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LAND

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SUMMER 2025

CULTIVATING COMMON GROUND

THE GREENWAY NEXUS
STEWARDSHIP IS LOVE

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 Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love

“Across this country, people care about conservation, and even in challenging times, there’s reason to believe that conservation is continually progressing.”

— **ASHLEY DEMOSTHENES**, CEO of the Land Trust Alliance

Conservation is a core American value, and land trusts are tapping into this shared love of land as they build trust, develop partnerships and mobilize support for land protection—from farms and ranches in Montana to the halls of Capitol Hill. Read the story on p. 14.



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The beauty and natural values of Valley Garden ranch will be protected forever through a conservation easement with Montana Land Reliance.

ALEXIS BONOGOSKY

OUR MISSION To save the places people need and love by strengthening land conservation across America.

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Land trusts preserve farms and ranches and protect habitat for wildlife and native plants. And they safeguard open spaces for people.

The Land Trust Alliance helps land trusts conserve more land.



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YOU ARE PART OF THE ANSWER

Your gift to the Alliance as a monthly Steward of the Land donor will ensure a continuous base of support for land conservation in your community and across the nation.

And, if you become a monthly donor in 2025, an extra \$100 will be donated to the Alliance by a generous supporter! Please consider converting your annual donation to a monthly gift to help us raise these much-needed funds.

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PEOPLE POWER

MY FIRST FEW MONTHS AT THE ALLIANCE HAVE BEEN AN ADVENTURE.

I've traveled all over—at least 10 states plus Washington, D.C.—to meet with board members and land trust leaders, donors and politicians. I saw the power of our community at regional land trust conferences in the Southeast and New York, and, of course, at Advocacy Days. Each of these has been inspiring, informative and energizing. It feels exhilarating to be part of something big.

This was my fourth Advocacy Days but first as the Alliance's CEO, and it was epic! I was thrilled by the number of attendees—our biggest fly-in yet—and their dedication, ideas and leadership. I also found hope in our meetings with people on Capitol Hill.

Across this country, people care about conservation, and even in challenging times, there's reason to believe that conservation is continually progressing.

When I reflect on these events and the meetings I've had, I think of the people at the heart of conservation and the relationships they are building over time. I think of Alliance staffers Ben Miles in the Southeast, Jamie Brown and Katrina Howey in New York, Robert Schwartz in D.C., and so many more who connect with land trusts and people in their communities every day. I think of long-standing board member Blair Calvert Fitzsimons and new board member Fred Van Sickle, who joined us at Advocacy Days and deepened the conversations with elected officials. I think of the dedicated volunteers I met getting their boots muddy while planting saplings in North Carolina preserves that had been severely damaged by Hurricane Helene.

To be in relationship is to be committed to something greater than oneself. This is what I love about land conservation. I'm thrilled to be on this adventure with you.



DI GLISSON, IUFREELY IMAGEWORKS

ASHLEY DEMOSTHENES
Land Trust Alliance's CEO

By **KIRSTEN FERGUSON**



PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA LAND CONSERVANCY

↑ Outdoor enthusiasts in New York's Hudson Valley can find new outdoor adventures—including best places to catch a sunset, have a picnic or go fishing—with Columbia Land Conservancy's new "GoCoCo" interactive website.

HELPING PEOPLE FIND THEIR NEXT FAVORITE PLACE

The accredited Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) has unveiled GoCoCo—short for "Go Columbia County"—a dynamic new platform designed to connect residents and visitors with the natural beauty of New York's Hudson Valley.

GoCoCo serves as a comprehensive guide to over 100 outdoor spaces, allowing users to filter destinations by activities such as hiking, birding, paddling and picnicking, as well as amenities such as restroom access, ADA-accessible trails and cell service. By providing detailed information on each site, the platform empowers individuals to explore Columbia County in ways that are safe, enjoyable and meaningful.

"Everyone deserves the opportunity to connect to nature, but finding a place to recreate can be anxiety-inducing if you aren't able to locate information about where you're going or what you'll find when you arrive. GoCoCo works to make the outdoors more accessible and inclusive by removing those barriers," says Rebecca Walker, Columbia Land Conservancy's director of strategic fundraising & communications and the project's coordinator.

