

## Plan would help protect Triangle drinking water

Conservation group sets sights on Neuse basin buffers

Sarah Lindenfeld Hall, Staff Writer

A coalition of conservation groups and government agencies is targeting 24,000 acres that it says are critical to protecting the drinking water for much of the Triangle.

The Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative released its plan Monday at a news conference on the shores of Falls Lake at Wake County's Blue Jay Point County Park.

The conservation plan will guide the coalition as it seeks to acquire land through purchase or donations primarily along tributaries that run into drinking water reservoirs. The so-called stream buffers remove sediments and limit runoff into streams.

"We have the tools now, and it's time to get busy," said Kevin Brice, executive director of the Triangle Land Conservancy. "We'll be working hard with landowners on a voluntary measure to keep our water clean."

The targeted land sits in the Upper Neuse River Basin, which stretches from northern Wake County and north and



The Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative is targeting tributaries such as the Eno River, above, that feed into area reservoirs. The group wants to acquire the land through purchases or donations.

**Staff File Photo by Shawn Rocco**

west through Durham, Orange, Granville, Franklin and Person counties.

Increasing development and the recent drought have highlighted the region's water needs. The basin is home to about 190,000 people and consists of 770 square miles. The basin drains into Falls Lake, Raleigh's drinking water source, and other area reservoirs that serve more than 500,000 people.

About 60 percent of the basin remains forested, but the group says that rapid development puts those undeveloped lands in jeopardy.

The population in the basin is forecast to be close to 300,000 in 2025. That growth is expected to take up 76 percent of the basin's remaining undeveloped land unless development patterns change, the group says.

The effort, announced last year, has helped to acquire 1,100 acres in Orange and Durham counties in the past four months through purchase or donations. Deals are being finalized on 1,200 acres in Durham, Orange and Wake counties.

Landowners who donate their property or a conservation easement, which allows them to maintain ownership but restricts development of the land, qualify for state and federal tax incentives.

D. Reid Wilson, executive director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, said it will take tens of millions of dollars to purchase all the property, especially as land costs mount in Durham, Orange

## TARGET AREAS

The Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative is targeting nearly 5 percent of the Upper Neuse River Basin for preservation. Here's how many acres per county:

Durham County

Area of Upper Neuse River Basin in county:  
130,825 acres

Total unprotected high-priority area: 6,862 acres

Franklin County

5,692 acres total

157 acres targeted for protection

Granville County

84,310 acres total

4,992 acres targeted for protection

Orange County

125,117 acres total

5,454 acres targeted for protection

Person County

83,609 acres total

2,585 acres targeted for protection

Wake County

64,139 acres total

3,585 acres, targeted for protection

(UPPER NEUSE CLEAN WATER INITIATIVE)

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and Wake counties.

"We are hopeful we'll be able to protect a lot of these properties through donations," Wilson said.

The initiative includes five land trusts, two local government associations and two watershed protection groups. The Conservation Trust for North Carolina, a statewide land trust service provider, is coordinating the effort.

Raleigh has pledged \$1.5 million over three years to the project, starting in the 2005-06 fiscal year. The N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund also has given \$110,000 to help with the project. Officials from the state, Creedmoor, Wake County and Durham County attended the event Monday and pledged their general support for the plan, though no specific dollar amount.

"We will cooperate with the initiative and do expect great things here," said Tony Gurley, Wake County commissioners chairman, citing the county's efforts to buy open space with voter-approved bond money.

Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker made protecting the Falls Lake watershed a goal for his current two-year term. He credits Dean Naujoks of the Neuse River Foundation for the idea to work together to preserve critical lands.

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Meeker said it could take more than a decade to acquire all the land.

"It's going to require us all to work together," Meeker said. "We're asking people to

step up and preserve the stream buffers."

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