Project to elevate SC's highest peak

Sassafras Mountain plans include observation tower

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Plans to highlight South Carolina's highest mountain peak are under way, including a new land donation and a fundraising effort for a lofty observation tower.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham was among the host of conservationists and government leaders atop Sassafras Mountain on a rainy Monday to introduce the plans.

Dense fog obstructed views that on clear days stretch to North Carolina, Georgia and, in the far distance, the mountains of Tennessee.

"The rain's going to pass, the sun's going to come out, and you'll see what the big deal is," said Graham, who was honored by a group of environmentalists for his efforts in conservation.

At 3,553 feet, the peak of Sassafras marks the highest elevation in South Carolina. The top of the mountain is split by the border between North and South Carolina in Pickens County.

The Conservation Fund will donate 4.8 acres of land atop the mountain on the North Carolina side to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to manage, said Mike Leonard, vice chairman of the environmental charity's board of directors.

The land grant represents a small part of a broader donation of adjacent land to the 8,000-acre East Fork Headwaters in North Carolina.

The Department of Natural Resources bought the South Carolina side of the mountain in 2004 from Duke Energy, which retained rights to communication assets on the property.

The mountaintop had largely been neglected as a destination until 2010, when the Department of Natural Resources cleared trees and built a modest, wooden observation deck looking to the southwest. The DNR is seeking private donations for the tower project.