

# The Enquirer-Journal

## **Agreement ensures farmland remains for farming**

by Heather J. Smith  
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Frank Howey wants acre after rolling acre of his family farm to remain untouched by development forever

He is the first Union County farmer to participate in a collaborative program with the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and the Catawba Land Conservancy.

The Preservation Trust Fund awarded grants to the Catawba Lands Conservancy. It, in turn, used \$286,446 to purchase preservation easement for a 114-acre section of Frank Howey Farm of Monroe.

This is the second year the conservancy got a preservation easement for the farm.

"It's a large farm, about 900 contiguous acres, that we're securing the easement rights to at the rate of a little more than 100 acres a year," Catawba Land Conservancy Associate Director RoxAnne Smith said.

Only 230 of Howey's roughly 4,000-acre Union County farm is now protected, but the conservancy plans to secure 100-acre parcels each year until the farm is covered.

Conservation easements are legal agreements between a conservation agency and a land owner to keep the land in its present condition. An encumbrance is added to the deed, stating the land may only be used as a working farm. No commercial, industrial or residential development is allowed.

Giving up development rights forever was a difficult choice, Frank Howey said. The potential for financial gain is significant. But he wants to pass on a successful farm to his two children and ensure future generations can grow their own food.

"I could have made much more by selling some of my land, but our lives are really just a speck compared to the age of the earth," he said. "We need to do what we can while we're here to make sure we'll always have a way to feed ourselves."

Farmland is the most valuable resource to North Carolina, Howey said.

"Most of the country's population lives either at the east coast or the west coast. We're all bunched together here," Howey said. "We need to keep our food production close to the population to cut down on transport costs, air pollution and spoiled produce."

His farm is less than an hour from the state's largest city, which is good for business but worrisome for land availability.



The roughly 200 acres visible behind Frank Howey makes up a part of the family farm land he hopes will remain for farming only. (RICK CRIDER/Enquirer-Journal)

"People move here from Charlotte because they enjoy the country feel to the area, but they destroy what they seek," he said.

Union County's population boomed in the last decade. Investors bought many acres of farmland to be subdivided for residential use. Once developed, the land will never again be used for food production.

Vanishing farmland prompted the N.C. General Assembly to create the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, N.C. Agriculture and Consumer Services Manager of Environmental Services Dewitt Hardee said.

"Farmers are really feeling the pressure from development," Hardee said. "We're putting up money from the trust fund and working with other agencies to make sure farmland stays zoned agriculture and is always used for farming."

Grants are an investment in the local economy, he said. Roughly a quarter of the state's economy comes from crop and livestock farms. North Carolina farm sales ranked eighth nationwide in 2009. Union County ranks first among 100 counties in poultry raised for meat. Large amounts of corn, wheat, soybeans and tobacco are raised by county farmers.

"But if we don't have the land resources to use for food production, we'll lose a large part of our economy," Hardee said.

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