Study's focus is on protecting landscapes

OSI to award $5.5M in grants for conservation

KAREN CHÁVEZ
STAFF WRITER
KCHAVEZ@GANNETT.COM

They've had their boots in the mud, the creeks, the cliffs, coves and mountainsides of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Upstate region for the last few decades, seeking open chunks of land for permanent conservation.

Success for land-trust supporters and volunteers in preserving lands important for scenic value, clean water, wildlife habitat and public recreation has come in securing land in the sight-line of the Blue Ridge Parkway and stitching together private lands to create popular state parks. Success also has come by purchasing conservation easements on small, hidden parcels in the highlands that are home to rare salamanders and songbirds.

But have the land trusts always been looking in the right places?

That's what a recent scientific study by The Nature Conservancy sought to find out. And now, a new multimillion-dollar grant from the New York-based Open Space Institute hopes to steer efforts in the right direction.

The Nature Conservancy report, "Resilient Sites for Terrestrial Conservation in the Southeast," identified the most resilient sites in the region, considered to be "natural strongholds" likely to withstand the growing impact of climate change and to offer refuge to a diverse array of animals.

The areas of focus include locations identified as priority landscapes for protection. They also are among some of the nation's most biologically diverse places and face a growing set of threats from development, inappropriate timber harvesting and invasive species. Over the next 20 years, the Southeast is expected to lose almost 20 million acres of forests due principally to development and conversion.

Using the new scientific data, the Open Space Institute, a leading regional land conservation organization, is seeking to focus attention on

See GRANTS, Page 9A

Grants

Continued from Page 1A

those most biologically rich and threatened places. To that end, the institute recently announced the OSI Initiative, in which $5.5 million in matching grants for land protection will be available to land trusts that focus on "climate-resilient" lands — those that will help facilitate wildlife adaptation to climate change within two new sites:

» The Southern Blue Ridge, encompassing mountainous parts of Upstate South Carolina, Western North Carolina and Tennessee.

» The Greater Pee Dee River, which straddles the North and South Carolina border along key river corridors and stretches from the coast to the Sandhills and Uwharrie Mountains.

The initiative, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, is part of a vanguard effort to use cutting-edge climate science to identify and protect resilient lands across the eastern United States. The new awards expand on the OSI's $12 million Resilient Landscapes Initiative that began in the Northeast two years ago.

This program, land conservation leaders say, will be meaningful for preserving natural lands for future tourism, wildlife, hunting and angling.

Mac Stone, executive director of Naturaland Trust, a land trust based in Greenville, said the new grant is exciting, but the short deadline will have his and other land management groups having to work quickly to take advantage of it

"We're certainly very interested in it and the prospect that this fund exists," Stone said. "It's an exciting fund and it's nice that these funding projects will be based on science for climate resiliency data.

"We'll have to delve deeper into the requirements of the application before we know if we will be able to apply. It's just a matter now of doing research to find which properties would be appropriate."

The Naturaland Trust was founded in 1973 by Greenville attorney C. Thomas "Tommy" Wyche, who began working to protect large and significant tracts of land in South and North Carolina. They became such conservation and recreation gems as Jones Gap and Caesars Head state parks.

The non-profit land trust has been involved in the preservation of tens of thousands of acres of foothills and mountain land, mainly along the South Carolina–North Carolina border, and works in cooperation with many private, government and other nonprofits to ensure lasting conservation of these lands.

"We work all within the Southern Blue Ridge Escarpment and within Greenville proper, such as the Swamp Rabbit Trail, and within the Enoree watershed to protect the bunched arrowhead, a federally endangered species," Stone said.

"We have a varied landscape on which we work, but we try to identify properties based on certain principles – they must be ecologically significant, contiguous with other protected landscapes, such as adding on to Department of Natural Resources land, or state parks land, and lands that can offer significant recreational value," he said.

There are many possible properties on the Open Space Institute map that fall within the boundaries Naturaland Trust works within, but Stone said it can take quite a bit of time to cultivate relationships with landowners.

