

Millions go to conservation trusts

[By Scott Nicholson](#)

North Carolina's land and water conservation trust funds provided more than \$43 million for projects in Watauga County in 2008, according to the annual "Green Book" report released recently by Land for Tomorrow.

The majority of the funding went to Elk Knob State Park in the Long Hope Valley, as well as Grandfather Mountain, where the state paid \$12 million for 2,600 acres.

The state's four conservation trust funds –the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, Natural Heritage Trust Fund, and Parks and Recreation Trust Fund — have spent \$65.1 million in Watauga County to help conserve land and water.

"Conservation funding is a major economic driver across North Carolina," said Katherine Skinner of the Nature Conservancy, and a Land for Tomorrow Executive Committee member.

"The bottom line is that conservation funding is necessary to keep our state moving ahead."

The High Country Conservancy worked with four local landowners last year to expand critical habitat around Elk Knob State Park, adding 62 acres containing oaks, cove forest and northern hardwood habitats.

Elk Knob is one of the most recent additions to the state-park system, established in 2003 and encompassing nearly 3,000 acres in Ashe and Watauga counties. The High Country Conservancy hopes to help add 350 more acres to the park this year.

"The views these projects protect are beautiful, but the protected land is also strategically significant for the future shape of the park," said Elk Knob park superintendent Larry Trivette.

"The local families who worked with High County Conservancy have benefited the park now and well into the future."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the N.C. General Assembly created the trust funds to protect water quality, farms and wildlife, and to create and expand parks.

They are funded through a combination of appropriations, personalized license plate sales and portions of the deed transfer tax.

Some conservationists say while funding has expanded, it's not keeping up with the need to protect vanishing habitat and clean-water sources.

Last year, the four trust funds received 524 applications from local governments, state agencies and conservation nonprofits requesting a total of \$354.1 million and provided funding of \$214 million.

According to Land For Tomorrow, more than 300,000 acres of forests, farms, stream banks, wildlife habitats and

wetlands have been developed since 2005.

North Carolina continues to lead the nation in the loss of family farms, and 3,300 miles of streams don't meet clean water standards.