

**Land Trust Alliance and
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service**

2024 Easements Summit Executive Summary



Support for Summit Design, Facilitation, and Reporting

Clarus Consulting Group & Indufor North America



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Executive Summary

Partnership

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), assists America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners in conserving the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources. Through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), NRCS remains committed to providing financial assistance to eligible partners, ensuring that conservation easements effectively protect the agricultural use and future viability and related conservation values of eligible land.

The Land Trust Alliance (Alliance) serves as the national voice for the land trust community, leading in policy advocacy, standards, education and training. The Alliance advocates for Farm Bill funding and policies to streamline program implementation. In addition, the Alliance facilitates collaboration between land trusts and landowners in accessing conservation easement programs and serves as a conduit between the NRCS and its members.

The Alliance and NRCS are dedicated to supporting ACEP-ALE and RCPP stakeholders by fostering a shared understanding and alignment around these essential conservation tools. Through their partnership, the Alliance and NRCS held two successful summits in 2018 and 2022 where they convened NRCS staff and key stakeholders from the land trust community to strengthen participation in the programs. The 2024 summit held July 29 to August 1 in Denver, Colorado, continues the work of both organizations and their stakeholders, promoting dialogue, learning and practical solutions for advancing land conservation efforts for ACEP-ALE, and new this year, RCPP.

Programs

The [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP), established in the 2014 Farm Bill, consolidated three existing easement programs: the Wetlands Reserve Program, the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. ACEP provides funds to purchase conservation easements to protect farms, ranches, grasslands and wetlands. Within ACEP, the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) component specifically targets the conservation of agricultural lands by providing financial assistance to eligible entities for purchasing easements that safeguard the agricultural use and conservation values of these lands.

The 2018 Farm Bill increased funding for ACEP and included provisions to streamline the program's implementation. These provisions included eliminating the ALE plan requirement, allowing landowner donation and certain eligible entity expenses to satisfy match requirements, and clarifying that Certified Entities need only satisfy the regulatory deed requirements.

The [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) was established in the 2014 Farm Bill to enhance conservation solutions and promote coordination between NRCS and its partners to help producers and landowners increase the restoration and sustainable use of soil, water and wildlife habitat on a regional or watershed scale. It supports innovative and collaborative conservation efforts, offering additional resources and flexibility to address diverse conservation needs across different landscapes.

The 2014 Farm Bill implemented and funded RCPP through existing programs including ACEP, which provided consistency between the programs when used for easement projects. The 2018 Farm Bill made sweeping changes to RCPP, making it a stand-alone program.

Summit Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of the 2024 Easements Summit, as expressed and shared by both the organizers and participants, were to:

- Celebrate all the lands protected through the ACEP-ALE and RCPP programs and improvements to the programs following the 2018 and 2022 Summits.
- Continue to strengthen partnerships and foster strong working relationships between NRCS and the land trust community.
- Facilitate a better understanding around the ACEP-ALE and RCPP processes.
- Identify priority areas for strategic growth and improvement of the ACEP-ALE and RCPP programs.

Activities and workshops were organized around the following components to ensure conversations generated strengths-based, solutions-focused, and actionable ideas and priorities:

- **Networking and relationship-building:** Many participants wanted to meet and collaborate with fellow practitioners, partners, and stakeholders, strengthening both existing and new relationships.
- **Learning and professional growth:** Attendees aimed to gain knowledge, insights, and skills to enhance their effectiveness in land conservation, including understanding national perspectives and solutions to challenges.
- **Improving programs and processes:** There was a strong focus on finding strategic ways to conserve more land, improving program delivery, and implementing effective solutions.
- **Communication and contribution:** Participants sought to advocate for streamlined program practices, and enhance communication between the NRCS, land trusts, and other partners. Many were motivated by the chance to contribute meaningfully to their regions and the broader conservation community.

Figure 1: Word cloud generated from participants' responses during the opening activity.