"But we're going to try," he said. "We're going to try to redirect our energy into seeing if we can secure some of these funds."

Other land trusts and conservation supporters also are excited about the funding possibilities.

"We feel this is a really groundbreaking way for trying to preserve biodiversity," said the Open Space Institute's David Ray, who is based in Asheville. "The goal is to help get it out there and get it out in front of land trusts and see if this is useful and what ways can we develop it."

Jess Laggis, coalition director of Blue Ridge Forever, a coalition of land trusts, said the group is excited about the Open Space Institute's new model for identifying lands for conservation, as well as the money up for grabs.

"The Blue Ridge Forever land trust partners are thrilled that the Open Space Institute has included the Southern Blue Ridge as one of the focus areas in the new Southeast Resilient Landscapes Fund, opening the possibility of funding to help protect more land in our region," Laggis said.

Blue Ridge Forever and its 10 member land trusts, which include the Asheville-based Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy in the Henderson-Transylvania county area, Foothills Conservancy, the Blue Ridge Conservancy in Boone, among others, has conserved nearly 80,000 acres in its 10-year existence.

The group had a goal of conserving 50,000 acres in the Southern Blue Ridge by 2010, which it reached, Laggis said, and has set a new goal of conserving 30,000 more acres by the end of 2015. She said it is 80 percent there. The Open Space Institute's initiative should help complete the goal.

"The Southern Blue Ridge is among the most ecologically diverse and fragile regions in the country. The intact forests and mountains here are an outstanding resource for resilience to climate change. However, these mountains are a magnet for population growth and development, which potentially threatens the future viability of wildlife habitat, clean water sources and other ecological systems," Laggis said.

"The need for conservation in these mountains remains acute. The Blue Ridge Forever partners will seize the opportunity to leverage this (OSI) investment as a catalyst for further land protection in the Southern Blue Ridge focus area," Laggis said.

Seeking conservation eyes with a new lens —

The Open Space Institute is using data from The Nature Conservancy report to identify which areas have the best chance for plant and animal survival in the future with climate change. That is a different approach from the way land trusts have worked, said Ray, who formerly worked for the Nature Conservancy.

It will be looking at lands that have the potential for future resistance to climate change, rather than lands that are valuable to plant and wildlife species today.

"The big criteria around which it's centered is climate-change resistance and science," Ray said. "Working with the Doris Duke Foundation, we want to expose the land trust world to this idea to see if it's useful."

Requests for proposals are open for land trusts seeking funds to purchase land or conservation easements, with the $5.5 million available in matching grants in the new focus areas.

The Southern Blue Ridge focus area includes lands up and down the Blue Ridge Escarpment, as far north as Ashe County, Roan Mountain, Grandfather Mountain, down to the Black Mountains, which include Mount Mitchell (the highest peak in the Eastern United States), and down through Hickory Nut Gorge east of Asheville, south into the Upstate of South Carolina, from the Landrum area west to Walhalla and the Georgia border.

Any land trust accredited by a land trust alliance or on a path toward getting accredited needs to have a project that would be within the focus area. The deadline to apply is July 21 and awards will be announced in September.

One of the criteria for the OSI grants is matching funds for the project, available from a foundation grant or clean water management trust fund, private funds, or landowner donation.



KEN OSBURN/

The Naturaland Trust, a conservation organization based in Greenville which has worked to preserve land in places such as Caesars Head State Park, seen here, will look at applying for $5.5 million in grants available through the Open Space Institute.

"First and foremost, our goal is to find projects that are good examples of use of this resilience data that protecting land is a valuable tool in helping plants and animals deal with challenges that will come with climate change," Ray said.

"Climate change obviously is a huge issue for everybody: for people trying to plan for emergencies; insurance companies taking note of it because of what it might do to business models; conservation; flooding, how it will impact our human communities; and what is it going to do to our wildlife?" Ray said.

Rebekah Robinson, assistant director of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, said she was pleased to see the Southern Blue Ridge chosen as one of the areas.