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Triangle Land Conservancy Transfers 308 Acres to Johnston County for First County-Owned Nature Preserve

A 308-acre tract of land in Johnston County will become the County's first publicly-owned nature preserve, marking a major milestone for conservation and outdoor recreation in one of North Carolina's fastest-growing regions.

Rose Dairy Farm is in the Neuse River Lowgrounds, one of the largest undeveloped wilderness areas remaining in the state. Due to its proximity to Smithfield and I-95, the tract faced high development pressure. Thanks to funding from the North Carolina Land and Water Fund, Complete the Trail Program, Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, the Wilkins family, Johnston County, The Winston Family Foundation, and TLC donors, Triangle Land Conservancy purchased the property in 2024 with the plan to transfer it to Johnston County.

"We are deeply grateful to Triangle Land Conservancy for partnering with us to permanently protect this 308 acres for the people of Johnston County," said Patrick Harris, Chairman, Johnston County Board of Commissioners.

"This property represents not only an investment in recreation and education, but also in preserving the rural character and natural beauty that make Johnston County special. For years, Johnston County and Triangle Land Conservancy have worked hand-in-hand to protect important lands across our community, often leveraging local funding to secure additional conservation resources. As Johnston County continues to grow, this partnership demonstrates our ongoing commitment to balancing that growth with thoughtful conservation efforts that will benefit future generations," continued Harris.

The tract protects a significant portion of the Neuse River floodplain and surrounding wetlands, which play a critical role in filtering pollutants and improving water quality downstream. The property also reflects Johnston County's deep agricultural heritage: more than 50 acres will remain in farming use by Garrett Wildflower Seed Farm. The large fields of poppies, sunflowers, and other flowers and native grasses will make this a unique and stunning destination.

"This property represents the best of Johnston County, from farmland that supports native wildflower seed production to protection of mature forest including cypress, laurel and overcup oaks" said Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, TLC's Director of Conservation East. "This project is a

powerful example of multiple entities coming together to protect our valuable natural resources. We're grateful to the N.C. General Assembly and the Johnston County Board of Commissioners for supporting funds for this important work.”

While the future nature preserve is not yet open to the public, plans include walking trails, new fishing access, and future paddle access to Black Creek and the Neuse River. Eventually Rose Dairy Farm will also be home to the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, North Carolina’s statewide trail system stretching from the Great Smoky Mountains to the Outer Banks. The current trail route follows Devil’s Racetrack Road through this part of Johnston County, but the protection of the Rose Dairy Farm is an important first step in eventually creating a more scenic off-road trail system in this area.

Rose Dairy Farm protects a portion of the Neuse River Lowgrounds Natural Area, which the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program has identified as one of Johnston County’s most ecologically significant natural habitats due to the presence of several rare and imperiled animals and natural communities. The site also has a historic cemetery and is believed to have been along the route traveled by General William T. Sherman’s troops during the Civil War.

Funding from Johnston County helped TLC leverage additional grants from the North Carolina Land and Water Fund and the Complete the Trail Program.

“The Rose Dairy Farm property offers an incredible opportunity to connect residents with Johnston County's natural treasures in a unique and meaningful way,” said Adrian O’Neal, Director of Johnston County Parks and Open Space. “We’re excited to begin preparing the property for public access and look forward to creating a space where families can enjoy the outdoors and learn more about Johnston County’s natural resources and farming traditions.”