CASE STUDY: HOKE COMMUNITY FOREST
ENGAGING COMMUNITIES AND PROTECTING FORESTS

SUMMARY

CHALLENGES
- Rapid Growth
- Distressed Economic Climate
- Tax Revenue Loss
- Proximity to Ft. Bragg

SOLUTIONS
- Pre-Acquisition Discussions with County
- Community Forestry

RESULTS
- Fundraising
- Water Quality Protection
- Habitat Protection / Endangered Species Restoration
- Reduced Military Base Encroachment
- Expanded Recreational Opportunities
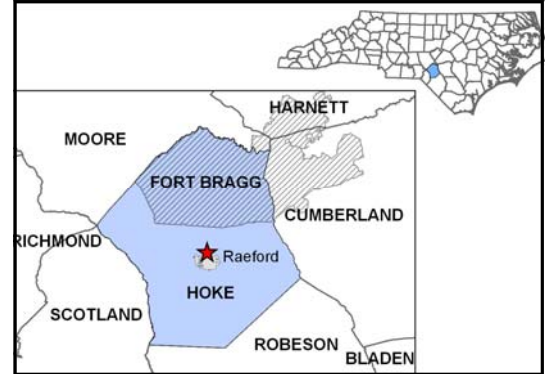- Sustainable Rural Economic Development

LESSONS LEARNED
- Alternative Strategies Work
- Building Partnerships is Essential
- Capacity Building is Key

Project: Hoke Community Forest

Project Summary: The Conservation Fund (TCF) and its partners are working to establish North Carolina's first community forest in Hoke County. The community forest will enable Hoke County to protect wildlife habitat and riparian buffers, restore the longleaf pine ecosystem, create recreational opportunities for residents, and create economic opportunities for the community (through pine straw raking and sustainable timber harvesting).

Partners:

- *Local Partners:* Hoke County, Hoke County Parks & Recreation Department, Raeford-Hoke Economic Development Commission, Town of Raeford, Blue Springs-Hoke County Community Development Corporation

- *Regional / Statewide Partners:* Sandhills Area Land Trust, NC Rural Economic Development Center, NC Community Development Initiative, NC Association of Community Development Corporations

- *Federal Partner:* Fort Bragg / US Department of Defense, US Fish & Wildlife Service

Location: Hoke County borders Fort Bragg and is located in the Sandhills region of North Carolina, characterized by rolling hills and deep coarse sandy soils. The region is noted for the longleaf pine / wiregrass ecosystem that thrives here.

Pine/ Wiregrass Ecosystem

Challenges:

- *Rapid Growth*: Despite being a rural county, Hoke County is one of North Carolina's fastest growing counties. It has the third highest growth rate in the state, with the second highest projected growth rate as well. The population is expected to grow dramatically over the next four years, with the influx of 40,000 new military and civilian personnel.

- *Distressed Economic Climate*: In recent years, Hoke County has undergone severe economic distress as a result of agricultural downturns and manufacturing job losses. Very few commercial businesses are located here – most of the tax revenue comes from property taxes; and most residents shop where they work – in other counties (62.1% of residents commute to work in another county).

- *Tax Revenue Loss*: Rural counties, such as Hoke County, can suffer significant economic losses when land is conserved within their borders. Much of the income that land previously generated as privately-held parcels are lost when the land is conserved and taken off the tax rolls. For counties facing economic distress, even a small loss of tax revenues can be significant.

- *Proximity of Fort Bragg*: Fort Bragg borders Hoke County and while such proximity can bring job creation and other economic benefits to surrounding communities, it also creates challenges. Although military-related personnel are contributing to the rise in residential demand in Hoke County and benefit from services the county provides, Fort Bragg pays no property taxes. Fort Bragg is also scheduled to expand in the coming year, only spurring additional growth. As a military training base, one of Fort Bragg's high priorities is to reduce encroachment and new development from surrounding areas (which may limit training). There are also high priorities for environmental protection of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker habitat on the base. Balancing the encroachment and environmental protection issues of Fort Bragg with the development priorities of the county is a challenge.

Younger pine stands at Hoke Community Forest

How Challenges Were Met:

- *Pre-Acquisition Discussions with County:* Before The Conservation Fund (TCF) purchased the former International Paper tract that would eventually become the Hoke Community Forest, TCF had a series of conversations with

Nicholson Creek, Hoke County
Site under conservation easement

the County about what would happen to the property after it left TCF's hands. TCF rarely holds onto conservation lands it purchases. The County actually informed TCF that this was the first time any conservation group had ever come to them first to discuss their plans about an acquisition.

- *Community Forestry:* TCF and Hoke County needed to find a solution that would reach the goals of both groups—conservation and continued income generation. The concept of a community forest seemed an ideal solution. TCF would help Hoke County raise the money to purchase the property and establish a community forest. In turn, Hoke County would gain local control of the property and reap the benefits of community-owned forest management activities – recreation, habitat preservation, water quality protection and income generation from pine-straw raking and sustainable timber harvesting.

Results:

- *Fundraising:* TCF and Hoke County have raised over $900,000 in acquisition funds and a portion of the property will be subdivided and transferred to Hoke County later this year. We continue to raise funds for Hoke County to use in acquiring the remaining acreage.

- *Water Quality Protection*: An extensive stream system comprises about a third of the property. In the sale to Hoke County, an easement will be placed over the riparian area, ensuring both the water quality and hardwoods in the buffer will remain protected.

- *Habitat Protection / Endangered Species Restoration*: Outside of the riparian buffer, the loblolly pine forest is slowly being restored to longleaf pine forest, expanding the red-cockaded woodpecker habitat in the area.

Hardwood stream buffer at Hoke Community Forest

Tools Used:
- *Conservation Tools:* Land and Easement Acquisition, Conservation Fundraising, Ecosystem/ Forest Management
- *Community Development Tools:* Building Partnerships, Community Outreach and Engagement, Sustainable Economic Development

Lessons Learned:
- *Alternative Strategies Work:* Non-traditional solutions to conservation can provide the same conservation benefits, while addressing some of the challenges that come with conserving land, especially in rural areas where the loss of revenue can create significant financial shortfall.

- *Building Partnerships is Essential*: Given the relatively novel concept of community forestry in the southeast US, partnerships were essential to establishing community and statewide support of this project. Partnerships were also important in engaging as much of the community as possible in the process of establishing the community forest.

- *Reduced Military Base Encroachment*: Adjacent to the Fort Bragg buffer, the Hoke Community Forest will ensure the area remains undeveloped.

- *Expanded Recreational Opportunities*: A grant from the NC Parks & Recreation Trust Fund will enable the county to enhance the recreational opportunities on site to include horse trails, walking paths, fishing and canoe access points, and camping sites.

- *Sustainable Rural Economic Development*: A long-term management plan will include sustainable timber harvesting and pine straw raking, which is estimated to bring in ten times more revenue than taxes from a privately-owned parcel would have generated.

- *Capacity Building is Key*: Communities may feel ill-equipped to manage or maintain a community forest. Ensuring that a long-term forest management plan is in place, working with the local county forester, continually engaging county leaders in every step of the community forest development process and recruiting the local land trust to manage easements on the property alleviated many of the initial concerns about undertaking such an endeavor.

From left to right: Mike Wood, Hoke County Manager; David Jackson, Hoke County Parks and Recreation; Jeff Campbell, Ford Foundation; Don Porter, Hoke County Economic Development Commission; Wayne Fawbush, Ford Foundation