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Buncombe County works to get farms protected; NC Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler visits

By Nanci Bompey • May 27, 2010

LEICESTER — The past few years have been tough at Sycamore Valley Farm, but David Snelson is determined not to lose the land where his family has lived and worked since the late 1800s.

Snelson, a fifth-generation farmer, wouldn't even speak to **developers** who inquired about the farm off New Leicester Highway.

Instead, he purchased a conservation easement with the help of federal, state and county funds to ensure the land remains a farm for his son, grandson and future generations.

"I've grown up here and farmed the land all my life, and I want to see it remain farm land," said Snelson as he leaned across the counter of his farm stand. "Whether we're the ones farming it or someone else, we want to see it remain a farm."

Snelson and county officials shared the story with N.C. Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler on Wednesday afternoon to stress the importance of funding the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation **Trust Fund**, which gave \$345,000 toward protection of Snelson's farm.

Gov. Bev Perdue did not put any money for the trust **fund** into her proposed budget, nor did it show up in the Senate budget, although a bill moving through the state House of Representatives would appropriate \$2 million for the fund.

"Two million dollars is not going to go very far for the work we need to do in North Carolina," said Troxler, who helped establish the fund in 2005. "For every project we award money to in North Carolina there are 10 others we can't award money to."

Agriculture is North Carolina's No. 1 industry, but the state still leads the nation in the loss of farmland. Since 2002, the state has lost more than 6,000 farms and 600,000 acres of farmland.

The fund was established in 2005 to help stem that loss and help younger generations stay in farming. Western North Carolina has become one of its biggest beneficiaries. Projects in Buncombe County have received \$1.27 million in grants from the fund since 2006.

"It's really a main **funding** source outside of county budget money," said Maria Wise of the Buncombe County Soil and Water Conservation District. "Unless we have incredibly generous people donate their easement rights, we won't have as many options."

Along with preserving area farms, the **trust** fund money helped build the new livestock market in Canton and create the Buy Haywood Market Development Project.

It also helps to leverage federal, state and county dollars. The Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy used money from the trust fund to purchase an easement on Claxton Farm in Weaverville and received matching funds from Buncombe County.

"That really contributes to the local economy," said SAHC executive director Carl Silverstein. "It brings people to the community, and they go back out to other parts of the state or wherever they are from and they tell a story of this beautiful place."

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N.C. Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler, right, tours the farm of the Snelson family with Michael Snelson and his son Austin, Wednesday afternoon. (John Fletcher 5-26-10) (John Fletcher/fletcher@citizen-times.com)



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(L to R) NC Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler greets Austin, Michael, and David Snelson at their farm in Leicester Wednesday afternoon. (John Fletcher 5-26-10) (John Fletcher/fletcher@citizen-times.com)

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