# SASSAFRASS CHANGES TAKE LONG VIEW



## Mountaintop cleared in plan to transform scenic site




PHOTOS BY MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF/

**Straddling the border of both Carolinas, Sassafras Mountain is South Carolina's highest point**

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The ancient Appalachian hills, smoothed by time's passage, roll below the pinnacle of Sassafras Mountain like ocean waves across four states, lost in the distance only by the limitations of the human eye.

Until recently, this majestic view from atop South Carolina's highest peak was obscured.

For decades, walls of mostly hemlock trees surrounded nearly every degree of the summit, insulating it from the world and leaving visitors unsure if they had actually made it to the top.

The trees are gone now, the summit laid bare in an effort to transform Sassafras into more than a footnote of trivia in elementary school textbooks.

The stewards of Sassafras Mountain had a choice to make — and they made a bold one that just a few years ago might have been unthinkable.

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**25'**

Planned height of the new observation tower, which is made of concrete with a rock facing.

**3,553**

Feet above sea level at which the peak of Sassafras Mountain towers.

**$50K**

Amount the Department of Natural Resources is short in meeting its funding goal for the first phase of the project, which consists mostly of building the tower.

Unlike in the past, a plan is actively in motion, not abstract. There is money, though not quite enough of it. The next step, building an observation tower to further open the world, has been scaled down but has newly tilled, fertile soil to stand on.

There are still challenges. The money isn't all there. The power company's bright silver industrial radio tower, secured within a chain link fence, is even more conspicuous following the clearing. The lines powering the tower are strung across the vista.

Yet, the competing interests that have held Sassafras back for so long have been disentangled.

The vision is manifesting.

## A quiet giant

Think of the few mountains you could say tower over the Upstate.

Table Rock and Caesars Head come to mind.

At 3,553 feet above sea level, the peak of Sassafras towers above them all, serves as a border between the Carolinas and marks the point of the Eastern Continental Divide.

Yet the question often arises, "Where is it?"

The answer: Travel up through Pickens, U.S. 178 to the Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference Center of The Blind, turn right onto the F. Van Clayton Memorial Highway and the road winds up almost to the very peak of Sassafras.

Progress on the mountain for long has been held back.

A collection of competing land interests — landowners, private industry and government — has kept the summit in a state of inertia on either side of the North Carolina and South Carolina border that splits the apex in two.

The top of Sassafras first became a destination in the 1940s when the South Carolina Forestry Commission built a fire tower to monitor the hills and valleys.

The tower was later abandoned, though locals were determined to climb, then it was torn down.

The mountaintop was utilitarian and accessible by car. Visitors could reach it by driving past a gate that might or might not be open, or pass through hiking on the 77-mile-long Foothills Trail.

The future began to turn in 1999 when the state of South Carolina completed its purchase of land from Duke Energy — known then as Duke Power — as part of the $21 million, 43,500-acre Jocassee Gorges preservation project.

The two-acre mountaintop in South Carolina wasn't part of the deal, but five years later, Duke would sell the land to the state for $50,000.

A former congressman owned 4.8 acres of the peak on the North Carolina side.

In 2010, the congressman sold the land to the Conservation Fund as part of a landmark 8,000-acre conservation sale. The conservancy then donated the land to the Department of Natural Resources, which now technically owns the land in North Carolina.

At the same time, for a cost of less than $3,000 and in just four days, DNR workers cleared locust trees and used the wood to build a small observation deck on the western side of the mountain, opening up spectacular views of lakes Keowee and Jocassee and mountains into Georgia.

The deck would prove to be a precursor to what Sassafras could be with a greater vision.

## Mountaintop vista

The time has come.

"We're trying to impart in the general public an understanding of our part in the southern Appalachian chain," said Dennis Chastain, a Pickens County nature historian instrumental in efforts to transform the mountain. "There's nothing that puts an exclamation mark on that more than standing up here and seeing it."

Last month, logging trucks were hauled to the top of Sassafras and 3 acres of trees were cut down.

It was a choice made only after consulting with conservationists and with the knowledge that plans for an observation tower finally could be fulfilled, said Mark Hall, DNR biologist and forester in charge of managing the Jocassee Gorges.

The trees were a mix of big hemlocks that dominated the canopy and second-growth mixed hardwoods.

Many of the hemlocks were already "stone dead," Chastain said, suffering from the spread of the woolly adelgid, an insect that infests hemlocks and has led park managers to warn people from hiking for fear of falling trees.

The logger was hesitant at first to take on the job, Hall said, because there was little value in the wood.

"He said, 'It's junk,' Hall said. "I said, 'I know.' "

For now, the mountaintop resembles the cleanup after a windstorm — what's left of the dead trees has been plowed aside.

The freed view now shows the Balsam Mountain Range, where the Blue Ridge Parkway meanders 6,000 feet high.

"If you come up here on a January morning, with little humidity, you're easily going to see 50 miles," Chastain said.

Some obstacles remain.

Rows of trees that block the view still stand on the steeper sections of the mountain but will be cut down later as plans progress, Hall said.

And then there's the radio tower, owned by Duke Energy.

The tower is a two-way radio repeater, used to communicate across the service area.

After extensive exploration, the company determined that Sassafras "was the only suitable location," Duke spokeswoman Lisa Stryker said.

Cell service can be unreliable, Stryker said, so the company relies on radio communication for day-to-day operations, storm repairs and, indirectly, Oconee Nuclear Station.

Rights to the tower and power lines were preserved when Duke sold its two acres to South Carolina.

The company has stopped short of committing to move the tower but, Stryker said, is enthusiastic about changes to Sassafras.

"We are working on ways to improve the aesthetics at the site, such as painting the tower, moving signage and finding other ways for it to blend in," she said.

