



September 23, 2009

## Economy hampers Upstate Forever efforts to purchase Nine Times property

Nov. 1 option deadline is approaching

*By Anna Simon  
Clemson bureau*

PICKENS -- Dana Leavitt is inspired by a 360-degree view from the top of Pink Mountain on a 1,650-acre undeveloped tract in northern Pickens County that Upstate Forever hopes to buy.

"It's one of those things where you say, 'Yes, we really need to save this for future generations,'" said Leavitt, land trust director for Upstate Forever, a conservation organization that has protected lands across eight Upstate counties through purchases and conservation agreements.

The property is home to wildlife including deer, bear, wild turkey and songbirds, as well as some rare and endangered plants.

The Nature Conservancy owns an adjoining 560 acres, the Nine Times Reserve, just south of State 11 between Holly Springs and Sunset. The conservancy's South Carolina chapter purchased the property from Upstate Forever, which acquired the land in 2007 from Crescent Resources, the real estate arm of Duke Energy.

Upstate Forever has until Nov. 1 to exercise an option to buy the remaining 1,650 acres of the Nine Times tract that also includes Big Rock Mountain. So far the non-profit organization hasn't been able to secure the money to make a reasonable offer in the current challenging economic climate.

State agencies such as the Conservation Bank, Department of Natural Resources and Forestry Commission that have helped in past efforts are strapped by budget cuts.

Crescent gave Upstate Forever the option to buy the remaining 1,650 acres at the same price as the adjoining Nine Times tract. Leavitt believes the purchase can be made for less, given the current financial and development markets.

Brief conversations with Crescent, which filed for bankruptcy protection earlier this summer in the wake of a weak real estate market, have been positive, he said.

James Short, president of Crescent Resources' Land Management Division, said that it is Crescent's policy not to comment on tracts of land that are under contract. He referred questions to Upstate Forever.

Below Leavitt's perch on Pink Mountain, three high tension power lines intersect the property. Cleared areas that must be maintained under the power lines create safe haven for nesting and escape habitat for wildlife, as well as a margin of safety from development.

"I would speculate that if it wasn't for the high tension lines this property would already be a gated subdivision," Leavitt said.

He hopes that will help the property remain undeveloped in the event an offer can't be put together by Nov. 1.

"Even if we don't make Nov. 1, we'll still pursue an offer if we can put the package together," Leavitt said.

---