



LAND CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS

Land conservation is a delicate and expensive undertaking. Land values in the Lowcountry continue to rise as our country's population continues to move to the coast. Beaufort County is an attractive location with impressive growth. With this growth, however, comes a demand for property that drives up the price.

Over its history, the Rural and Critical Land Preservation Program (RCLPP) has developed relationships with a remarkable set of partners in land conservation. These partnerships have created exciting opportunities for the program and helped to broaden the impact of the program. They have also helped to spread the cost by adding additional and matching funds to conserve significance parts of The Beaufort County landscape. Over \$40 million dollars of matching funds have been spent by Partners to purchase land. This helps to further stretch County dollars.

Beaufort County Open Land Trust

Beaufort County Open Land Trust permanently protects land by working with private citizens and communities. The Trust accepts donations of properties and helps landowners establish legal restrictions that limit harmful use and development. To carry out its purpose, the Trust acquires strategically important parcels of land, negotiates appropriate agreements, seeks financial support, and promotes public interest in and awareness of the Lowcountry environment.

BCOLT is a strategic partner with the program, helping to advise on the strategic direction of land conservation in the Lowcountry. Since 2000, BCOLT is the long-term steward of conservation easements acquired in the program and enforces these easements to ensure the Program's intent is followed.

Rural and Critical is managed by the BCOLT through contracted services. In 2010, BCOLT became the RCLP program administrator. This arrangement has proven to be successful in directing conservation toward a community-based approach and using resources in an efficient manner.

Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort – REPI Program

The Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI) supports cost-sharing partnerships authorized by Congress between the military Services, private conservation groups, and state and local governments to protect military test and training capabilities and conserve land. These win-win partnerships acquire easements or other interests in land from willing sellers to preserve compatible land uses and sustain wildlife habitat near installations and ranges where the military operates, tests, and trains.

The Rural and Critical Lands Program has a multiyear agreement with the Beaufort Marine Corps Air Station to acquire easements around the Beaufort Marine Corps Air Station Installation. (See attached map).

The partnership allows the program to acquire lands to support its mission on rural land protection and the MCAS Beaufort is protection from high density encroachment, retaining its long-term viability and mission. This partnership promotes three goals: land conservation, economic development in Beaufort County, and our nation's defense.

The Program and MCAS Beaufort split the costs of acquiring REPI easements or occasionally the County will acquire the fee title to land and the REPI easement will purchase a receive a restrictive easement for their 50% contribution. This is the case with Ihly, Lucky, McLeod, Battey-Wilson, and the Emma Adams tracts.

Natural Resource Conservation Service – U.S. Department of Agriculture

The RCL Program partners with the US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. For more than 75 years, NRCS and its predecessor agencies have worked in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes.

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)(formerly Farm and Ranchland Protection Program or FRPP) that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the RCL Program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The Program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland and pastureland.

Under the Agricultural land component, NRCS may contribute up to 50% of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement. Where NRCS determines that grasslands of special environmental significance will be protected, NRCS may contribute up to 75% of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement.

The Program, NRCS and BCOLT have been very successful in protecting viable agricultural land on St. Helena Island. This program is among the most successful in the southeast and has been a stabilizing force on the community's landscape.

Municipalities

Relationships with municipalities have been a win-win for the program. Town of Bluffton and the Town of Hilton Head Island, as examples, have been excellent partners contributing 50% matches to RCLPP funding for properties that meet the goals of both the County's program and the Town's Program. These municipalities often will hold title to properties purchases through the program, accepting the cost on ongoing maintenance and stewardship.

Other Partners

Although the Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, NRCS, and municipalities are the most frequent partners used by the RCL Program to contribute funds for land protection, other organizations and agencies including BCOLT, SC Department of Natural Resources, BC Stormwater Utility, have also been, and still are, important partners.