

Section 7

Preservation Strategies and Priorities

While the preceding recommendations in this plan have discussed measures to address existing degradation, this section focuses on measures to preserve watershed function. This is important both to protect existing high quality resources, but also because protection of key areas can help prevent further loss of function in downstream areas. The preservation strategies discussed below include:

- Preservation of forested areas through conservation easements; and
- Practices for the sustainable use of forest land.

Potential preservation projects to meet NCEEP criteria are presented.

7.1 Background

Data are currently lacking to identify areas for preservation based upon specific ecologically-based criteria. As discussed in Section 5.3, few natural heritage data are available for the planning area and local organizations have not yet developed conservation priorities. The emphasis in developing potential preservation targets for the Peachtree-Martins Creek Local Watershed Plan was therefore on the identification of relatively large forested tracts. Preservation of forested area is critical to maintenance of stream function. It will also preserve terrestrial habitat, although the natural heritage value of this habitat cannot be readily ascertained.

Preservation tools include the purchase of land and the use of conservation easements. Conservation easements are a permanent, legally binding agreement between a private landowner and a qualified land conservation organization that protect important ecological values of a property while allowing continued ownership and use of the land by the landowner. Entering into a conservation easement is completely voluntary. Non-profit private land trusts typically hold conservation easements but federal, state, and local government entities may also perform this function.

7.2 Preservation Recommendations

Recommendation: Governmental agencies and private organizations should work with local landowners to protect exiting forested tracts in the planning area using conservation easements or other means. NCEEP can undertake these projects in situations where this is feasible. The HRWC, the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee and other local groups should work with property owners to initiate projects where NCEEP cannot operate.

Discussion: Two sets of forested tracts were identified for potential preservation - a limited set of parcels meeting specific criteria for NCEEP projects, and a larger set that may be of broader conservation interest. These tracts are discussed in Sections 7.4 and 7.3 respectively.

7.3 General Preservation Priorities

7.3.1 Tract Identification

Parcels containing a minimum of 50 acres of forest were identified using the IPSI land use/land cover data base and Cherokee County parcel information. Several parcels were dropped because forested areas in the tract were fragmented. Parcels which are part of the Nantahala National Forest were also dropped. Finally several parcels along the US 64 bypass near Harshaw Road (sites number 3 and 5) were dropped because plans for development are in place for these parcels and preservation seems unlikely.

The resulting group of tracts (Figure 7.1) includes 31 parcels with at least 50 acres of forest. These parcels range in size from 52 to 401 acres. About 20 of these have been identified by the Local Advisory Committee (LAC) as having substantial potential for development over the next 10 years, due either to their location or a belief that the owner is interested in developing the property. One of the tracts (number 33 in Figure 7.1) is in US Forest Service (USFS) ownership, but is likely to be sold to a private party or traded by the USFS for a tract elsewhere that is contiguous to other Forest Service lands.

Whether the owners of these 31 parcels are potentially interested in land conservation options was not explored in any detail during the development of this plan. There are several parcels for which the LAC feels the owner may be interested in preservation, though this information should not be considered conclusive and LAC members were not familiar with all property owners. This information is included in Table A2 in Appendix A, along with parcel and property owner information for these tracts.

7.3.2 Priority Tracts for Preservation

Other than the Nantahala National Forest, few large parcels of forested land remain in the planning area. Of the 31 parcels described above only 4 exceed 300 acres, located primarily on the western margin of the area. Only 6 other parcels exceed 100 acres. Preserving large areas of forest in the Peachtree-Martins Creek area will thus be a challenge and will likely require working with multiple landowners to preserve even a modest amount of forested land.

All of the parcels identified in Figure 7.1 should be considered for potential preservation. As discussed in Section 5, the upper Peachtree drainage and the Upper Martins Creek (UMC) sub-watershed have been identified as focus areas for preservation. These are the only portions of the planning area that currently support a high level of ecological function. In order to help retain existing function in these areas, preservation of forested tracts here should be a priority. These areas are also upstream of sites at which the mountain creekshell was found. There are five parcels in the UMC sub-watershed with more than 50 acres of forest, and five such parcels in the upper portion of the Peachtree drainage (Upper Peachtree and Moore Branch sub-watersheds).

