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Protecting the plateau

By PAM SOHN

The Land Trust for Tennessee and the Conservation Fund have helped protect at least 5,500 more acres in the Savage Gulf and Fiery Gizzard areas of the Cumberland Plateau, officials said Wednesday.

The acquisition of about 4,780 acres and a conservation easement on 718 acres will preserve the wilderness landscapes and brow lines of two fragile and rugged areas against development, said Chris Roberts, South Cumberland project manager with the Land Trust for Tennessee.

"This is a big step forward," Mr. Roberts said. "Twenty-four hundred acres protected at Fiery Gizzard raises the amount of trail protected there from 10 percent to 33 percent. And the 3,100 acres of largely brow property purchased around Savage Gulf was the last big piece -- not the last piece, but the last big piece."

The plateau region, with low land prices and beautiful unspoiled vistas, is being targeted for development by people fleeing high housing costs, financial ravages and weather catastrophes in northern states and Florida states officials have said.

Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen praised

the preservation efforts, which will mean the state will take control of much of the newly protected land surrounding already established state natural areas.

"Savage Gulf and Fiery Gizzard are true Tennessee gems, and the recent acquisition of these tracts is important to protecting the land the viewshed at South Cumberland and ensuring a quality experience for future visitors," the governor said in a statement.

Mr. Roberts said the protection effort began 30 years ago but has only begun to come to fruition in the past six months.

"It's been slow," he said. "There is still a lot more to do."

In December, 2008, the Arlington, Va.,-based Conservation Trust Fund purchased 3,705 acres at Savage Gulf from Timberland Investment Resources LLC. The fund has helped protect 150,000 acres in Tennessee over 20 years.

The fund will hold the land until the state takes ownership in the spring, according to Jean Nelson, president and executive director of the Land Trust for Tennessee.

Conservation Fund Vice President Rex Boner said the fund didn't actually spend any of its own money on the recent acquisitions, but instead floated the state at the end of a fiscal year when the purchase could be made but funds were tight.

"Difficult financial times don't decrease the importance of protecting these lands for the people," he said Wednesday.

Tom Johnson, managing director for Timberland Investment Resources, called the acquisition for protection gratifying.

"The forest lands involved at Savage Gulf have very important scenic and recreational values, and from the time they were acquired by our firm we were anxious to see them permanently

protected for the public's benefit," Mr. Johnson said.

The Fiery Gizzard, frequently listed as one of the premier backpacking destinations in the country, is "surprisingly vulnerable" because most of the trail and the lands around it are privately owned, according to Land Trust for Tennessee officials.

Mr. Roberts and Mr. Boner said the trusts and local conservation groups often raise money from members and the public to help protect important resources.

"We all know the state's broke," Mr. Roberts said. "But we're there, and we're doing what we can."