



*Million*  
ACRE PLAN

# Million Acre Plan For North Carolina

## Executive Summary

### Governor Hunt's Challenge to North Carolina

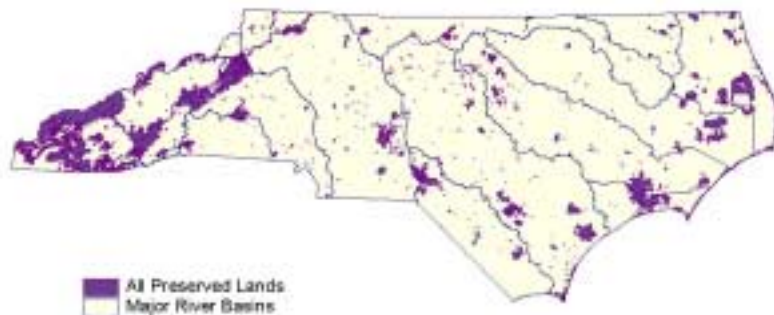
North Carolina's economic vitality is encouraging unprecedented growth – another 2 million people will be added to the state's current population of 7.6 million by 2020. Our state needs a green infrastructure of protected open space and farmland to complement this growth and development and to maintain our high quality of life. Therefore, Governor Hunt has challenged North Carolina to add one million acres to North Carolina's current assemblage of permanently conserved open space and farmland by the end of the year 2009.



### Background

Figure 1 shows the lands currently preserved in North Carolina, most of which are concentrated in the mountains and coastal areas. The majority of the 2.8 million acres preserved (8.6 percent of the state's land area) is owned by the federal government, with the remaining acreage under ownership of the state and local governments and non-profit organizations as shown in Figure 2. The Million Acres Initiative would increase North Carolina's acreage of protected lands by 35

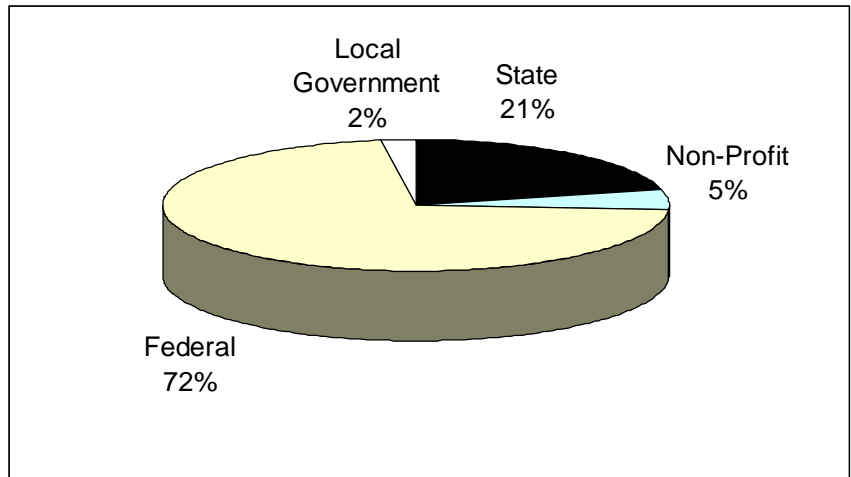
**Figure 1. All Preserved Lands in North Carolina**



percent over a ten-year period, so a total of 12 percent of the state's land area would be permanently set aside. Currently, the State of North Carolina spends over \$30 million per year on permanent open space protection. Such funding is complemented by investments of the federal and local governments -- including a number of recent local bond issues -- as well as private stewardship and donations.

In 1999, Governor Hunt's Interagency Task Force on Smart Growth found, through a series of public meetings across the state, that open space preservation was a primary citizen concern. The results of these public meetings led Governor Hunt to make his million acre challenge at the NC Smart Growth Commission on January 31, 2000. Developed in collaboration with a broad base of interested parties both inside and outside of state government, this Million Acre Plan presents a strategy for meeting Governor Hunt's challenge.

