

# The land's the thing

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## Property owners pick conservation over cash

By Charles Sowell  
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Some things are worth a lot more than money to some people.

Mac McGee is one of those. He and his family have foregone what is unarguably a fortune for their three miles of frontage on Lake Hartwell to preserve Double M Farm's traditional uses.

In early February McGee and his family finalized a conservation agreement with Upstate Forever to preserve the 509-acre farm. Under the terms of the agreement traditional farm uses as well as hunting, fishing, and harvesting timber can continue.

Mining, residential subdivisions, and industrial or commercial development will not be allowed. The agreement doesn't allow public access and does not impact the family's title to the land.

"There was a man come by here not long ago," said McGee, the operator of Double M (he doesn't see himself as the owner). "He was drivin' a white Cadillac convertible with red interior. He asked me if I wanted to sell my lakefront property. I told him 'no.'"

"And he says to me, 'Well how much will you take for it?'"

"I had to get right smart with him. 'You don't hear very good, do ya?' I said to him. Didn't take him long to get the idea I wasn't sellin'."

McGee conveys a visceral love for the land and for his family that goes beyond what most think of when they talk about mere real estate.

"My son and daughter will be the sixth generation on this land," he said. "The farm comes down from my great grandmother, who was a Willford."

"I was raised on this place by my grandfather. If I'm anything today it is because of him."

From the late 19th Century to the 21st Double M has been continually farmed. The methods have changed, but the love for the land hasn't.

"We all love to hunt and fish," McGee said. "But that's not why we did this (conservation agreement). We did it so that our great-great grandchildren, 150 years from now, will be able to see this place pretty much as we see it today."

Continuity in some families takes on far deeper meaning than in others.

But that doesn't mean there is no progress at Double M.

McGee and his son market Carolina Grassfed Beef's all-natural, pesticide and herbicide-free beef cattle.

"I think our standards are tougher than just organic," McGee said. "We keep about 110 brood heifers on the place and raise our own replacement brood stock."

The 60-year-old farmer chuckles when he talks about starting up a new business in the midst of the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression.

"My timing could have been better," he said. "But we've managed to keep our heads above water and are selling all of our stock locally. All of our customers are repeat ones, so we're doing something right."

The realities of the current economy and of farming in general means that all family members have to pitch in doing what needs be done.

"I work over at a stockyard in Georgia on Mondays."

McGee said. "So I'm here six days a week and my son fills in for me when I'm gone."

The days run from can see to can't see in the summer and from dark until dark thirty in the winter when precious daylight hours dwindle.

It took the McGee family about a year to complete their conservation agreement, he said.

Jacqueline Oliver, land protection specialist at Upstate Forever said the typical turnaround time for a conservation agreement is more like two years.

"It varies with each land owner, but that's a pretty good average," she said.

Upstate Forever has reported a flurry of easements in the past few months as land

owners rushed to take advantage of expiring tax credits for conservation easements, she said.

There are currently bills pending in both the U.S. Senate and House to make tax incentives for conservation easements permanent. The original bill was passed in 2006 and expired at the end of 2009.

Proponents point out that donating development rights in a conservation easement often means the property owner is giving away his most valuable asset. Without enhanced easement incentives a landowner making \$50,000 a year donating an easement worth \$1 million would get a total tax break of \$90,000.

With the enhanced incentives the landowner could claim \$800,000 in tax deductions.

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