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Big Blue Ridge Mountains tract protected

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An 8,000-acre tract that is the largest privately-owned wilderness in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains has been placed under contract to conservation groups for \$33 million, they said today.

The Hendersonville-based Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and the Conservation Fund, a national group, said they bought the Transylvania County property from Champion Cattle and Tree Farms. Champion is part of a corporation owned by the family of former U.S. Rep. Charles Taylor, R-N.C.

Taylor was the conservative chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Environment. His family-owned businesses agreed to sell the property at 40 percent to 50 percent below its appraised value.

The tract lies atop the Blue Ridge escarpment, where the mountains rise dramatically from the Piedmont near the N.C.-S.C. line. The escarpment is one of the world's most biologically diverse "hot spots."

The land holds native brook trout, forests, rare bogs and waterfalls. It covers most of the headwaters and main stem of the East Fork of the French Broad River.

Nine miles of the Foothills Trail, an east-west hiking path, winds through it, linking Caesar's Head State Park in South Carolina and North Carolina's Gorges State Park.

The conservation groups plan to convey the tract into public ownership, opening the land to public hunting, fishing and hiking.

"This is the last opportunity we will have to acquire such a sizable and significant tract in the Southern Appalachians for conservation ownership ever again," said Dick Luddington of the Conservation Fund, crediting the Taylor family.

Charles Taylor served eight House terms before losing a reelection bid to Rep. Heath Shuler, D-N.C., in 2006. His family began acquiring the East Fork tract in the early 1980s.

“When my wife, my sons and I began to talk about what we wanted to see happen to the property, it became clear that conserving it for the public was an idea we all supported,” Taylor said in a statement.

The conservation groups will raise money to pay the \$33 million purchase price. Potential donors, they said, include philanthropists Fred and Alice Stanback of Salisbury. An application has also been made to the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund for \$5.4 million.



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