The University of Tennessee (UTK) served as the Host University for the Cooperative and Joint Venture Agreement for the Southern Appalachian Mountains Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit for the period September 15, 1999 through September 14, 2004. The cooperating federal agencies were the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Geological Service, and the U.S. Department of Energy. In addition to the host, there were nine non-federal institutions or agencies participating in the original agreement.

The Host University (UTK) coordinated a program of research, technical assistance, and educational activities related to the objectives of the SAM-CESU. UTK also coordinated planning activities with Federal Agencies and Partners to develop administrative policies for such coordination, and convened meetings to provide advice and guidance, to review annual work and multi-year plans, and to assist in evaluating the SAM-CESU. In addition to providing suitable office space and networking facilities for federal partners, UTK provided basic administrative and clerical support as well as access to campus facilities (library, laboratories, etc.) on the same basis or costs as other faculty. Grant funds were utilized in basically four general areas: travel, communications, supplies, and contractual services. A Southern Appalachian Mountains CESU role and mission statement was developed and adopted and a SAM-CESU website has been in operation since 2001.