

Phyllis Stiles, Campaign Director for Blue Ridge Forever
Presentation to Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Annual Meeting:
Gather 'Round the Blue Ridge
August 19, 2010

Thank you Angie. What an august audience! I'd like to take a few minutes to tell you just a little bit about the land and water conservation activities of the nine land trusts that form the Blue Ridge Forever coalition.

First allow me to introduce our members whom I hope you already know. To the far north, we have Blue Ridge Conservancy and National Committee for the New River based in West Jefferson. To the south we have Pacolet Area Conservancy in Tryon. To the southwest, we have Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust in Highlands and Land Trust for the Little Tennessee in Franklin. To the east, we have Foothills Conservancy in Morganton and the Conservation Trust for North Carolina in Raleigh but concentrating on the Parkway. And finally, in the center, we have Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy in Hendersonville and Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy in Asheville. There are brochures on the information table if you'd like to pick one up.

You wouldn't be here today if you weren't already pretty well informed. So I'm going to assume that you know each of us just happens to get out of bed every morning, and drive or walk around North America's most biologically diverse temperate forest, right here at this beautiful North Carolina arboretum and all around us. We're talking hundreds of plants and animal species that occur nowhere else on this earth other than our coves, ridges, valleys, streams, and rocky outcrops. That gives me shivers just to think about it.

People love our mountains! They love the fact that we have so many tree species that our ridges explode with colors in the fall. They love the fact that you can find relief from sweltering summer heat in our forests and in the higher elevations. They love the fact that we're still so rural. And they love the way our water tastes, especially when you call it beer.

Our state will grow from 8 million to 12 million people between 2000 and 2030. That's like the entire population of South Carolina moving into North Carolina. All those people want roads, houses, stores, churches, entertainment... The problem is that each new resident displaces about 2 acres of undeveloped land.

This is what caused all nine mountain land trusts to join forces in 2004. We knew it would take teamwork to even attempt to keep pace with development. So we formed the Blue Ridge Forever coalition and quickly got busy creating a conservation vision for this 10,000 square mile region. You can download the Vision from our website. You'll notice in that Vision that the Blue Ridge Parkway—running nearby-- is one of our 29 focus areas.

I hope you've also heard about our 50,000-acre campaign that launched in 2006 and will end later this year. Angie thought you might enjoy seeing this poster we produced in

partnership with the Blue Ridge Parkway during this 75th anniversary year. It's one of the ways we've been trying to get the word out about our campaign. These posters are located in highly trafficked areas all along Parkway communities throughout Western North Carolina. We were thrilled that the three tourism host groups and the Blue Ridge Parkway Association helped us identify business sites to display them.

In addition to the Parkway and the other 27 focus areas that comprise our Conservation Vision, we have a focus area that extends throughout the Heritage Area because the resource it represents is at-risk of virtual extinction. That's the family farm. Did you know Western North Carolina lost 125,000 acres of farmland between 2002 and 2007? That's only 5 years. We are national leaders in farmland loss. The reasons for family farm loss are complex, but the pressure to convert farmland to residential or commercial use is a major one.

There's even a saying in the farming community, "Every time a farmer dies, a subdivision is born." Development may have slowed, but it will come back because of the people moving here or building vacation homes here.

In spite of the pressure, our mountains have about 13,000 family farms that earn part, or all, of their livelihood from the land and employ more than 33,000 people directly on the farm. Our entrepreneurial mountain farms have built a statewide reputation for alternative crops, fantastic farmers' markets, and highly subscribed CSAs.

Think of what those farms mean to our local food supply, economy and our heritage. Then think about the role those farms play in preserving wildlife habitats, water resources, and open spaces. And while residential developments COST counties and cities money in services, farms cost less than they pay in property taxes because tomato plants and cows don't go to school or call 911 very much.

We simply cannot afford to stand by and watch our farms disappear. Historically, it's been up to the farm families to keep the land in farming. They're on their own, right? After all it is their land and it's worth a fortune. The catch is that it's only worth a fortune when they sell it for development. That's a choice we don't want them to have to make.

In the past few years, land trusts have made assisting farmers who want their land to be available to future farmers a high priority. In the 90s, only 19 farms were placed under permanent easement. The first conservation easement on working land in western North Carolina was placed at Cataloochee Ranch in 1993 in Haywood County.

In this first decade of the new millennium, our land trusts have already placed 113 farms under easement and we're working more and more with Soil and Water Conservation District staff to try to help even more farmers. These farmers cannot bear the thought of the land their family worked for generations being covered up in roads and houses. Willing farmers are calling the land trusts every day asking for help, and the land trusts are only limited by the funding available for at least paying the closing costs like surveys and appraisals that total up to \$18,000 or more per project. Whenever possible, we also try

to raise money to compensate farmers for at least part of the development rights they're giving up.

This year, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area gave Blue Ridge Forever a grant to take a look back and forward to better understand land trusts' experiences in protecting working lands. For that we'd like to thank the Heritage Area staff and board members. We will be announcing the formal results of our study soon, but we're spending this year on learning ways we can be even more effective by learning from one another and working more closely with the traditional farm services agencies. We don't have the luxury of reinventing any wheels when our mountain agricultural heritage is at stake.

In closing, land trusts are grateful--grateful for the biological cornucopia we call home; grateful for visionary, selfless landowners; and grateful for all of the private individuals and public servants who have partnered with us to do something that seems counterintuitive— leaving the land just like it is.

If you haven't done so yet, I'll hope you'll become a member of your local land trust today.