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FOREST SERVICE ADDS TO PISGAH

Land purchase will increase Lake James buffer

Other acquisitions planned to protect the lake and its watershed from development

By Erica Beshears, Staff Writer

The U.S. Forest Service announced Monday it has purchased 607 acres toward an expansion of the Pisgah National Forest from the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area to Lake James.

Conservationists hailed the purchase as an important step in protecting the watershed and water quality of Lake James, the cleanest and least-touched lake on the Catawba River, which supplies water to most of the Charlotte region.

The undeveloped forest land, on the west bank of the scenic Linville River, also will provide more space for recreation in the heavily used Grandfather Ranger District of Pisgah.

"This is just a beautiful addition for the forest," said Miera Crawford, district ranger for the Grandfather district.

"We get to explore what's there," she said as she walked along a grassy trail through the hardwood forest, imagining spots where future forest visitors might enjoy a picnic or camping. "That's what we're looking forward to."

The land was purchased from International Paper Corp. for nearly \$1.6 million. The sale was finalized earlier this month.

Officials say they hope the purchase is the first of many in the area north of Lake James. Congress has allocated \$6.5 million for expanding Pisgah, which covers more than a million acres in northwestern North Carolina. The Forest Service is requesting more money this year.

But buying property is slow work. The Forest Service can only purchase land from willing sellers at the appraised value, Crawford said. And the land must touch existing national forest.

Eventually, the protected land may grow by as many as 10,000 acres and extend all the way to the shoreline, said Susie Hamrick Jones, executive director of the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina.

Her group has worked since 1998 to protect the watershed north of Lake James.

Most of the land in that area belongs to Crescent Resources and International Paper, Jones said.

Jones described the land as a “strategic tract” that extends the current Pisgah boundary south towards Lake James.

Purchasing it accomplishes several goals, she said: It protects much of the Linville River watershed from development; it protects the view from the top of the Linville Gorge; and it will provide public access to the Linville River below the gorge.

Strong public support at the local level convinced Republican Congressmen Charles Taylor of Brevard and Cass Ballenger of Hickory and Democratic Sen. John Edwards to push for the expansion funds, Jones said.

“It’s a wonderful affirmation of the power of people, really, to protect the very valuable resources that we hold in these upland areas, these watershed areas,” she said. “You can’t replace those.”

For years, Lake James, a 6,500-acre lake that straddles Burke and McDowell counties, remained free from lakeshore development such as on Lake Norman and Lake Hickory.

But housing developments have appeared on the lakeshore, launching a battle between corporate landowners and conservationists, who say developing the lake and its watershed would significantly harm water quality.

“This has been a hot, front-burner issue,” said Rance Henderson, chairman of the Burke County committee that recommended land-use regulations for shoreline development.

Henderson said the Pisgah expansion fits into what his committee hoped to accomplish.

He said he also liked that the area’s corporate landowners were willing to sell the property to the government for preservation.

“The ultimate goal of all our activity was to preserve the lakeshore and acres for prudent and balanced development,” he said. “This just adds to a much larger area that will never be developed.”

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