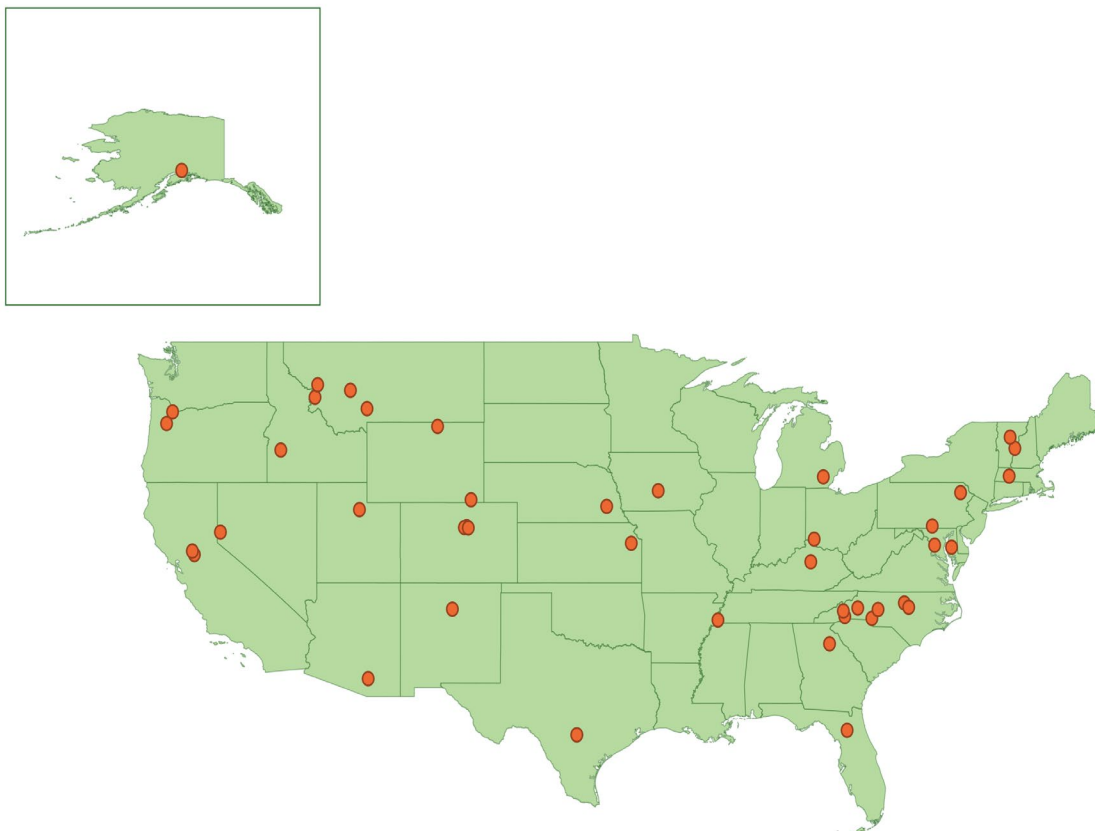


Participants

A total of 80 individuals representing land trust and conservation organizations (local, regional and national), NRCS and the Alliance participated in the four-day summit in Denver, Colorado. Land trust and conservation organization participants represented organizations actively pursuing, using and/or considering using the ACEP-ALE and RCPP programs from across the country. Participants also represented a range of knowledge about the programs, from experts with significant experience to relative newcomers to the ACEP-ALE and RCPP processes.

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. Both firms have co-facilitated prior summits and bring unparalleled knowledge of the Alliance and NRCS programs.

Figure 2: State representation of summit participants.



2024 Easements Summit Participant Reflections:

"This was such a beneficial experience to me and our organization in so many ways and I am very grateful to have been included. The connections made and the additional insights into the programs will be incredibly valuable in our conservation efforts moving forward."

"I work with a land trust and felt that the opportunity to see 'behind the curtain' and better understand NRCS processes and obstacles in the ALE and RCPP programs was very helpful."

"I continue to believe the Summit is one of the best member services that the Alliance provides. The Summit builds trust between NRCS and eligible entities that allows for more efficient and effective program delivery. It provides a forum to ID issues and develop solutions..."

Overarching Takeaways

Many valuable insights, takeaways and recommendations from the 2024 Easement Summit inform the continued improvement and delivery of ACEP-ALE and RCPP. At the end of the summit, participants were asked to reflect on the summit's goals and to share their biggest takeaways. The following are selected takeaways:

- Acknowledgment of the value of and need for current and continued opportunities for engagement and training offered by NRCS and the Alliance.
- Commitment to continue building out shared resources including checklists, frequently asked questions (FAQ) sheets, toolkits, etc. (Alliance Resource Center and other online platforms).
- Emphasis on the importance of regular communication between land trusts and NRCS at the state level to clear up questions, build institutional knowledge and maintain partnerships.
- Importance of clarity regarding program process to support identifying and addressing obstacles to greater participation in both programs.
- Value of building, maintaining and supporting relationships and fostering trust at all programmatic levels, but especially at the state level between NRCS and land trust staff where implementation ultimately occurs.

