Economy slows Nine Times efforts

Upstate Forever trying to buy tract but has Nov. 1 option deadline

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PICKENS — Dana Leavitt is inspired by a 360-degree view from the top of Pink Mountain on a 1,650-acre, undeveloped tract in northern Pickens County that Upstate Forever hopes to buy.

"It's one of those things where you say, 'Yes, we really need to save this for future generations,' " said Leavitt, land trust director for Upstate Forever, a conservation organization that has protected lands across eight Upstate counties through purchases and conservation agreements.

The property is home to wildlife including deer, bear, wild turkey and songbirds, as well as rare and endangered plants.

The Nature Conservancy owns an adjoining 560 acres, the Nine Times Reserve, just south of State 11 between Holly Springs and Sunset. The conservancy's South Carolina chapter purchased the property from Upstate Forever, which acquired the land in 2007 from Crescent Resources, the real estate arm of Duke Energy.

Upstate Forever has until Nov. 1 to exercise an option to buy the remaining 1,650 acres of the Nine Times tract that also includes Big Rock Mountain. So far the nonprofit organization hasn't been able to secure the money to make a reasonable offer in the current challenging economic climate.

State agencies such as the Conservation Bank, Department of Natural Resources and Forestry Commission that have helped in past efforts are strapped by budget cuts.

Crescent gave Upstate Forever the option to buy the remaining 1,650 acres at the same price as the adjoining Nine Times tract. Leavitt believes the purchase can be made for less, given the current financial and development markets.

Brief conversations with Crescent, which filed for bankruptcy protection earlier this summer in the wake of a weak real estate market, have been positive, he said.

James Short, president of Crescent Resources' Land Management Division, said that it is Crescent's policy not to comment on tracts of land that are under contract. He referred questions to Upstate Forever.

Below Leavitt's perch on Pink Mountain, three high-tension power lines intersect the property. Cleared areas that must be maintained under the power lines create safe haven for nesting and escape habitat for wildlife, as well as a margin of safety from development.