

# Land Trust Alliance and Natural Resources Conservation Service

## 2022 Agricultural Land Easement Summit Report Executive Summary



*July 31, 2022*

*Support for Summit Design, Facilitation, and Reporting  
Clarus Consulting Group & Indufor North America*



## Executive Summary

### 1.1 Background

The [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP) was established in the 2014 Farm Bill and brought together three easement programs: the Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. ACEP provides matching funds to purchase conservation easements to protect farms, ranches and grasslands through the Agricultural Land Easement program (ALE).

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture, helps America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners conserve the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources. Under the ACEP-ALE, NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing conservation easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land.

The Land Trust Alliance is the national voice of the land trust community and the national leader in policy, standards, education, and training. The Alliance is both a conduit to NRCS for its members, as well as an advocate for Farm Bill policies that help land trusts and landowners work together to access conservation easement programs.

**Both NRCS and the Alliance are interested in continuing to support all ALE stakeholders in creating a shared understanding and alignment around this important tool for land conservation.** As a part of this shared interest, NRCS and the Alliance convened a highly successful summit in 2018 that included NRCS staff responsible for implementation of the ALE program and key stakeholders from the land trust community across the country. The summit promoted dialogue, learning, and practical solutions for the future. The 2022 summit, held June 7-9 in Jacksonville, Florida, builds on the foundation of the 2018 summit and the work of both organizations and their stakeholders over the past four years.

To learn more about ALE, NRCS and the Alliance's role, visit the [ACEP-ALE Action Center](#).

### 1.2 Purpose of the Summit

The objectives of the 2022 ALE summit, as expressed and shared by both the organizers and participants, were to:

1. Strengthen and foster partnerships between NRCS and partners from the land trust community;
2. Build clarity around ALE process and identify solutions for further improvement;
3. Celebrate achievements and outcomes from the 2018 summit; and
4. Identify priority areas for strategic growth and improvement of the ACEP-ALE program moving forward.

With these objectives in mind, summit activities and workshops were organized around the following four components:

- **Strengths:** What is working well today that we can build on in the future?
- **Challenges:** What challenges or barriers are getting in the way of success?
- **Solutions:** What solutions or actions could help address the challenges?
- **Resources:** What resources are needed to implement the solutions we identified?

To open the summit, all participants were asked, **“what could we do, discuss, or accomplish during the summit that would leave you most excited?”** Participants shared a strong desire to:

- A word collage generated from participants responses to the introductory exercise is included below. It highlights participants' focus on **learning and understanding the program, process, and people or partners**.

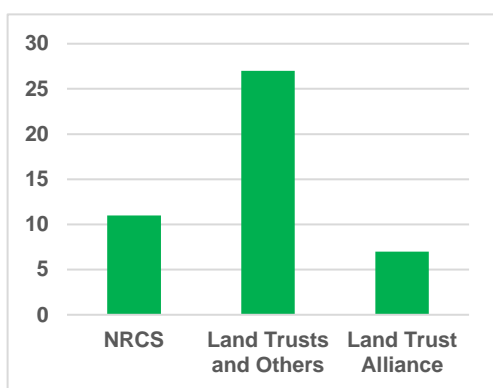


## 1.3 Participants

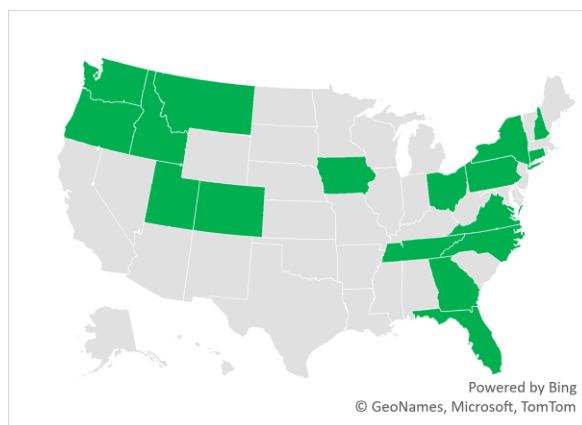
A total of 45 individuals representing land trust and conservation organizations (local, regional, and national), USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Land Trust Alliance participated in the two-day summit in Jacksonville, Florida. Land trust and conservation organization participants represented organizations actively pursuing, using and/or considering using the ACEP-ALE program from across the country. Participants also represented a range of knowledge about the program, from being an expert with significant experience to being relatively new to the ALE process.

The summit was designed and facilitated by consultants from Clarus Consulting Group and Indufor North America, firms with experience in facilitation, organizational strategy and design, particularly with the Alliance and other conservation-related organizations.