**Figure 2. Land Conserved in North Carolina by Owner**

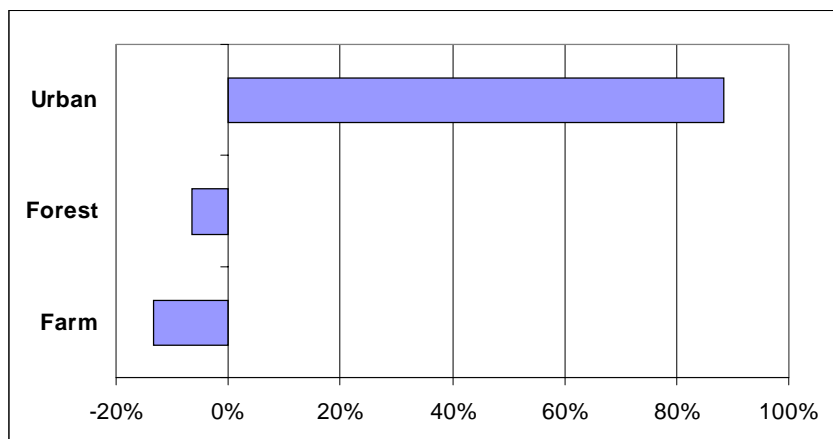


**Need**

The cost of open space conservation grows higher each year. Increasing open space conservation efforts now will help North Carolina to meet its economic, environmental, and quality of life goals. In particular, the need for open space conservation is demonstrated by the following facts:

- **Population.** North Carolina's population is expected to grow by 26% over the next 20 years, creating tremendous pressures to develop the open spaces of the state. At the same time, an expanding population also increases demand for open space and outdoor recreation opportunities.
- **Development of Open Spaces.** Forest and farms are being lost to development as shown in Figure 3, with an 88% increase in the urban areas of the state over a 15-year period. The average annual conversion rate of forests, farms and rural lands between 1992-1997 was 156,300 acres a year -- a 67% increase in the rate of land conversion recorded from 1982 to 1992. By 1997, 14.7% of North Carolina's land area was developed (USDA, 1999)

**Figure 3. Percent Change in NC Land Use, 1982 - 1997**



- **Environmental Loss.** 34 percent of North Carolina’s coastal wetlands have been altered in some way and no longer fulfill their natural function to protect water quality. Loss of open space around water supplies can put drinking water at risk. More pavement and impervious surfaces increases run-off water pollution. More than 50 percent of the Significant Natural Heritage Areas in North Carolina remain unprotected. Scenic vistas, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and greenspace in urban areas are all being lost to development.
- **Economic Loss.** North Carolina’s agriculture industry, including food, fiber, and forestry, is dependent on open spaces, and it contributes more than \$46 billion dollars to the state’s economy and employs 22 percent of the state’s workforce. Additionally, the 100-year flood plains of North Carolina’s rivers are better left undeveloped as illustrated by Hurricane Floyd flooding which caused billions of dollars in damage to lives and property. Over-development of open space and cultural sites also harms the 10-billion dollar tourist industry in North Carolina.

## Defining the Initiative

This initiative will focus on lands permanently protected through voluntary acquisition of fee title interest or conservation easements by federal, state, local, or private non-profit land managing organizations.

## Objectives

The Million Acre Initiative provides an alternative to unfettered conversion of farmland and forests to sprawl and development to meet the environmental, economic, and quality of life objectives listed below.

- Protect the quality of streams, rivers, lakes, estuaries, sounds, and coastal waters.
- Protect significant or sensitive natural areas, rare species, and wildlife habitat,
- Protect wetlands and riparian buffers.
- Protect drinking water supplies.
- Reduce risks to people and businesses from flooding.
- Protect forestland from conversion to non-forest uses.
- Protect farmland, especially small family farms, from conversion to non-farming uses.
- Provide public access to outdoor recreation including public waters.
- Protect scenic beauty.
- Protect significant archaeological, cultural, and historic sites.
- Protect urban greenspaces.



As North Carolina works toward this million acre goal, the state can conserve either a patchwork of lands or lands that are related to each other in a logical way. A statewide plan cannot be prescriptive about which objectives should be most important to a community, and thus, priorities for open space acquisition need to be set at the local or regional scale. For example, coastal communities may be most concerned about flood mitigation, piedmont communities may be most concerned about urban greenspaces, and mountain communities may be most concerned about scenic beauty. Priorities may also differ between urban and rural communities.

Unlike other trust funds and conservation programs, the farmland preservation program is relatively undeveloped. Thus, Governor Hunt and the NC Smart Growth Commission have afforded farmland preservation special attention. A proposal to expand the farmland preservation infrastructure for North Carolina is currently being jointly developed by DENR, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and Cooperative Extension. The Farmland Preservation Trust Fund should fund the conservation of both farmland and forestland.

