

Executive Summary

Introduction

Southern Jackson County—known throughout this plan as the Headwaters District—is one of the most ecologically and culturally significant regions in North Carolina. Encompassing six townships from Caney Fork to Cashiers, the District includes portions of the Eastern Continental Divide and the headwaters of the Tuckasegee, Chattooga, Whitewater, and Horsepasture Rivers. These waters eventually flow to both the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, underscoring the District’s role in regional and national hydrology.

The Headwaters District is defined by steep slopes, fertile bottomlands, rare habitats, and more than 125 miles of coldwater streams. It supports a unique agricultural economy, nationally significant outdoor recreation areas, and beloved mountain communities. However, these natural assets face increasing pressure from development, tourism, and natural disasters.

The purpose of this plan is to recommend actionable strategies for promoting both responsible development and conservation in the District and the greater County. It is not a regulatory document, but a data-driven and community-supported framework to guide decision-making and balance growth with conservation.

Public Engagement

Effective public engagement was central to shaping this Conservation Plan. Over the year-long planning process, the project team applied a multi-pronged approach to involve residents, stakeholders, and partners at every stage. A Steering Committee met monthly to advise the process and 37 Key Stakeholders representing the 6 townships and the subject areas of agriculture, tourism, economy, recreation, education, conservation, and development provided in-depth insights and feedback. Additionally, state, regional, and local partners were consulted. Two public meetings and a broadly distributed survey provided the community with multiple opportunities to participate.

The Steering Committee and Key Stakeholders helped shape the recommendations detailed in Chapter 5. This inclusive process ensured the plan was grounded in local knowledge, built community ownership, and aligned conservation goals with the County’s vision for the future.

Stakeholder groups emphasized farmland preservation, trout stream protection, outdoor recreation, and rural character as top priorities. The engagement process blended with the data and mapping analysis, natural resource inventory, existing plans, ordinances, and national case study review; all contributed to the key findings, priorities, and recommendations in this plan.

Key Findings

Exceptional Natural Assets:

- Nearly every major waterway in the District is trout-classified, with additional designations for High Quality and Outstanding Resource Waters.
- 85% of the District’s land remains forested, with extensive rare species habitat and unique geological features.
- 35,000 acres of farmland soils of statewide or local importance sustain diversified agricultural operations, from livestock and orchards to Fraser fir cultivation.

Increasing Development Pressures:

- Rapid growth driven by second-home development and tourism is fragmenting farmland, threatening water quality, and straining infrastructure.
- By 2040, as much as 3,000 acres of farmland in Jackson County could be lost to development.
- Steep slope development presents risks to safety, property, and water quality.

Community Values and Support:

- Public engagement revealed overwhelming support for conservation initiatives. More than 90% of survey respondents endorsed programs to protect land, water, and habitats. Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of protecting farmland, streams, ridgelines, and scenic vistas while supporting sustainable economic opportunities.

Conservation Priorities

The planning process identified five core priorities:

- 1.** Safeguard water resources — Protect headwaters, trout streams, and riparian buffers to maintain water quality.
- 2.** Direct growth away from sensitive lands — Avoid development on steep slopes, flood-prone areas, and near critical habitats.
- 3.** Preserve farmland and working forests — Ensure the viability of agriculture and forestry through easements, incentives, and stewardship.
- 4.** Connect landscapes and communities — Expand trail systems, greenways, and habitat corridors to enhance ecological function, recreation access, and public health.
- 5.** Promote stewardship and outdoor economy — Align conservation with economic vitality by investing in recreation, branding, and education initiatives.

Best Practices

The plan outlines practical best management practices tailored to three key audiences:

County Leaders and Planners:

Enhance public education and enforcement of existing ordinances, update ordinances for conservation subdivisions, adopt stronger water resource protections, and integrate conservation mapping into permitting.

Developers and Builders:

Cluster development to preserve open space, maintain buffers along streams, and incorporate natural infrastructure.

Private Landowners:

Voluntarily enroll in agricultural and forestry programs, adopt erosion control measures, and consider conservation easements.

These practices provide flexible pathways to conservation that respect property rights while protecting shared resources.



***“We successfully
attracted
people here –
now it’s time
to reevaluate
the language
to embrace
stewardship
of place” –
how can we
advance sensible
development
that respects the
landscape that
will ultimately
shape the region
over the next 30
years?”***

— Steering Committee

Recommendations for the County Commissioners

While the plan provides a comprehensive framework, several actions stand out as most critical for consideration by the Jackson County Board of Commissioners. For more detailed information about each recommendation, reference Chapter 5 in the plan.

1. Promote Responsible Development

- Prioritize site scale stormwater management to prevent sedimentation and nutrient loading in waterways.
- Incentivize low-impact development practices by offering expedited permitting for developers who commit to them.
- Educate on the financial benefits to the County and developers by implementing responsible development practices.
- Develop a responsible development scorecard to be used during the development review process.
- Recognize and award existing and future projects that meet and exceed development criteria.

2. Protect and Enhance Farmland

- Increase County support for farmland preservation and conservation easement programs.
- Expand participation in Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD/EVAD) and Present - Use Value (PUV).
- Provide tax and incentive programs that make agriculture more competitive against development pressures and facilitate generational preservation of family farms.

3. Establish a Headwaters Stewardship Council

- Convene a permanent, cross-sector body to coordinate conservation strategies across the District and advise the County Commissioners.
- Include representatives from County government, land trusts, farmers, developers, land managers from local, state, and federal agencies, and community leaders.

- Promote education and understanding of the County's natural resources and guide implementation of recommendations in this plan.

4. Strengthen and Enforce Land Use Ordinances

- Reinforce existing watershed protection measures by formalizing riparian buffer standards along waterways.
- Address weaknesses in the water recharge ordinance.
- Update conservation subdivision requirements to prioritize clustered development and open space preservation.
- Expand protections for steep slopes and ridgelines to reduce hazards and safeguard scenic resources.

5. Invest in Connectivity and Outdoor Recreation

- Partner with regional initiatives to expand trail networks and create expedition-level hiking and biking routes.
- Improve access and parking at key trailheads, while ensuring stewardship of natural areas.
- Leverage outdoor recreation as a cornerstone of the County's economy.

6. Implement Priority Conservation Projects

- Use the suitability maps included in this plan to guide development toward appropriate and safe places and to direct land acquisition, easements, and targeted conservation projects.
- Focus on properties adjacent to existing public lands, stream corridors, and farmland soils of statewide importance.
- Partner with local and national land trusts that specialize in land acquisition and conservation finance strategies.

The **Headwaters District Conservation Plan** provides Jackson County with an authoritative, community-driven roadmap to protect its most valuable resources. It recognizes that conservation is not an obstacle to growth, but a prerequisite for long-term prosperity, safety, and quality of life.

By acting on the key recommendations outlined above, County Leaders and Planners, Developers and Builders, and Private Landowners can all take meaningful steps to:

- ▶ **Protect the County's headwaters and farmland.**
- ▶ **Reduce the safety risks and costs of unmanaged growth.**
- ▶ **Strengthen the outdoor recreation economy.**
- ▶ **Preserve the cultural and ecological heritage of Southern Jackson County for future generations.**

The plan does not require wholesale adoption to be effective.

Implementing even select recommendations will have significant positive impact, positioning Jackson County as a leader in balancing conservation and development in Western North Carolina.