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Upstate Forever kept 3,005 acres in the green in '06

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Upstate Forever signed 15 land protection agreements on 3,005 acres in South Carolina last year, protecting nearly as much land in 2006 as in the first six years of its land trust program.

Dana Leavitt, director of the Upstate Forever Land Trust program, credited the increase to a better understanding of easements and attractive tax incentives.

A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally binding agreement that limits certain types of uses or prevents development from taking place on a piece of property.

Many people don't understand that under an easement, the property owner retains ownership, Leavitt said

"That's a misconception about giving away the property," he said. "They continue to own their land, and each conservation agreement is unique to the landowner and property."

He said the Internal Revenue Service passed a law in August that allows individuals to take up to a 50 percent deduction on their income taxes for 15 years after signing an easement.

"Before it was for five years and 30 percent, but the IRS wants to give more incentives for surrendering the development value of the property," Leavitt said. "Qualified farmers on working farms or forest land can actually take up to a 100 percent deduction."

No new conservation easements were signed between Upstate Forever and Spartanburg landowners last year, but Leavitt said two of the organization's largest easements are in the Tryon, N.C., area and constitute more than 1,200 acres.

"We're getting ready to add a couple of other tracts in 2007," Leavitt said. "We work with a number of landowners in the Campobello and Tryon area, where there is a lot of interest from the equestrian standpoint."

Another land trust agency, Spartanburg Area Conservancy, signed three easements in the Spartanburg area for a total of almost 80 acres.

"Last year was pretty average for us in terms of acres protected," said Julie Lonon, land protection coordinator for the conservancy. "We picked up 36 acres at Chinquapin Creek across from the Milliken

Research Park and added 29 acres to the Cottonwood Trail, and we also have an easement on the new hospice home built across from Chinquapin."

With the exception of the hospice acreage, which was donated by Spartanburg Regional Medical Center, Lonon said they did not have any individual landowners granting easements this year. The conservancy used funding from the South Carolina Conservation Bank to purchase its tracts.

"Both were funded by the conservation bank to the tune of \$692,000 for Chinquapin and \$415,000 for the Cottonwood addition," Lonon said. "We love having that resource there and will be calling on them again this year, but we are hoping the new tax laws will help us next year also."

Leavitt said he thinks the number of conservation easements will continue to increase as more people balk at the rapid rate at which green spaces are disappearing.

"Some folks that have traditionally loved farm and forest land are realizing the rate of development, and that now is the appropriate time to go and protect the land they love," Leavitt said. "That's essential to the quality of life and the future citizens of the Upstate and South Carolina. Without easements, the land we love and cherish will be gone."

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