## State Role

The Million Acre Initiative depends on widespread participation by numerous parties inside and outside of government to be successful. The State's role in the Million Acre Initiative should be as follows:

- **Encourage Private Stewardship.** The state should work with local governments, private land trusts, and others to educate landowners on the environmental and financial benefits of conserving their lands.
- **Support Existing Programs and Facilitate Coordination.** Many state and federal agencies, local governments, private organizations, and individuals have already initiated creative and productive efforts to preserve open space and farmland. The State's first priority should be to support, enhance, accelerate, and coordinate these successful programs, rather than to create new programs.
- **Infuse Capital into Existing Programs.** The State should take a leadership role in conserving open space by increasing funding to existing natural resource trust funds and by supporting the operational costs for management and coordination. However, the acquired lands should not be entirely state-funded. All parties must seek and use many sources of public and private funding as well as financial incentives. Also, North Carolina has a tremendous, and often untapped, financial resource in the potential for donations of lands and easements as a result of the stewardship ethic held by many landowners across the state.





- **Encourage Ownership of Land and Easements by Appropriate Parties.** The acquired lands and easements should not all be state-owned, as local or federal governments are at times in a better position to own and manage land. Often land can remain in private hands with easements owned by government agencies or non-profit land trusts.

## **Major Recommendations**

The Million Acre Plan identifies a number of recommendations to help North Carolina achieve open space conservation goals. These recommendations have grown out of a set of principles developed in collaboration with a broad range of interested parties. As North Carolina needs to take steps now to enhance its land conservation efforts, some recommendations need to be acted upon in the near term, including the Short Session of the 2000 General Assembly. Other recommendations could be implemented over a longer time frame. The major recommendations identified in the Million Acre Plan are listed below.

### **Short Term Recommendations**

- **Facilitate Coordination.** The Governor should establish a Million Acre Advisory Panel and direct DNR to coordinate and staff all aspects of the Million Acre Initiative, including information sharing, data tracking, management of a central website, and education.
- **Codify Million Acre Goal.** The General Assembly should put the Million Acre Goal into law to provide a source of common inspiration for the citizens of North Carolina and guidance for future sessions, and the legislature should require annual progress reports starting September 2000.
- **Farmland Preservation.** The General Assembly should increase the funding for Farmland Preservation to at least \$1 million dollars during the 2000 session. Such funds would provide farmers an option to keep their land as working farms while protecting their property from development. This trust fund will need a larger and dedicated funding source in future years to meet an increasing demand by farmers.
- **Clean Water Management Trust Fund.** The Clean Water Management Trust fund should be increased from a floor of \$30 million today to \$100 million over the next three years. The General Assembly should not reallocate funds from any of the state trust funds for other uses. Additionally, the Clean Water Management Trust Fund should review its policies on buffer requirements to ensure that conservation of land to protect water quality can be coordinated with other open space protection objectives.
- **Dedicated Funding Source.** The Governor and the General Assembly should work together to identify dedicated state and local revenue sources to fund permanent conservation efforts. The menu of potential funding sources could include the deed stamp tax, impact fees, transfer taxes, severance taxes, and others that could complement tax incentives and private stewardship. Revenues generated should support farmland preservation, increased funding levels for existing state trust funds, and the Conservation Grant Fund to cover the costs of transactions for donating lands and educating landowners.

- **Center for Geographic Information and Analysis (CGIA).** CGIA and DENR should be supported to create and maintain a GIS database of layered land use maps in North Carolina which could be used by all parties to identify lands for conservation and track the progress toward the million acre goal.

### Long Term Recommendations

- **Financial Opportunity Assessment.** DENR and the UNC Environmental Finance Center should conduct an assessment to shed light on the combination of funding sources that could enable North Carolina to achieve the million acre goal. The results of this assessment should be reported to the North Carolina Smart Growth Commission so the report can be used by the 2001 General Assembly.
- **Retaining Open Spaces through Smart Growth.** To complement the Million Acre Initiative, the NC Smart Growth Commission should explore policies to retain open spaces in North Carolina in addition to the permanent strategies outlined in the Million Acre Plan. The Commission should evaluate transfer development rights and Governor Hunt's goal of setting aside 20% of land for open space in new greenfield developments.
- **Tracking Progress.** The Department of Environment and Natural Resources should provide an annual report to the Governor and General Assembly on progress towards meeting the quantitative goal as well as meeting higher environmental, economic, and quality of life objectives.
- **Million Acre Bond.** Many states have infused large sums of money into open space conservation by the issuance of revenue bonds and/or general obligation bonds. These funding sources should be explored for North Carolina by the 2001 General Assembly.