

Farm acreage forever

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By Sarah Melton



Gerald Frye feeds one of his Black Angus Beef cows on the 206-acre farm in western Lincoln County. Gerald, along with his wife Leslie, completed a conservation easement with the Catawba Lands Conservancy to ensure the property will remain a working farm instead of a housing development. *Seth Mabry / LTN Photo*

Gerald and Leslie Frye no longer have to worry that their 206-acre cow farm will one day be demolished and turned into a subdivision.

The couple completed a conservation easement with the Catawba Lands Conservancy Sept. 20 to protect their Flay Road property, which is near the Lincoln/Cleveland county line.

A conservation easement is a legal agreement with the property owner that designates the land for a certain purpose, said Brenna Sowder, communications coordinator for the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

"In the Fries' case, they have conserved their property as a working farm so it will always be a working farm," she said. "It will prevent the land from becoming a housing development."

Catawba Lands Conservancy has been working on the Fries' conservation easement for two years. Funding for the easement came from Walmart, N.C. Ecosystem Enhancement Program and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program grants.

"When we conserve a piece of land, we are committed to making sure that, the agreement legally established by that easement is sustained forever," Sowder said.

"We are obligated to monitor that property on an annual basis so there is also a small portion of that money that is used for continued stewardship of the land."

The Catawba Lands Conservancy has worked with around 100 farms in North Carolina and is always looking to help more farmers, Sowder said.

"People who love farming ... if we can make it possible for them to continue that legacy, I think that is important," she said.

Even though the Fries wouldn't sell their agricultural acreage for development, the conservancy ensures that even if something were to happen to them, future owners wouldn't be able to go against their wishes either.

The conservation easement has reestablished Gerald Frye's love and passion for what he does on the farm.

"I enjoy it," he said. "I enjoy doing all the work, but there was always a nagging, negative feeling about it. I'd be out there clearing some land or doing some work and it would be hard and extensive.

"I'd be thinking, how foolish I am wasting my time and money doing this because I know, as soon as I am gone, bulldozers are going to come in and level it all off because it will be developed. That always gave me a bittersweet feeling."

But now the Fries do not have to worry about bulldozers turning their land into a housing subdivision or commercial property. It will always remain a farming or agriculture piece of land.

"I feel a new importance about what I am doing," Gerald Frye said. "It is not going to be a shopping center in 10 years. It is going to remain here as open farmland. That gives you a greater sense of need to go out and do these things to take care of the land."

Gerald Frye said negative stereotypes are sometimes associated with conservation easements. People think they are "giving up" their land, when in fact, they are doing something remarkable for the community, he said.

"You are preserving a farm and you are safeguarding it in manner you cannot do in any other way," Gerald Frye said. "You gain such a pleasant feeling."

The Fries bought the first chunk of land, 140 acres, in 1992, and then purchased the remaining 66 acres in 2006. Initially, the couple knew very little about farming.

But it had been Gerald Frye's lifelong dream to live and work on a farm. They stayed in an old farmhouse on the property until construction finished on their new home several years later.

The Fries brought cattle onto the farm in the mid-1990's. They normally keep around 60 mother cows and then the calves are sold at auctions when they reach about eight months old.

The mother cows are pregnant for nine-and-a-half months and usually have one calf per year. Leslie Frye enjoys caring for the calves.

"I really enjoy the cow-calf operation," Leslie Frye said. "It is very interesting. Cows are very similar to people. You have good mothers. You have bad mothers. It's just been a whole different experience."

Of course, it is hard not to get attached to the animals, but the Fries find comfort in knowing that they have been raised with a lot of love.

"As an animal lover, you might say that is kind of strange for a guy to be raising cattle for beef," Gerald Frye said. "As long as we are a meat society, someone has to raise the cattle for that. The cattle here and all the farmers I know of treat their cattle humanely. They are not abused. They are not neglected."

The Fries credit Lincoln Water & Soil Conservation District for helping them learn about farming. Although the farm has been in operation for years, the Frye's are always learning.

"It's been a learning process all the way through and it's wonderful," Gerald Frye said. "I've never worked this hard with so small return on money. But I found that every year that goes by, I love it more. Maybe it's good I didn't find it as a young man. I may have starved."

The Fries read about conservation easements in magazines and were put in touch with the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

"The more I am around them, the more I am impressed what with they are trying to do," Gerald Frye said of the Conservancy. "They are not a bunch of stuffed shirts. They are nice people. They are really dedicated to trying to conserve open land and protect our environment."

Some farms have several employees to keep operations running smoothly. But at the Frye farm, it is just a husband and wife team doing all the work and there are no plans to change that either.

"People talk about retirement and you know, I can't say that word," Gerald Frye said. "It is a matter of how long I can enjoy it. My mind retired a long time ago, but as long as I can creep around out there, I will take a stab at it."

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