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Land coalition on track

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A coalition of 10 North Carolina land trusts is on track to complete an effort to protect 50,000 acres of mountain land by the end of this year.

The Blue Ridge Forever coalition started the project in 2006, and so far has protected 329 properties making up 45,046 acres.

The bad economy has been both a blessing and a curse, said Walter Clarke, the executive director of Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, based in West Jefferson. "Land values are starting to come down ... because land is not moving (on the real-estate market). There are some real deals to be had, but there are not the public dollars available."

Private funding has suffered, too, since the campaign began. Still, at least 75 percent of landowners in the campaign donated at least a portion of property.

Land trusts provide permanent protection for lands that have things people want to preserve, such as clean drinking water, wildlife, vistas or other features valued for conservation. They work with landowners to negotiate conservation agreements or to acquire the land for protection.

Eric Hiegl, the executive director of the High Country Conservancy, based in Boone, agreed that the economic landscape has changed since the campaign began.

"But the generosity of individuals who have donated land or given financial support has been a constant," he said.

He points to recent successes such as adding 10 more acres to Bear Paw State Natural Area in Watauga County, which brings Bear Paw to 355 acres. High Country Conservancy has helped protect two tracts totaling 320 acres on Snake Mountain, part of the new Elk Knob State Park.

A big success arranged with help of the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust has been the state's purchase of 1,100 acres of land on Pond Mountain, which will become a new state park.

The agencies hope to finish the Pond Mountain acquisitions this year, adding 600 acres.

Last year, the 10 land trusts protected 10,257 acres in Western North Carolina. They need to protect a final 4,954 acres by the end of this year to meet the Blue Ridge Forever coalition goal.

The other members of Blue Ridge Forever are Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, based in

Hendersonville; Conservation Trust for North Carolina, in Raleigh; Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, in Morganton; Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, in Highlands; Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, in Franklin; National Committee for the New River, in West Jefferson; Pacolet Conservancy Area, in Tryon; and Southern Appalachians Highlands Conservancy, in Asheville.

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