

More property owners join EEP

By CAREY JOHNSON
Times Staff Writer

Since environmentalists began a plan to protect endangered estuaries, the state has spent millions of dollars, including hundreds of thousands here in Franklin County.

The Ecosystem Enhancement Program is a state and federal collaborative effort to mitigate destruction of wetlands created during highway construction by preserving lands in other places.

Either property owners themselves or a local land conservancy group recommends properties to the state to be included in the plan.

When it first started, the Tar River Land Conservancy recommended a 146-acre tract owned by Lucy and Felix Allen, who helped start the conservancy.

The decision came under fire because of Lucy Allen's status as a legislator in the North Carolina House and Felix Allen's one-time position on the local and state land conservancy boards.

The Tar River Land Conservancy operates out of a building owned by Felix and Lucy Allen beside the Post Office in downtown Louisburg.

Environmentalists and those who choose the properties that are selected said the Allens' stature had nothing to do with the selection.

The Allens received a combined \$1 million from state and federal money for the easements.

The site feeds into Swift Creek, a tributary to Sandy Creek, which is a pristine water source and is home to several federally endangered fishes and mussels, scientists said.

Ironically, Fisher said, the Allen's involvement has increased interest in the program.

Since then, nearly 60 acres

of land have been included in Franklin County and more than 110 acres have been included from Granville County.

The Tar River Land Conservancy represents the upper Tar River, which spans a group of counties, including Franklin, Warren and Granville counties.

In Franklin County, just more than 40 acres at Cypress Creek owned by Jane Wilson Langley was included for a cost of \$148,368.

And just more than 18 acres along Swift Creek owned by William O'Neal was included for \$66,600.

Also, 110 acres along Shelton Creek in Granville owned by Randall Wood and Barbara Lee Guthrie were also included for \$442,160.

About 80 sites are under review or are in the process of acquisition in Franklin, Granville, and Warren counties.

The *Franklin Times* made a Freedom of Information Act request for those sites, but EEP officials declined to reveal those properties for fear it would taint the negotiation process.

Only one Franklin County site, 33 acres along Sandy Creek, was turned down.

"I think the interest is very high," Fisher said. "I think it's going up."

"People have heard about it," he said. "Sometimes, it takes having a landowner that personally knows to talk about it before they get interested."

"Once people like Randy (Wood) and Nancy Guthrie go and talk to people, the interest jumps tremendously."

Fisher said that sort of endorsement is key.

Although the state has shown an ability to offer prices per acre above county appraised values, landowners are reluctant to sell their property to the state in exchange for never being able

to develop the property.

"Every landowner has different interests," Fisher said. "We've contacted people by phone, by E-mail and through their peers, but a lot of people have told us they're not interested."

"More than half say that," Fisher said.

Since last summer, EEP has included more than 26,600 acres from across the state at a cost of \$51 million, said EEP spokesperson Tad Boggs.

That land includes 125 miles of stream access, 5,800 acres of wetlands.

"We're committed to going out and finding properties to include," Boggs said.

But Fisher said the conservancy understands that the program could be nearing an end at anytime.

Since the program is designed to provide environmental mitigation for road projects, when those needs are met, properties included in the EEP will slow down.

The state Department of Transportation has slashed funding for projects in central North Carolina, but it wasn't clear what effect that would have on EEP.

"Now, we're on a week to week basis as to when the state is going to stop asking for new projects," Fisher said. "That is currently being reassessed."

"A year and a half ago, I couldn't imagine us meeting the mitigation needs," Fisher said. "Now, the Tar River has done so many projects."

"It could be over in a couple of weeks."

• According to the Tar River Conservancy, EEP is interested in sites with a 300-foot wooded buffer, predominately and preferably hardwood, along one of the following areas:

• Swift/Sandy Creek in Warren, Franklin, Nash, Halifax, Edgecombe or Vance Counties,

• Fishing, Shocco or Little Fishing Creek in Warren, Franklin, Halifax, Nash or Edgecombe counties, or

• The main stem of the Tar River, Shelton or Cub Creeks in Person or Granville counties.

For more information about the conservancy or the program, contact the office at (919) 496-5902 or visit their Web site at: www.tarriver.org.

Click on the 'info for landowners' link.

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Bertha Mae "Bert" Malone

Wishes to express its sincerest thank you to the numerous friends, neighbors, and the Pastor and members of the Concord Baptist Church for their personal and collective acts of kindness shown during our period of bereavement.

We especially want to thank the doctors and staff of