

The fund helps pay for land acquisition, sewage-treatment and stormwater projects.

Clean Water money helped protect nearly 38,000 acres a year since it was created in 1996. But last year the fund awarded no grants and considered no new applications.

"We basically skipped the whole cycle," Rogers said.

Gov. Bev Perdue took \$115 million from the fund, which is financed by the legislature, to help close the state's budget gap. The state Parks and Recreation Trust Fund also lost \$6 million; the Natural Heritage Trust Fund, \$2.8 million.

As Parks and Recreation's revenue dropped 40 percent, its land-acquisition grants to local governments fell by more than half, protecting 347 acres.

Legislators gave the Clean Water fund \$50 million this spending year (which ends June 30), and Perdue's budget includes another \$50 million next year. But \$40 million still must be paid on grants approved in 2008, leaving little money for new projects. Applications seeking \$248 million have come in this year.

Protection of one of Lake Norman's biggest undeveloped tracts, 589 acres in Catawba County, was nearly lost when the Clean Water money was taken last year.



Deer tracks mark the soft sand bank of Mountain Creek just above Lake Norman in Terrell. The area is in the process of being preserved in its natural state by the Catawba Lands Conservancy. JEFF WILLHELM - jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

The Charlotte-based Catawba Lands Conservancy, working with Catawba County, had an option to buy the land that expired in 2009. Then its \$2.6million grant from the fund was put on hold.



A black snake searches for a meal along the bank of Mountain Creek. The Catawba Lands Conservancy is in the process of preserving the natural state of the area around the creek. JEFF WILLHELM - jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

The conservancy scrambled to save the deal. Landowner Crescent Resources agreed to extend the purchase option through 2010. Duke Energy, which partly owns Crescent, agreed to extend the discounted purchase price. Crescent, itself in bankruptcy since last summer, agreed to take an additional \$500,000 off the price.

That made the deal more attractive to the Clean Water board, which approved \$2.1 million. The deal is expected to finally close in late summer.

"There were a lot of gyrations involved to keep that project alive," said Dave Cable, the conservancy's executive director. Catawba County will manage the tract as a nature preserve.

Despite a dearth of grant sources, the conservancy notched some success last year. It became one of the first three N.C. land trusts to win national accreditation by the Land Trust Alliance. Legislators also passed a priority for conservationists, a bill that makes it harder to condemn land protected by conservation easements.

But the group closed only four acquisitions in 2009, preserving about half its typical 600 acres a year.

"We're going to make that up this year," Cable said. The trust is on track to protect more than 1,200 acres this year.

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