

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – One NC *Naturally* Conservation Planning Tool

The N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) recognizes the need to coordinate statewide conservation efforts as population pressures threaten our state's finite natural resources. By 2030, North Carolina's population will increase 50 percent to 12 million. Currently North Carolina leads the United States in lost farm and forest lands - more than one million acres in 10 years. At least 383 acres per day are converted to new roads, shopping malls and housing developments. This breakneck pace challenges each community to provide an adequate supply of clean water, unpolluted air and outdoor recreation areas to maintain the health of current and expected residents.

Developed in response to this need, the One NC *Naturally* Conservation Planning Tool provides a framework for decisions about future growth, while also ensuring that significant benefits provided by our state's natural resources will be preserved for future generations. In 1999 North Carolina's General Assembly established the goal of permanently protecting one million acres of natural lands by the end of 2009. Through the efforts of federal, state and local governments, and private nonprofit groups, 405,000 acres have been preserved so far. Achieving the million acre goal would increase preserved land to 12 percent of the state's total land area (3.8 million of 31 million acres).

The One NC *Naturally* Conservation Planning Tool was envisioned to streamline the process of identifying and prioritizing the areas in North Carolina's landscape that are essential for conservation. The selected planning approach draws upon the expertise of the Natural Heritage Program and is based on "Green Infrastructure" principles, which emphasize the importance of maintaining an interconnected network of green space that conserves valuable natural ecosystem functions, while also providing associated benefits to human populations. This analysis pinpoints areas that are already protected as well as those areas in the landscape that represent protection "gaps" in a functional ecosystem network.

Recognizing the dual role that ecosystem functions play for wildlife and humans, separate assessments were developed to more accurately rank the functions of each. The assessment series, which is composed of geospatial data layers, does not value one kind of benefit over another, but separates them into six classifications. The values used to assess necessary ecosystem functions are different enough that no meaningful combination into a single scale can be made. For example, it would not be reasonable to compare the significance of drinking water to the value of a rare species.

The One NC *Naturally* Conservation Planning Tool includes six natural resource assessment maps:

- Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitat,
- Open Space and Conservation Lands,
- Water Services,
- Farmland Preservation,
- Forestry Lands, and
- Marine and Estuarine Resources.

This comprehensive planning tool can be used by individual organizations, state and local agencies to inform decisions about conservation and other land use planning efforts in North Carolina. The assessment maps can be used independently or in combination. By coordinating assessment data, various programs can quickly identify lands that provide multiple benefits for compatible uses. The ranking system helps prioritize conservation funding decisions, resulting in cost-effective investment of tax dollars toward our most precious and vulnerable remaining lands.

The Conservation Planning Tool and associated assessments will be updated every six months, ensuring that the most recent available data is included. In addition, new partners and ongoing collaboration will continually provide new information and data layers that will be vital for the ongoing analyses and assessments.

Once these are complete, work will begin on a threats assessment, examining impacts of climate change, population growth patterns, landslide hazards and exotic species on our state. At a later date, a separate assessment map will be created for restoration needs, ranking the importance of degraded lands for restoration. Through restoration, these lands will eventually improve their role in providing ecosystem functions.

Strategically planning for growth in North Carolina in an environmentally sensitive way will benefit all of our state's citizens. The Conservation Planning Tool can help to identify essential areas in the landscape for conservation, while at the same time helping guide development to those areas where it might have the least amount of impact. North Carolina will be known as the state that planned for growth by wisely incorporating environmental, conservation and natural resource concerns into our decision-making process.

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For more information:

www.onencnaturally.org and <http://www.conservation-nc.net/>

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