

The Conservation Fund (TCF), USDA Forest Service (USFS) and State of Tennessee bought the Rocky Fork Tract on December 15, 2008, successfully removing the tract from threat of development, but this has not completed the acquisition process.

“Rocky Fork in conservation ownership; though I never doubted it would happen, it seemed to take forever,” said Morgan Sommerville regional director of Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s (ATC) southern office in Asheville, North Carolina. In fact, the USFS has been trying to buy this 10,000 acre northeast Tennessee tract of land, which is often referred to as a microcosm of the Smokies, since the passage of the National Trails System Act

in 1968. ATC has been helping to acquire this tract for 25 years.

By any measure, this is a superlative project. Rocky Fork was the largest remaining unprotected, high-elevation tract of land in the Southern Appalachians. It contained more than a mile of unprotected Appalachian Trail tread (about 17% of the remaining tread left to protect; now in USFS ownership) and will allow for relocation of the A.T. to a vastly improved route nearly five miles in length. Rare plants and animals live in the Rocky Fork watershed, including, perhaps, a new species of salamander. The tract contains more than 16 miles of Blue Ribbon trout streams with a sizable population of native brook trout, and the area

is home to 2.2% of Tennessee’s breeding black bear population. The old roads and railroad grades in the property provide a great trail system and the high ridgeline of the tract provides a missing link for a long sought, long-distance trail roughly parallel to the A.T.

In the best tradition of A.T. management, more than 30 local, state and national organizations came together in support of conservation of the A.T. and Rocky Fork to help raise the funds to get this project out of the starting gate. According to a poll in the *Erwin Record*, more than 70% of the population of Unicoi County, in which most of Rocky Fork is located, supported its conservation. This diverse partnership, skillfully

led by TCF, includes the ATC, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, USFS, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation and their Heritage Conservation Trust Fund, the Lyndhurst Foundation, private donors, and many others. “The A.T. was the foot in the door to provide the rationale for purchase; significant earnest money was provided by Fred and Alice Stanback so that the owners would take our offer seriously and sign an option on the tract, and a continuing show of support comes from a wide range of hunting and fishing groups, recreation groups, citizen’s groups and environmental and conservation groups,” said Sommerville.

The campaign for federal Land and

Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) monies to help fund the acquisition has been bi-partisan and is led by Senator Lamar Alexander (R, TN), Senator Bob Corker (R, TN), Representative David Price (D, NC), Representative Heath Shuler (D, NC), Senator Richard Burr (R, NC) and Representative David Davis, (R, TN). ATC hopes that LWCF funds will pay for much of the tract.

The December closing, which transferred ownership of Rocky Fork from investor/developers to the USFS and TCF was an important first step in the protection of the tract through complete public ownership. At present, TCF has provided bridge funding of more than half of the more than \$40 million purchase price.

“This deal is not done until the USFS and Tennessee have acquired all of TCF’s Rocky Fork holdings,” said Sommerville. The December closing converted 2,237 acres of Rocky Fork to USFS land, and the rest is currently held by TCF. ATC will be working hard with the rest of the partnership to secure the remaining federal, state and private funds needed to purchase all of Rocky Fork and place it in public ownership. “As a veteran of more than two decades of work to conserve Rocky Fork, I am asking for political and financial support of this critical conservation objective so we can rapidly finish the long journey to final, complete Rocky Fork protection,” said Sommerville.

PHOTOS BY DAVID RAMSEY

Protecting Ten Thousand Tennessee Acres

