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2 land-conservation groups plan to merge

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Two land-conservation organizations that, between them, have protected more than 15,000 acres in Northwest North Carolina are merging, officials said yesterday.

Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, based in West Jefferson, and High Country Conservancy, based in Boone, are joining to form a new organization called Blue Ridge Conservancy.

The merger will help the groups better manage public and private money during challenging economic times, said Walter Clark, who will be the executive director of the new conservancy. Clark has served as the executive director of the Blue Ridge trust.

"The board and staff of Blue Ridge Conservancy feel that we have taken a huge positive step forward in fulfilling our stewardship responsibilities to the lands we serve and the donors who make our work possible," Clark said.

No jobs will be eliminated because of the merger, he said.

But the change will eliminate duplicated administrative costs and overlapping service areas and save money on holding conservancy functions, said John Turner, the president of the new organization.

"The merger of these two highly respected groups has created an enhanced organization with the capacity to advance land preservation in our northwestern mountains to an unprecedented level," Turner said in a statement.

Both the Boone and West Jefferson offices will remain open for now, although that could change.

The Blue Ridge Conservancy will serve Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey counties. The group will work with private landowners who voluntarily protect their land with conservation easements that preclude development, but allow the land to remain privately owned, be sold or passed on to heirs.

Each of the founding organizations has had notable recent successes.

Blue Ridge worked with the state to create the Pond Mountain game lands, which will open in the near future for deer hunting, and in the off-season, horseback riding on designated trails. The property, once owned by a Christmas-tree farmer, has about 17 miles of springs and streams that feed into creeks that flow into the New River.

High Country helped establish the Bear Paw State Natural Area in 2008, with an initial 350 acres. The land is north of Grandfather Mountain and near Valle Crucis, where the group has also established a number of conservation easements.

High County had its origins in 1995, when a group of students at Appalachian State University formed the Watauga Land Trust in response to concerns about development on Howard's Knob in Boone. The organization changed its name two years later to High County Conservancy and expanded to serve Ashe, Avery and Watauga counties.

Blue Ridge was formed in 1997 to protect rural landscapes and farmland in Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey counties.

The new Blue Ridge Conservancy will protect farmland and land with scenic views or ecological value.

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Protecting farmland and more,/h3>

The Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust and the High Country Conservancy are uniting to form the new Blue Ridge Conservancy. Between them, the organizations have protected thousands of acres, including:

â€ Alleghany County: 3,502 acres.

â€ Ashe County: 3,790 acres.

â€ Avery County: 531 acres.

â€ Mitchell County: 65 acres.

â€ Watauga County: 2,862 acres.

â€ Wilkes County: 4,015 acres.

â€ Yancey County: 484 acres.

For more information, go to www.blueridgeconservancy.org.