

BOX CREEK WILDERNESS

November 3, 2016

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Media Contact:

Jeff Fisher, CEO Unique Places, 919-632-0161

7,000-ACRE BOX CREEK WILDERNESS PERMANENTLY PROTECTED

Marion, N.C.—One of the largest conservation easements donated by an individual in the history of North Carolina was recently recorded in Rutherford and McDowell counties. It permanently protects the 7,000-acre Box Creek Wilderness, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains south of Marion, N.C.

Tim Sweeney, Cary resident and founder of Epic Games, donated the conservation easement to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

“Box Creek Wilderness is a critical, rare, and unexpected natural area in the western foothills,” says Kevin Caldwell, a wildlife biologist with Mountains to Sea Ecological. “Ecologists documented over 130 rare and watch-list plant and wildlife species, and several new-to-science wildlife and plant species, including three moths and a new spiderwort species. Three new-to-science natural communities were documented, one of which has a vast hillcane (native bamboo) ground layer, and four natural communities never documented east of Murphy or Brevard. It ranks in the top one percent of Natural Heritage Areas in North Carolina and holds the highest possible rank for a property.”

Conserving Box Creek Wilderness not only protects the rare habitats found at the site, but also helps form a natural connector between conserved lands in the South Mountains and Pisgah National Forest—providing wildlife populations with avenues to migrate across the landscape as needed.

For years, Box Creek Wilderness was under threat of being fragmented due to a utility condemnation lawsuit filed by Rutherford Electric Membership Corporation (REMC). The proposed power line was to cut through several miles of globally rare and imperiled habitat.

Ultimately, the lawsuit was settled following the USFWS’s involvement in protecting the site, spurred by a dialogue stewarded by U.S. Senator Richard Burr. Instead of cutting through Box Creek Wilderness, the power line will be built along an existing road corridor.

“I’m grateful for the efforts of Senator Burr to help protect Box Creek Wilderness,” said Tim Sweeney. “And I’m grateful for the whole Fish and Wildlife Service team’s tireless efforts to preserve vital North Carolina natural areas in partnership with conservation-minded landowners like me.”

Efforts to organize the permanent conservation of the site were led by Jeff Fisher, CEO of the land management and real estate consulting firm Unique Places LLC. “The cards are stacked against the private landowner in eminent domain litigation in many ways, so reaching a settlement required a lot of hard work and resourcefulness from many team members,” said Fisher. “Fortunately, we had a very determined landowner, and our team was able to demonstrate to important stakeholders that conservation and energy infrastructure can coexist responsibly.”

Many locals also supported the efforts to save Box Creek Wilderness, writing letters of support, signing a petition, and joining numerous community hikes, nature tours, and running events hosted at the site.

According to Elly Wells, who led community outreach for the project, “Since 2012, when the efforts to conserve this landscape were made public, hundreds of community members added their voices to the call for the vast unfragmented acreage of Box Creek Wilderness to be protected, recognizing the ecological and historical significance of this remarkable natural area in their backyards. The success of this conservation project is a victory for everyone who contributed to the effort. Today’s announcement is both an acknowledgment of and a thank you to each one of them.”