Figure 3: NRCS ACEP-ALE national program manager Matt Oliver addresses attendees.



Key Topics and Potential Opportunities

Across summit discussions, a set of key topics emerged as areas of opportunity to strengthen and advance ACEP-ALE and RCPP. **These suggested ideas and strategies can help shore up partnerships, streamline processes and ensure more working lands are protected for future generations.**

The task for the Alliance, NRCS and land trusts will be to prioritize next steps that are feasible for implementation going forward. The following list of possible solutions provides a menu of potential action items put forth by summit attendees. NRCS and the Alliance will take these stakeholder comments under advisement as we work together to support partner participation in ACEP-ALE and RCPP.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements

Communication, Guidance and Program Improvements

Clear communication and guidance on policy and processes consistently came up as an important opportunity to strengthen program participation. Communication impacts all aspects of implementation, from the individual project to the overall program, and across national and state levels. Participants often focused on quality of communication over quantity of communication.

- **Enhance communication:** Encourage monthly check-ins between entities and NRCS staff to ensure the application, agreement and project implementation process is clear, effective and efficient. Develop inter-organizational fluency between land trusts and NRCS regarding program participation such as post-closing easement administration actions and their associated processes, eligible entity submission requirements, state and national-level review timelines and delegations of authority. Work collaboratively to streamline entity package submission, responses to requests for additional NRCS guidance, and the communication of proposal status and next steps.
- **Improve guidance:** Clarify requirements around complete applications including internal controls (IC) processes, form NRCS-CPA-230, land eligibility and title issues, and Highly Erodible Land (HEL) plans.
- **Additional streamlining:** To the extent possible, set predictable application batching dates with advance notice and promote strengthened communication and collaboration with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) at the state level.

Tools, Templates and Checklists

An overarching next step that came to light for ACEP-ALE involved reviewing, updating and re-sharing existing tools, templates and checklists that support the program. In some cases, new tools and templates may need to be developed and shared. Developing the tools and templates mentioned above is part of a forward-thinking strategy to mitigate the effects of high staff turnover within NRCS and land trust partners. (The applicable stage in the process is included in parenthesis for each for each suggestion listed.)

- **Circulate resources:** Share available NRCS checklists (application, acquisition through closing, stewardship), title exception guide and sample approved deed templates. Share land trust checklists and seek opportunities to align or clarify.
- **Develop tools and guidance:** Create instructional materials or tools when possible and appropriate to strengthen eligible entity understanding of program implementation. Examples include Easement Acquisition Branch (EAB) application review sheet, ownership change detection tool and utilizing project management tools.

- **Acquisition timelines:** Collect and share data as eligible entities move through the acquisition process to identify inefficiencies and obstacles with an eye toward collaborative development and communication of effective solutions.

Capacity

While participants agreed capacity can be addressed in part through tools, templates and checklists, some additional and dedicated capacity is still needed to support the program.

- **Continue to increase staff resources:** NRCS has made strides in hiring and more is needed at state and field offices, particularly for easement administration capacity and technical review capabilities. At the same time, land trusts can seek to increase staff when and where possible to support program implementation.
- **Strengthen institutional knowledge:** Seek opportunities to transfer knowledge to new staff to support continuity in program delivery.
- **Appraisal capacity:** Assess ways to increase appraisal capacity.
- **Leverage shared partnership positions:** Utilize resources such as the Alliance NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team (NCAT) team and other partner positions working across the country to support program participation. Seek to add partnership positions where capacity is needed.

Training and Mentoring

The need for ongoing training on key topics related to ACEP-ALE, as well as the development of mentoring opportunities, was an idea and solution identified through ACEP-ALE discussions. Webinars were named consistently as strategies that were working well.