**Figure 2 Summit 2022 Participants**



**Figure 1 State Representation of ALE Summit Participants**



*ALE Summit 2022 Participants on Field Trip*

## 1.4 Key Topics Discussed and Potential Opportunities

Across summit discussions, a set of eight key topics emerged as areas of key opportunity for strengthening and advancing the ALE program and partnerships. While some topics received more focus than others, all were important to participants to carry forward through collaboration between NRCS and the Alliance. **Taken together, these strategies will help strengthen partnerships, streamline the ALE process, and ensure more working lands are protected for future generations.**

The key topics discussed and potential opportunities surrounding these eight key topics are summarized from across the summit below and elaborated on in a separate detailed report. Topics in the detailed report include Strengthening Partnerships, Streamlining the ALE Process, Co-Creating Solutions, and Summit Closing Reflections.

### 1. Communication Tools & Strategies

- **Process Flowchart:** Create and share a simple process document or workflow chart that outlines the ALE process “Happy Path” and the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors.
- **Introductory Overview:** Record and share an overview of the ALE program and the application process for an audience of new NRCS and land trust staff.
- **Status Tracker:** Develop and pilot application status tracking tool (“pizza tracker” model and/or project management software) to improve communication about status and timelines.
- **Monthly Meetings:** Establish monthly meetings between NRCS state office and land trust partners.
- **Online Portal:** Create an online portal or Dropbox to facilitate submission of program agreements and parcel contracts.
- **Landowner Communication:** Ensure better coordination between NRCS and land trust partners around site visits and interactions with landowners.
- **Pre-Application Meetings:** Host pre-application meetings with applicants that have potentially difficult parcels or land ownership scenarios.
- **Regional Working Groups:** Establish regional working groups to help address regionally specific challenges.
- **Guiding Principles:** Remember the guiding principles for partnership established at the summit, which include trust, respect, accountability, and credibility.

### 2. Certified Entities

- **Information and Guide:** Improve access to information about the pathway for land trusts to become certified entities and create and share a certified entity guide that helps prospective applicants understand the process to become certified and the benefits of doing so.
- **Workshops and Mentorship:** Host certification clinics or work sessions and provide mentorship support for organizations seeking entity certification.
- **Threshold Requirements:** Evaluate threshold of completed projects.
- **Conservation Title Easement Certification:** Certified entities recognized across all agricultural easement programs.

### 3. Appraisals

- **Capacity:** Invest in appraiser apprenticeships.
- **Length of Appraisal:** Allow appraisal value to last for one year.
- **NRCS Acquisition:** NRCS could consider advertising an RFP to establish an agency blanket purchase agreement for appraiser services.
- **Alternative Methods:** Consider alternative valuation methods.

### 4. Capacity & Sustainability

- **State-level Liaison Position(s):** Create a land trust representative position to serve as liaison with local or state NRCS office.
- **NRCS Positions:** Fill vacant positions and NRCS and consider hiring from the land trust field.
- **Communication:** Improve land trust understanding of the NRCS side of the ALE process so support communication with landowner.
- **Sustainability:** Build resilience for ACEP-ALE by sharing and documenting institutional knowledge.

### 5. Deed Development & Templates

- Update minimum deed terms in next Farm Bill and align with tax code.
- Customize minimum deed terms to meet matching requirement and incorporate minimum deed terms into template and keep updated.
- Make template more flexible so it can work for all projects.

### 6. Equity & Underserved Producers

- Explore intersections of the ALE program and heirs' property issues.
- Develop strategies for reaching, engaging, and working with underserved producers.

### 7. Success Stories

- Share more success stories to highlight the great work accomplished through ACEP-ALE. It is important information to share with NRCS national staff, members of congress and other decision makers and the general public to strengthen support for the program.

### 8. Buy Protect Sell

- Consider support for transaction expenses for land trusts.
- Facilitate Buy-Protect-Sell statutory and regulatory changes.

## 1.5 Summit Closing Reflections

The many valuable insights, takeaways, and recommendations from the 2022 ALE Summit summarized above will inform the continued improvement and delivery of ACEP-ALE. During the closing activity of the summit, participants were each asked to share one key takeaway from the summit overall. A summary of responses from this closing reflection activity are captured below.

### Overall Takeaways from the Summit

Participants were asked to reflect on the goals of the summit and to share their biggest takeaways. The following are responses from participants shared in the closing session:

- Better understanding of NRCS capacity challenges, such as 1 NRCS in-house appraiser and 1.5 deed reviewers, and how the agency is working on it
- Appreciation for all challenges from all partners and deeper understanding of the realities of implementing this program on the ground
- Reminder of the importance of investing in and sustaining communication, relationships and partnerships
- Insight into how differently things are done across states and regions (explains complications)
- Re-assurance that we're all in it together, on "team conservation"
- Opportunity to zoom out and look at program nationally (put region in context)
- More knowledge and understanding of NRCS ALE process (from both the NRCS and land trust perspective)
- Inspired by colleagues and partners and appreciative of the humanity of this kind of gathering
- Reminder of how far the program has come in 15 years and how much we achieved in 2018 and since

These reflections demonstrate successful achievement of participants' goals for the summit shared in the opening activity: **learn** new insights and relevant updates about the program, **explore** ways to build on successes, **build** new and strengthen existing lines of communication, and **share** strategies and stories about how to make the program successful well into the future.