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Foothills Conservancy sells Catawba Falls trail property to U.S. Forest Service

By Mike Conley

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At a special dedication ceremony in Old Fort, the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, a regional land trust, formally announced that it has sold to the U.S. Forest Service 88 acres which will provide long-sought public access to Catawba Falls in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Old Fort.

The U.S. Forest Service acquired the land for \$713,000 using federal Land and Water Conservation Funds secured by U.S. Reps. Heath Shuler and David Price in legislation signed into law last December. The ceremony, held at the Mountain Gateway Museum, was attended by Shuler, Old Fort officials, McDowell County officials, state Sen. Joe Sam Queen, representatives of the Foothills Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, representatives from both U.S. Sens. Richard Burr and Kay Hagan were on hand as well for the event.

"Catawba Falls is a natural treasure that belongs to the people, and the people will now have full public access to it," said Shuler. "This beautiful area is a prime destination for hiking, fishing, and hunting. Access to this natural gem will encourage tourism and boost the economy of McDowell County and western North Carolina."

"Catawba Falls has always been one of our state's most popular natural resources, but it has not always been accessible," said Price. "I am pleased that I was able to help secure the federal investment needed to preserve the Catawba Falls area for future generations."

Foothills Conservancy discounted the sale to the U.S. Forest Service by \$124,000, made possible by a generous contribution to the conservancy of \$124,000 from Fred and Alice Stanback of Salisbury.

"We're glad to see it finally happen," said Fred Stanback. "The Conservancy has done a lot of good work

preserving land all around."

The conservancy combined the gift with monies from its own revolving loan fund and a loan from the Conservation Fund, a national organization, to initially acquire 65 acres of the 88-acre tract in 2005. In 2007, an anonymous private lender stepped up to help Foothills Conservancy quickly purchase an adjoining 23 acres, which controlled the access to Catawba Falls when the tract was listed for sale.

"At long last, the public is assured access to Catawba Falls, a natural treasure in McDowell County," said Tom Kenney, Foothills Conservancy's land protection director. "Thanks to the efforts of many before us, Catawba Falls has been a part of Pisgah National Forest since 1989, but lack of trail access has kept people from seeing where the Catawba River begins. Foothills Conservancy is honored to play a role in opening the door to one of North Carolina's most spectacular waterfalls."

Local officials are happy that the public access to the falls has finally been secured after years of effort. This means more tourists and outdoor enthusiasts will come to Old Fort. That will also boost the town's economy.

"The town is proud to be the gateway to western North Carolina and the mountains," said Mayor Garland Norton.

"This has been a long time coming," said Commission Chairman David Walker. "Catawba Falls is a tremendous asset. Along with Point Lookout Trail, Catawba Falls will draw more tourists to this town." Companion legislation is pending which will expand Pisgah National Forest's official boundary to include the newly purchased tract and a portion of the original Catawba Falls tract that remained outside the national forest's proscribed boundary. The legislation passed the House with full bi-partisan support after being introduced by Shuler and cosponsored by all 13 members of the North Carolina Congressional delegation. A similar bill is pending in the Senate, co-introduced by Hagan, a Democrat, and Burr, a Republican.

"Acquiring this tract has been a priority for North Carolina's National Forests for more than a decade," said Marisue Hilliard, supervisor of N.C. National Forests. "We thank Foothills Conservancy, Congressman Shuler and Price, and Senators Hagan and Burr for supporting this acquisition and the boundary expansion." Hilliard also unveiled a plaque that will be placed at Catawba Falls in memory of Col. Daniel Weissiger Adams whose family owned Catawba Falls prior to the Forest Service's purchase of the falls in 1989. That plaque has waited for more than 20 years to be placed where the public can see it. Adams' grandson Stuart Adams Robinson was on hand for the unveiling.

John Crockett, district ranger with the Forest Service's Grandfather District, said his agency plans to build a parking area at the end of Catawba River Road. That will allow the public an even easier access to the trail which leads to the falls.

"The only limitation is parking at this point," he added. "People can go to the falls today."

Funding for the 88-acre purchase represents the first Land and Water Conservation Fund appropriation to the U.S. Forest Service for a North Carolina project since 2002, when federal funds added lands adjacent to the Linville Gorge National Wilderness Area and above Lake James to Pisgah National Forest – acquisitions also led by Foothills Conservancy. LWCF funds were also allocated this year for part of another N.C. National Forest acquisition – Kings Mountain in the Uwharrie National Forest.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has strong bi-partisan support as the primary program supporting strategic additions and improvements to national forests, parks – including the Blue Ridge Parkway, and wildlife refuges. The LWCF program was established in 1965 and uses royalties from federal oil and gas leases along the Outer Continental Shelf to fund outdoor recreation and conservation land acquisition projects.

"The need for public access to Catawba Falls is a great example of why conservation funds are needed now," Kenney said. "In addition to providing a public trail to the falls and protecting the Catawba River near its source, funding for projects like this creates opportunities for local governments and groups to develop tourism destinations and to use outdoor recreation on our public lands as a magnet to boost and benefit their

economies."

Since 2005, Foothills Conservancy has permanently conserved 1,384 additional acres which adjoin Pisgah National Forest in the headwaters of the Catawba River and continues its conservation efforts in the area. This work has been accomplished with the support of many partners at the local, state and federal levels, including private landowners and the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

Based in Morganton, Foothills Conservancy is a non-profit regional land trust working with willing landowners and communities to protect significant natural areas and open spaces, including watersheds, forests and farm land, across the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains and their foothills in eight counties: Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, Lincoln, McDowell, and Rutherford.

Since 1995, Foothills Conservancy has protected more than 45,000 acres by acquiring lands for state parks at South Mountains, Lake James and Chimney Rock; for state game lands, including those at Wilson Creek and below the Linville Gorge; and for Pisgah National Forest and the Blue Ridge Parkway. In addition, Foothills Conservancy has assisted private landowners who wished to permanently protect farm and forest lands with conservation agreements.

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