Preservation of headwaters tracts in other areas is also important to prevent further degradation in ecological condition and is recommended.

7.4 Potential NCEEP Project Sites

A site search was conducted to identify potential preservation parcels for NCEEP to meet compensatory mitigation needs. Sites were identified as potential NCEEP preservation sites based upon parcel size, stream reach length and riparian area classification criteria developed in consultation with NCEEP.

Primarily forested reaches were identified as potential NCEEP preservation reaches using a three-stage process similar to the one used to select restoration and enhancement sites.

1. Initial reach identification using the IPSI data base;
2. Limited field reconnaissance;
3. Scoring and prioritization. Reaches were scored based on several factors and sites were then prioritized based on this scoring.

Methods are discussed in detail in the *Project Atlas* that accompanies this Watershed Management Plan.

Seven sites in the planning area were identified (Table 7.1 and Figure 7.2), though many have either recently been impacted by the 64 bypass project or are likely to be infeasible because of impending development or other issues. Two sites are not affected by these concerns. These are also the two sites with the highest ecological condition scores. These are Sites 1 and 6, which are recommended to NCEEP as priority preservation sites. Additional information on the seven sites is included in the *Project Atlas*.

Table 7.1 Potential NCEEP Preservation Sites

Reach ID	Sub-Watershed*	Stream Name	Total Score**	Priority Level**	Feasibility Concerns
1	LMC/MMC	Right Prong Martins Ck	7	High	No
6	FBR	Fall Br	6	Medium	No
2	HCK	Hampton Ck	5	Medium	Yes
4	FBR/LSL	Fall Br	5	Medium	Yes
3	SUT	UT Hiwassee River	4	Low	Yes
5	SUT	UT Hiwassee River	4	Low	Yes
7	LSL/FBR/MSB	Snead Br/Graham Br	4	Low	Yes

*Where portions of a parcel lie in several sub-watersheds, the primary sub-watershed is shown in bold type.

7.5 Management of Forested Lands

Recommendation: Owners of private woodlands in the planning area are encouraged to practice sustainable forest management, protecting habitat and water quality while making productive use of their land.

Discussion: Several resources are available to private landowners who want to more actively manage their forest lands while still meeting some conservation objectives. Appalachian Voices in Boone, NC has produced a sustainable forestry guidebook, well-respected by a variety of forestry professionals, entitled *Managing Your Woodlands, A Guide for Southern Appalachian Landowners* (Goslee, 2004). Additional copies of this handbook can be obtained free of charge from Appalachian Voices.

The NC Division of Forest Resources (NCDFR) provides free on-site forestry planning and consultation to forest land owners. The NCDFR administers the non-binding Forest Stewardship Program to provide landowners with cost-effective resource management planning. Participants in this program are eligible for cost-share assistance from NCDFR that can help with reforestation and timber stand improvements. Participants also receive recognition with a sign to post on their land. NCDFR also maintains a list of consulting foresters who can help woodland landowners with forest management plans and road and access designs to minimize impact on streams and riparian areas (<http://www.dfr.state.nc.us/contacts/cf/cfyancey.pdf>.) The private consulting foresters charge for their services.

Regardless of whom landowners select to perform these services, good forest management plans, at minimum, should specify the following stream and riparian protective measures:

- Retaining a streamside management zone to filter sediment, shade streams, and maintain a wildlife corridor;
- Minimizing the number of stream crossings;
- Installing properly temporary stream crossings that are required;
- Constructing logging access roads at less severe angles to streams;
- Installing erosion control measures where necessary to reduce overland erosion and sedimentation into streams;
- Seeding immediately road beds constructed for access; and
- Leaving trees that have wildlife benefit.

Approximately 14% of the project area, located primarily in the upper half of the Peachtree Creek drainage, lies within the Tusquitee Ranger District of the Nantahala National Forest. Under current management plans, national forest lands within the project area are included under Management Area 3B. These lands are managed for sustainable timber harvest, habitat for wild turkey and other compatible species (which may involve specific timber cuts or the maintenance of cleared areas), and recreational activities such as hiking and hunting (USDA National Forest Service, no date). Motorized vehicle access is limited.