

Nature is growing on Alabamians

By Thomas Spencer -- The Birmingham News

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Green isn't just in style for the holidays. According to the Green Resource Center of Alabama's **annual Green Report**, it's becoming a year-round fashion.

The Homewood-based clearinghouse for environmental information publishes its second annual roundup of advances on the environmental front today.

The report catalogs major public land acquisitions, multiple energy conservation and pollution efforts made possible by the federal stimulus package, and a growing embrace of green building and manufacturing practices.

The Green Resource Center's founder, Scott Walton, said the report is something of a "state of the state" report on the adoption of "social, economic and environmental best practices."

"Alabama isn't doing everything right, but there is a lot of good going on and the report highlights those things," Walton said.

Among those highlighted is a \$20.9 million federal grant that is paying for programmable thermostats and new energy-efficient heating and cooling systems and kitchen equipment at prisons statewide. At Limestone Correctional Facility, it's paying for three generators that will convert wood chips into gases that can generate limited electrical power. The Department of Corrections also is building a biogas plant to convert food waste and old cooking oil into methane for use as kitchen fuel, according to the report.

The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs used federal money to insulate 800 houses of low-income Alabamians in 2009 and, with additional federal money on the way, officials estimate they'll be able to weatherize 6,500 more homes by 2012.

On the land preservation front, Little River Canyon National Preserve and Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge got money from Congress to expand. Also at Little River, The Nature Conservancy acquired 2,186 acres, some of which will be added to the preserve with the rest going to the state for a Wildlife Management Area.

In 2009, the land preservation program Forever Wild added 500 acres to its Walls of Jericho Preserve in Jackson County, 1,343 acres to the Lowndes Wildlife Management area, and 3,007 acres of rare Black Belt prairie and pine forest that adjoins the historic grounds of Old Cahawba. Forever Wild also protected more than 61,000 acres of Wildlife Management Area lands in Bibb, Tuscaloosa, Walker and Shelby counties through a 93-year lease with a timber company.

The trend toward building green continued with numerous LEED-certified building projects, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, either announced, completed or certified in 2009, including the new Children's Hospital under construction in Birmingham, Ruffner Mountain's new Nature Center and the Vestavia Hills Public Library.

The city of Birmingham has a \$2.5 million project to replace heating systems in eight city recreation center gymnasiums with geothermal ground-source heat pumps. The city expects to save about \$250,000 a year in heating and cooling costs. On the auto manufacturing front, Mercedes announced it would build a hybrid version of the MClass sport utility. Also, both Mercedes and Honda have completely eliminated the waste they had been sending to landfills, according to the report.

There also are some unusual projects out there such as the Alabama Rain Barrel Project, which was launched in Montgomery and Auburn. The project converts 55-gallon "secret syrup" barrels donated by Coca-Cola into rain barrels for water harvesting and stormwater control. It will expand across the state in 2010.

A coalition of groups on the Tennessee River put out 100 fishing line disposal bins at public fishing areas throughout the Tennessee River basin. The line can persist in nature for hundreds of years and is a danger to wildlife. The program is being expanded to lakes and reservoirs statewide.

Walton said it's gratifying to see government, corporations and organizations adopting green practices.

"People are starting to get it more than ever before," Walton said.

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