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## Budget woes slow state land conservation efforts

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By [THE ASSOCIATED PRESS](#)

LAKE LURE (AP) — North Carolina's status as one of the few Southern states with public money set aside for land conservation may be in jeopardy thanks to persistent budget woes that have created a backlog for the agencies that preserve open land.

Groups that hope to preserve tens of thousands of acres across the state are keeping their fingers crossed that the General Assembly will leave the \$50 million in the budget proposed by Gov. Beverly Perdue for the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, the largest of several state trust funds used for land conservation.

If not, 2010 could look a lot like last year, when the fund completed essentially no conservation work as \$115 million was taken from it to help balance the state budget. That created a backlog the fund is still trying to get through. Although there are 227 applications pending for 2010, the fund is still working through projects from 2008.

"That really set us back quite a ways," said Debbie Crane, a spokeswoman for Land for Tomorrow, a coalition of groups that backs water and land conservation. "There is no way to sugarcoat it. It was a terrible year for conservation, but it was also a terrible year for the economy in North Carolina as a whole."

Right now, the backlog affects groups like the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, which paid \$2.6 million for a 1,527-acre tract of land around Weed Patch Mountain, north of Lake Lure.

The group got it for a third of its appraised value in December after the developer that owned the property filed for bankruptcy. Now the conservancy wants to make its preservation permanent by selling it to the government for inclusion in a park, but the state may not be able to come up with the \$2 million for the purchase.

"We didn't want to pass up the opportunity, because it's a wonderful conservation opportunity at a price we haven't seen in years," said Kieran Roe, executive director of the conservancy. "But it raises the question of when we'll be able to make the conservation permanent, and that will rely on state funds."

Right now, state funds and conservation groups alike can only watch the General Assembly and hope lawmakers agree with Perdue on the importance of keeping open land in North Carolina.

"We're glad the governor included it in her budget and we feel like we've gotten some positive feedback from legislators in making sure it stays in," said Richard Rogers, executive director of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, "but these times are unique and it's difficult to tell."

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