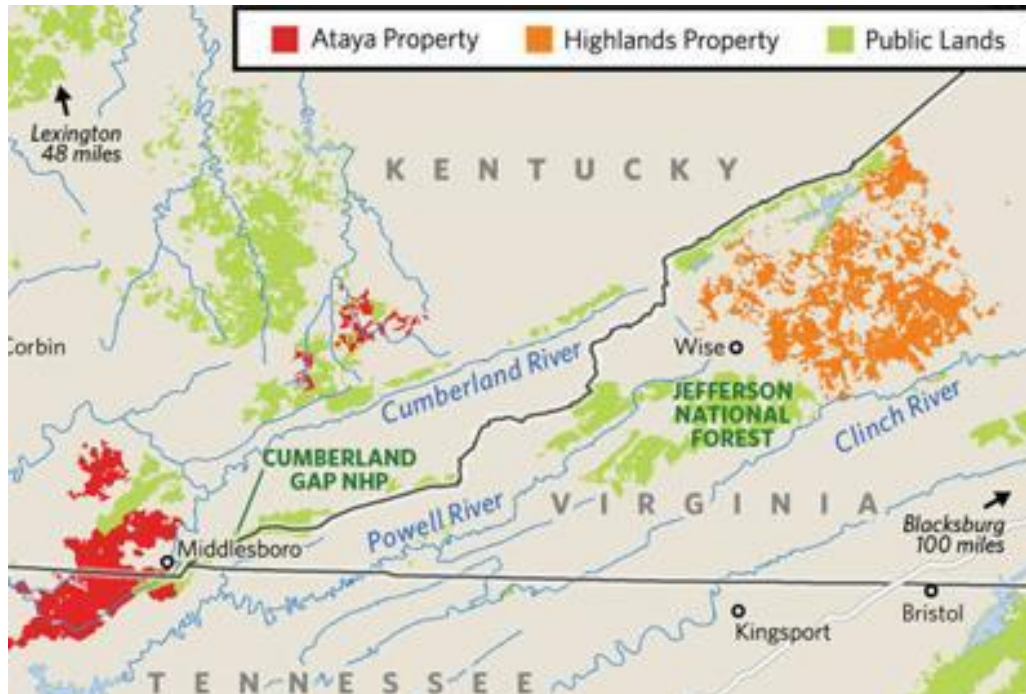


Nature Conservancy obtains 153,000 acres of local forest

16 July 2019



As shown here, the Virginia acquisition covers a significant amount of property east and north of Wise, including numerous tracts crossing Wise and Dickenson counties from the Breaks toward St. Paul and Castlewood.

A project of The Nature Conservancy has acquired 153,000 acres of forest land in far Southwest Virginia.

The Cumberland Forest Project has acquired a total quarter-million acres of working forest land in the central Appalachian coalfields of Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, The Nature Conservancy announced in a Monday morning press release. That includes 100,000 acres in Kentucky and Tennessee, first announced in April, and the just-announced Virginia property.

A map of the Virginia acquisition covers a significant amount of property east and north of Wise, including numerous tracts crossing Wise and Dickenson counties from the Breaks toward St. Paul and Castlewood.

"The Nature Conservancy plans to manage the property as a working forest, using sustainable practices to improve and maintain the health of the forests," according to the release. "The project is designed to protect and restore wildlife habitat, secure clean water for people and nature and sequester atmospheric carbon to mitigate climate change. At the same time, it aims to support outdoor recreation and foster important investments in local economies."

The Virginia property, known regionally as Highlands-Lonesome Pine, “features vast landscapes of climate resilient forest and more than 500 miles of headwater streams that feed into globally important waters including the Clinch and larger Tennessee River systems,” the release states. Its forests and streams support 20 federally listed threatened mussel species in the Clinch River and more than 130 types of fish.

Also, these forests and streams are critical to downstream water quality and public water supplies, the group noted.

“The Highlands-Lonesome Pine property complements other existing conservation lands on High Knob and Pine Mountain, and it will serve as a forested backdrop for outdoor destinations like Breaks Interstate Park and the developing Clinch River State Park.”

The Highlands-Lonesome Pine property was acquired from an investment fund managed by The Forestland Group.

“We are very excited by the prospect of The Nature Conservancy’s ongoing management of the Highlands-Lonesome Pine property and we look forward to our continued working relationship in the future to promote a shared vision of protecting sustainably managed working forests to ensure that the important economic, environmental and social co-benefits are available for future generations,” said Forestland Group President and CEO Blake Stansell.

Community Impact

The Nature Conservancy says it will continue to support existing land uses including hunting, trail riding and other outdoor recreation.

“We have a long history of working with local communities, landowners and other partners in the Clinch Valley to support sustainable development through forestry, agriculture, outdoor recreation and mined land reclamation,” said Clinch Valley program Director Brad Kreps. “Through our management of this new property, we can build on our existing momentum with local people and partners to significantly scale up our positive impact on the region.”

Due to the acquisition’s size, The Nature Conservancy went beyond traditional funding approaches. The Cumberland Forest Project will take advantage “of the fact that sustainable forestry can generate revenues through timber harvesting, carbon offset sales and recreational leases. In this case, The Nature Conservancy will manage a limited partnership funded by investment capital that aims to achieve valuable conservation and social outcomes alongside financial returns.”

Also, the release states, The Nature Conservancy is working with the University of Virginia's College at Wise "to assess opportunities to support local businesses and community development projects that are sustainable and nature-based, including but not limited to outdoor recreation and tourism, forestry and the reclamation of abandoned mined lands."

"The biodiversity of southwest Virginia offers tremendous opportunities for ecological education, outdoor adventure and recreation as well as economic revitalization of the region," said UVa-Wise Associate Vice Chancellor for Economic Development and Engagement Shannon Blevins. "The Nature Conservancy continues to find ways to preserve unique natural resources as well as opportunities for development, which aids in the revitalization of the region. Their leadership in this regard is a valuable part of the region's economic development strategy."

Mineral Rights

The release notes that the local properties are divided into a surface estate, owned by the forest project, and a subsurface mineral estate "which will continue to be owned by third parties . . . The Nature Conservancy has no control over those parties' mining activities on the properties; however, the project intends to work with regulators and mining companies using a collaborative, science-based approach to advocate for best environmental practices and restoration that can minimize the impacts of mineral extraction."

Further, it states, the forest project "expects to receive compensation for any impacts these existing mining operations have on the properties' forests and infrastructure and can direct those funds to restoration and conservation activities. In addition, the project is expected to receive royalties, which it plans to contribute in their entirety to third-party community organizations to support local economic and community development efforts. The Nature Conservancy also intends to work with Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy to restore other abandoned mined lands features on the property."

"The Nature Conservancy's management of this property creates potentially exciting synergies as our coalfields region continues to diversify its economy by reclaiming former mined lands to new economic uses," said Mike Quillen, Region 1 chairman for the GO Virginia economic development initiative.

The Highlands-Lonesome Pine property "is one of the largest blocks of undivided forest land in the Central Appalachians," according to the release. "The Nature Conservancy will build upon well-established partnerships with state natural resource agencies and other conservation organizations to secure long-term conservation protections for key areas of the property," including conservation and open space easements and long-term forest carbon management agreements.

Source: http://www.thecoalfieldprogress.com/coalfield_progress/nature-conservancy-obtains-acres-of-local-forest/article_006feb32-a744-11e9-b181-473bc2393d9a.html