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Game land purchases in N.C. could diminish

Money from 2 state trust funds falling victim to downturn

By Jack Horan
Special Correspondent
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Wildlife technician Brett Walker paints boundary markers on a tree at the Holly Shelter Game Land in Pender County. N.C. WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION PHOTO

More Information

- [Game lands maps](#)

A book of game lands maps is available for \$10 at www.ncwildlife.org or by calling 866-945-3746.

The Wildlife Resources Commission on Wednesday approved the following changes to hunting regulations for 2009-10. They:

Allow archery hunting on private land on Sunday as well as falconry on Sunday. The ban on gun hunting on Sunday remains; only the legislature can change that law.

Allow crossbows for all hunters. They are now restricted to those with arm disabilities.

Abolish the 10-county, week-long, either-sex winter turkey season in January.

Expand the muzzleloader season for deer from one to two weeks. The commission turned down a controversial proposal to expand from one to two months the gun season for deer in the Piedmont and Foothills. Complete list: www.ncwildlife.org.

Six months after completing the largest conservation land deal in North Carolina's history, state purchases of game lands for hunting and fishing may be dropping off.

The Wildlife Resources Commission has been buying an average of 15,000 acres a year, making it state government's largest conservation landowner, with acreage double that of state parks.

But money from two state trust funds, the primary cash sources, is falling victim to the recession.

Two weeks ago, Gov. Bev Perdue took \$100 million from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund for grants made last year, including \$5.3 million for two game lands acquisitions. Perdue diverted the money to a reserve to help offset the state's projected \$2 million budget shortfall.

With the shortfall, it's an open question whether the legislature will give the clean water fund a full, \$100 million appropriation for 2009.

While Perdue hasn't taken money from the Natural Heritage Trust Fund, nonetheless "we're concerned about that possibility," said executive director Lisa Riegel. She said revenues may reach \$12 million this year compared to \$24 million two years ago. Natural Heritage depends largely on a real estate transfer tax and home sales are down.

In October, in the largest such deal ever in the state, the commission added the last of 6,500 of 66,000 acres of International Paper tracts on the Chowan, Roanoke and Tar rivers in the northeast and Juniper Creek near Wilmington for game lands. Another 10,000 acres went to other state agencies and conservation buyers in the \$80 million purchase.

"I think it's a fair statement that that was a once-in-a-lifetime acquisition," said Isaac Harrold, who oversees land purchases for the commission.

All told, the commission has 2.1 million acres in game lands, most of which are leased from landowners such as national forests, electric utilities and timber companies.

Of that, the commission owns 471,000 acres. They include Holly Shelter north of Wilmington (64,743 acres); Sandhills near Southern Pines (61,225) and South Mountains near Shelby (19,775).

As private hunting lands shrink, either lost to development or to hunt clubs, game lands provide a place for the public to hunt, fish and, on some areas, camp and hike.

The wildlife commission stepped up its game lands program when the legislature created the clean

water fund in 1996 and the natural heritage fund in 1988. Clean water pays for land along creeks and rivers for undeveloped water-quality buffers. Natural heritage pays for significant natural areas or tracts that connect existing game lands. They often combine on a single tract. To date, they've paid for game lands costing \$155 million.

Money can come from other sources. The Department of Defense, for example, paid half the 3,455-acre Stones Creek Game Land because it wanted an undeveloped buffer next to Camp Lejeune Marine Corps base near Jacksonville.

Harrold said he depends on local land trusts for recommendations for tracts from willing sellers. Qualifying properties go to the 19-member wildlife commission. Last month, commissioners gave the go-ahead to pursue acquiring 14 tracts totaling 18,222 acres. On Wednesday, they OK'd two more tracts with 410 acres.

He said big or connecting tracts rank higher than smaller or isolated ones. "When we prioritize, we look at the future potential to enlarge (a game land) or connect it to existing habitats," he said.

Harrold said the agency strikes a deal for one of every two tracts. About 20 with 20,890 acres have gotten some money and await completion of funding. Another 91 with 79,052 acres have gotten none. The latter backlog includes Hickorynut Mountain south of Old Fort, approved in 2005. Hickorynut Mountain, 8,000 acres in two tracts, is believed to be the largest private property for sale in Western North Carolina.

Until the economy improves, less money will be available for new game lands. "Our expectations are we will not be receiving the same level of funding," Harrold said.

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