More land to be protected

600 acres in Pickens, Greenville put into conservation easement

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More than 600 acres will be protected from future development after landowners in Pickens and Greenville decided to put two tracts into a conservation easement with Upstate Forever.

Funds awarded by the South Carolina Conservation Bank were critical in making the easements possible, said Erin Knight, director of the land grant program at Upstate Forever.

Grant Meadows, a picturesque field near the base of Table Rock in Pickens County that's popular with photographers seeking shots of the mountain's face, now has 37 acres protected. The section in the easement makes up one-third of the meadow, Knight said.

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Grant Meadows also includes a 2-acre pond and frontage on Carrick Creek, a tributary of the Oolenoy River. It's a habitat for deer, bear, wild turkey and migratory songbirds.

The Riverbend Shoals tract, located near Honea Path in southern Greenville County, has 580 acres of forest used for timber management and hunting. The acreage has 2.25 miles of frontage along both the Saluda River and Mountain Creek.

Upstate Forever now holds conservation agreements with owners of 89 properties totaling 17,763 acres in the Upstate. A conservation easement is a voluntary contract between a landowner and a land trust that allows the landowner to retain ownership of the property but relinquish some rights to develop the property.

The state Legislature began funding the state conservation bank again in 2012 after several years of greatly reduced funding.

The conservation bank makes it possible for owners of some of the Upstate's choice sites for conservation to keep those properties from being developed, Knight said.

"Landowners don't usually do conservation easements for financial gain; however, when they go into, it they realize there are a lot of costs involved," she said.

Chief among those costs is the loss of most development rights on the properties, she said.

Funds from the bank that are used to close some conservation agreements balance out the costs for landowners, many of whom have owned the land for generations and don't wish to see it developed, she said.

"The conservation bank is a tool for landowners without which they couldn't, or wouldn't, choose to protect their special properties," Knight said.

"For the conservation community that tool is critical because there are properties of inestimable conservation value that otherwise would go unprotected and could be developed."

Funds from the conservation bank have significantly increased the ability of Upstate Forever to achieve its land protection goals, she said.

The state conservation bank approved $290,000 toward conservation of Riverbend Shoals and $68,200 toward the Grant Meadows tract, according to the bank.

Conservation groups are working through a backlog of sites across the state that had been approved for funding through the bank before it was cut during the Great Recession years.

A number of land-protection projects have been completed since funding was restored in 2012, and Upstate Forever is working to close several other conservation agreements in the coming months, she said.