- **Direct engagement opportunities:** Continue direct engagement between entities and NRCS via national webinars and training. Provide updates and guidance on timely topics such as Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) opportunities or funding reallocations. Consider the development of joint NRCS/land trust mentorship or training to promote aligned program understanding. Amplify existing NRCS and Alliance webinars and workshops.
- **Peer-to-peer sharing:** Provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and sharing of best practices. Examples include launching an ALE Certified Entity peer group and holding working or discussion groups to continue to strengthen program implementation.
- **NRCS staff training:** NRCS has expanded training opportunities for states with more to come both in person and online. Continue training of state and field staff to strengthen understanding and delivery of programs and empower state-led training for NRCS field staff and eligible entity partners at the local level.
- **Partner and stakeholder training:** Explore opportunities to provide state-level education by region or via state associations. Update and regularly circulate Alliance resources. Also, explore potential for education sessions and materials for new landowners and realtors to facilitate strong conservation easement deed term comprehension.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Communication, Guidance and Program Improvements

Participants suggested enhanced communication channels between NRCS, land trusts and other relevant RCPP partners to ensure timely and accurate dissemination of information to provide clear, concise guidance on program requirements and expectations, helping partners navigate the complexities of RCPP more effectively. As issues arise, continue to improve and streamline program implementation as appropriate.

- **Enhanced communication:** Encourage more frequent check-ins between entities and NRCS staff to ensure the application, agreement and project implementation process is clear and efficient.
- **Improved guidance:** Clarify guidance and requirements around deed restrictiveness levels, RCPP plans, critical conservation areas (CCA) affirmative obligations, and entity use of technical assistance (TA).
- **Additional streamlining:** Implement additional program improvements such as broader use of retroactive rule changes and removal of the pre-obligation valuation justification to simplify/expedite RCPP easement acquisition.

Tools, Templates and Checklists

Participants highlighted the need to develop, update and share standardized tools and templates to streamline RCPP processes, ensuring consistency and clarity in project development and management. This includes creating comprehensive checklists to guide partners through complex tasks, reducing errors and increasing efficiency.

- **Document library:** Create a library of documents for applicants (e.g. proposal materials, agreements, approved deed templates, etc) to enhance entity experience.
- **Status tracker:** Enhance the ability of entities to track the status of their projects.
- **Deed template flexibility:** Allow more flexibility with RCPP deed templates.

Capacity

Participants prioritized the need to strengthen the capacity of RCPP partners by increasing access to resources, staff and technical expertise. This includes securing additional funding, personnel, and technology to support project implementation and ensure long-term sustainability.

- **Expand RCPP staff capacity:** Increase the number of NRCS and entity staff whose primary focus is RCPP delivery so that projects are completed in a timely manner.
- **Enhanced TA opportunities:** Increase the flexibility of TA funding for entity project management.
- **Certified Entity status for RCPP:** Expand the use of Certified Entity status for RCPP easements.
- **TSP training and expertise:** Familiarize the land trust community with the NRCS Technical Service Provider program for RCPP land management purposes.

Training and Mentoring

Participants agreed on the need to implement targeted training programs to build capacity among RCPP participants and administrators, focusing on technical skills, program requirements and best practices, but they were also complimentary about the improvements seen in entity training opportunities in fiscal year 2024. By pairing new or struggling participants with experienced mentors to provide ongoing support and guidance, all parties could foster better knowledge transfer and skills development.

- **Direct engagement opportunities:** Encourage more direct engagement between entities and NRCS staff (state and national) including listening sessions, webinars and other trainings. When appropriate, the Alliance can host/facilitate such activities.
- **Peer-to-peer sharing:** Create a venue for peer-to-peer sharing of programmatic partnership agreement (PPA) exhibits and other helpful documents.
- **Mentoring program:** Create a shared mentoring program where NRCS/land trust staff shadow each other to build an understanding of what it takes to get a project online.

Summary and Looking Ahead

The 2024 Easements Summit brought together top-tier conservation practitioners and NRCS and Alliance staff and leaders from across the country to strengthen participation in ACEP-ALE and RCPP. The summit resulted in ideas and recommendations that the Alliance and NRCS will take under advisement and renewed connections between the agency and the land trust community.

In the months since the convening, both the Alliance and NRCS have undertaken work to support strong program implementation:

- NRCS and Alliance held training and the sixth annual summit lunch roundtable at the Alliance's annual Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference.
- NRCS is continuing to expand online and in-person training offerings for state-based staff.
- NRCS launched easement network groups for NRCS staff this year.
- Alliance launched Certified Entity Peer Mentoring Working Group.
- Alliance to launch an online resource landing page for ACEP and RCPP services and materials.
- Alliance to develop an online RCPP toolkit for land trusts.

As we look ahead, the Alliance and NRCS are committed to continued dialog and collaboration to support land trust participation in ACEP-ALE and RCPP — vital conduits for conserving critical farm and ranch lands across the country.