## Ready to build

The new tower will be a scaled-down version of designs for a tower put forth by the Clemson engineering department two years ago, when U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham joined a host of political leaders on a rainy day atop the mountain to pledge support.

The original plans called for a four-story observation tower reaching 60 feet high and straddling the border of the Carolinas.

The project would cost $1 million.

However, subsequent meetings on the tower's progress revealed that it couldn't accommodate the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Hall said.

The tower's design was such that it would require a walkway a quarter-mile long all told with an 8 percent grade, Hall said.

What has resulted are plans of a smaller scale.

The new tower, made of concrete with a rock facing, will rise to about 25 feet, with a handicapped-accessible ramp leading from the lower parking lot and extending access to the very top.

The funding is nearly in place for the first phase, which consists mostly of building the tower, Hall said.

Later phases will include "green" restrooms at the lower parking lot.

Duke Energy has pledged $350,000 as part of its effort to renew the license for its Keowee-Toxaway hydro project.

The company had originally pledged $500,000, but a dispute with Pickens County reduced the number, Hall said.

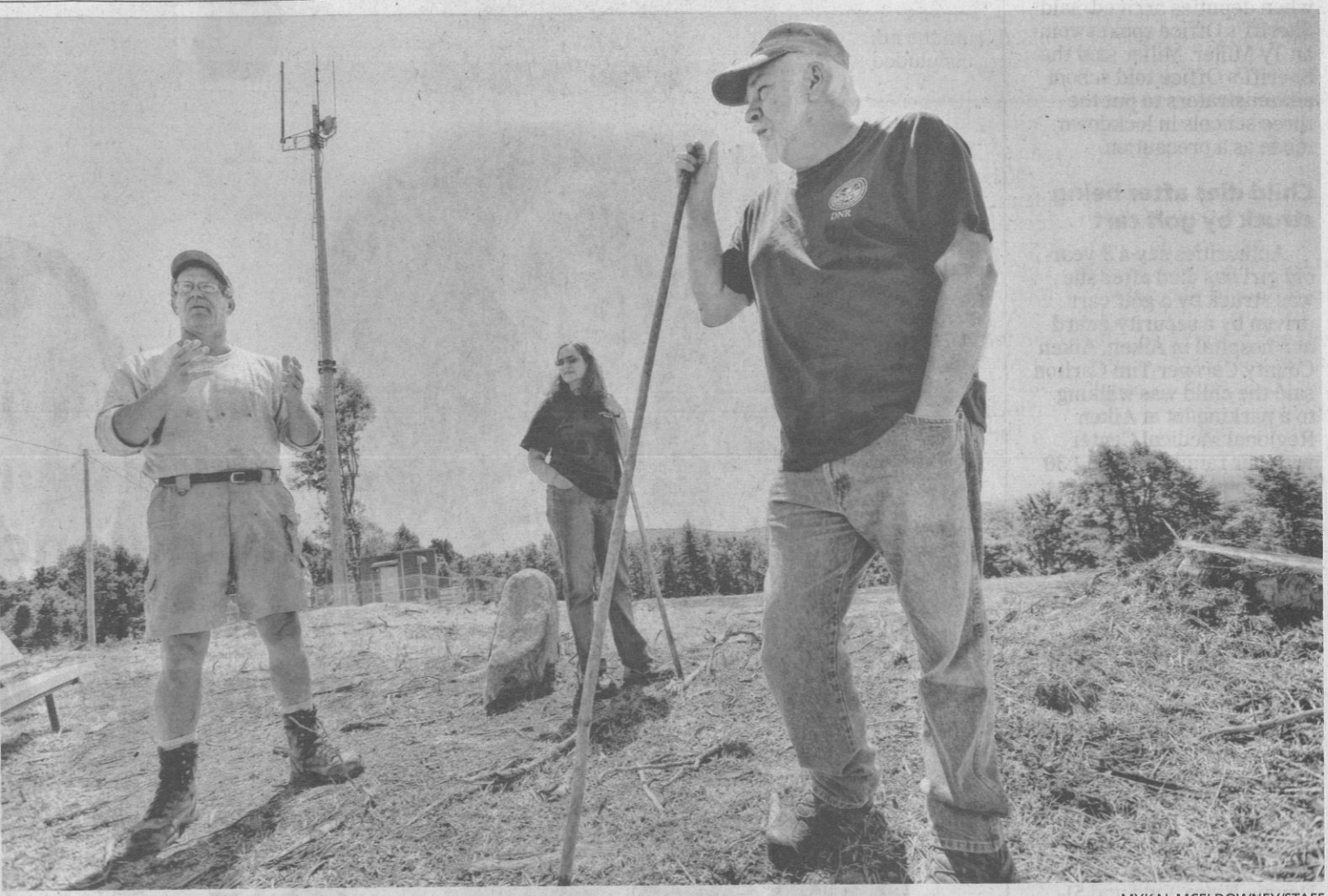
The county had asked for nothing as part of the upcoming licensing agreement, but that changed when problems arose with how it would be allowed to access drinking water in the future.

The Department of Natural Resources is about $50,000 short.

In two years, DNR has raised $25,000 from the sale of commemorative bricks that will be placed at the foundation of the tower. The bricks are $100.

Another $25,000 was donated through the Harry Hampton Memorial Wildlife Fund.

The Felburn Foundation pledged $50,000 and an anonymous donor $40,000.



MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

From left, Mark Hall, DNR wildlife biologist and Jocassee Gorges project manager, Jane Chastain and Dennis Chastain take a break from clearing the top peak of trees on Sassafras Mountain. Hall and Dennis Chastain said many of the hemlocks were already dead, victims of the woolly adelgid infestation.



MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

An impenetrable wall of hemlocks obscure the view at the top of Sassafrass Mountain, leaving visitors to wonder if they reached the summit.