

Published: Aug 15, 2009 04:10 AM

Modified: Aug 15, 2009 04:40 AM



Kurt Schlimme, left, of the Eno River Association and Rob Evans of the state agriculture department hike through land proposed for conservation in Durham's Hebron Road area.

JOHN ROTTET, Staff photo by John Rottet

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A hummingbird moth checks out some flowering swamp milkweed in the proposed addition to the plant conservation preserve along Hebron Road in Durham.

JOHN ROTTET, Staff photo by John Rottet

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## Hard times dry up conservation funds

### Land-saving deals short-circuited

**BY LYNN BONNER, Staff writer**

DURHAM - North Carolina has traditionally devoted more money than most other states in the Southeast to land conservation -- preserving wetlands and other natural areas, acquiring land for parks, protecting land around streams from building and parking.

But more than two dozen potential land conservation deals across North Carolina have been frozen in mid-handshake. The same economic conditions that may make some land more affordable have cut into the money available to complete such deals.

Land conservancies were hit hard in February when Gov. Beverly Perdue tapped special funds for purchases, including \$100 million from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, to pay the state's bills when North Carolina's budget deficit began to grow.

The legislature recently restored \$50 million a year for the next two years, but land conservancies are still struggling. Some had already taken out loans to purchase land after getting a commitment for money from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, money that now may not be available.

The Eno River Association, for example, had plans to buy 130 acres in northern Durham and give it to the state. Those plans were stymied when the Clean Water Management Trust Funds were taken. Now the deal is in jeopardy.

Robin Jacobs, the association's executive director, said she doubted they could raise enough money to cover the \$3.2 million cost.

"Without help from Clean Water, which has just been so important in conservation funding for the state, it's unlikely we'll be able to raise the money in the time frame we'd have to raise it," she said. The state has four trust funds to support land conservation: Clean Water; the National Heritage Trust Fund, which awards money to state agencies only; the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, which gives grants to state and local governments; and the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. Perdue pulled money from the parks and natural heritage funds in April.

#### Deals fall apart

Conservancies around the state felt the crunch, said Kevin Brice, president of the Triangle Land Conservancy.

Brice said the money problems stalled four of its deals. Among them was the planned purchase of land in Orange County with the help of about \$3 million in Clean Water money. "The lower funding levels for conservation the state needed to get down to are having a profound impact on conservation across the state," Brice said.

Conservancies seek private money, too, Brice said, but the recession makes it harder to raise private funds.

It is important to continue land conservation, even in a bad economy, said Reid Wilson, executive director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. The group assists the state's 25 local land trusts and is itself a land trust that focuses on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

In 2008, the state's local land trusts were able to protect more than 20,000 acres at 237 locations in North Carolina, according to Wilson. They protected almost 30,000 acres in 2007.

Keeping land around streams clear of buildings and parking lots helps drinking water stay cleaner, Wilson said, and the parkland purchased and farms preserved are important to state agriculture and tourism.

"If you don't preserve farms and other natural areas, both of those foundations of the state's economy will be severely undercut," he said.

#### Amid the muck, charm

The soggy acreage off Hebron Road in northern Durham has hidden charms for conservationists. Cub Creek, a feeder for the Eno River, runs through the property. And it is adjacent to 58 acres of state-owned land that is a rare plant habitat.

"It's a pretty cool site," said Kurt Schlimme, the Eno River Association's director of land stewardship. "There are not many tracts of this size to be protected."

New residential developments sit across the street and down the road. Conserving the land would make it easier for the state to execute the controlled burning needed to manage the land next door, said Rob Evans, coordinator for the plant conservation program in the state Department of Agriculture.

"It's a convenient natural boundary," Evans said of the property.

Years to recover

Conservationists predict it will be two years or more before state-supported land preservation fully rebounds.

The land trusts have been somewhat spoiled by working in a state that devotes more money to land preservation than almost any other in the southeast, Brice said.

Now they are thinking of ways to survive with less state support.

"We're going to dust off old strategies, reach out to land owners and ask them to consider a donation or a deep discount," he said. "We have to get creative."

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