GoCoCo is supported in part by New York's Environmental Protection Fund and the New York State Conservation Partnership Program, administered by the Land Trust Alliance. The project was inspired by GoFingerLakes.org, created by Finger Lakes Land Trust, as well as by two nature guide-books authored by Sheldon Evans.

Explore GoCoCo and discover your next favorite outdoor destination in Columbia County at lets gococo.org. ☺

Artists Safeguard Swan Valley Wildlife Haven

In Montana's Swan Valley, two artists have turned their love for nature and wildlife into a legacy of conservation. Darrell and Lael Gray recently protected their forested 20-acre property near the Flathead National Forest through a conservation easement with the accredited Flathead Land Trust.

Located at the base of the Swan Mountains east of Bigfork, the property is a critical travel corridor for wildlife navigating between the Swan Range and Swan River. Originally owned by a photographer for "Wild Kingdom," the surrounding area was once used for wildlife filming.

The landscape is rich with diverse woodlands, wetlands, springs and creeks—prime habitat for grizzly and black bears, mountain lions, wolves, moose, herons, frogs and more. The property is also an art-filled sanctuary. The Grays have set up a studio on-site, where Darrell spends many hours creating large-scale sculptures on the grounds while Lael paints, drawing inspiration from the natural beauty surrounding the studio.

Conserving the Gray property through a land protection agreement strengthens the ecological integrity of the entire region. "From the beginning it was very important to be a knowledgeable and good steward of the land," says Darrell Gray. "We strive to integrate with the forest and keep our impact light." ☺



DARRELL AND LAEL GRAY

→ Montana artists Darrell and Lael Gray protected their forested property near the Flathead National Forest, where the landscape includes large-scale sculptures and a wealth of wildlife.



BIG WATERS LAUNCHES SUMMER YOUTH PROGRAM

The accredited Big Waters Land Trust of Florida—formerly Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast—is making waves with its new Bay Explorers Summer Experience, which provides teens with an immersive week of education and exploration in Sarasota Bay’s vibrant watershed.

The free program for youth ages 14-18 from Sarasota and Manatee counties offers an unforgettable week exploring coastal shores, mangrove forests and upland trails while learning about environmental topics such as water quality and human impacts on the bay’s health. The teens also gain outdoor recreation skills such as kayaking, snorkeling and fishing.

Participants are provided with transportation, lunch and snacks each day, supplies and equipment for daily activities, a pair of water shoes to keep, and a



↑ A summer explorers program by Big Waters Land Trust allows teens to explore Sarasota Bay’s vibrant watershed.

\$100 stipend to cover other costs related to participation. The Bay Explorers Summer Experience is funded by the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and a strong network of community partners.

And in two more items of good news for Big Waters Land Trust this spring, the group announced the permanent conservation of 14 ½ acres at The Elling Eide Center in Sarasota County. The

Elling Eide Center is a 72-acre preserve of rare coastal uplands that houses the largest private Asian Studies library and research center in the Western Hemisphere.

Also in spring, Big Waters’ rebranding won a Silver ADDY award in recognition of its outstanding creative excellence. Watch the award-winning reveal video at youtube.com/watch?v=IHervBerURs. ☺

Preserving Gullah Geechee Legacy



↑ Named after the property’s original owner Elouise Spears, The Spears Preserve at Harrington is a natural oasis in one of the most densely developed neighborhoods on Georgia’s St. Simons Island.

The accredited St. Simons Land Trust has acquired 16 acres in the heart of the historic Harrington community, a culturally rich Gullah Geechee neighborhood on St. Simons Island, Georgia, settled by formerly enslaved people after the American Civil War. The property, the last large tract of undeveloped land in Harrington, was once owned by Elouise Spears, a local conservation pioneer who coined the phrase “Don’t Ask, Won’t Sell.”

The maritime forest will remain intact, with the exception of the planned Elouise Spears Heritage and Nature Trail, offering space for birding, hiking and reflection. The land trust worked closely with Spears’ daughter, Natalie Dixon, and her husband, Joe, to honor the family’s deep commitment to land stewardship.

“My hope is that by continuing Elouise Spears’ conservation ethic, we may demonstrate to future generations the contributions made by African American families who settled the Harrington community in the wake of the Civil War—a legacy as historically significant as Gen. Oglethorpe’s British settlement a century earlier at Frederica,” says Jim Barger, chair of St. Simons Land Trust’s board.

Given the tract’s proximity to protected marshlands and its location in the Altamaha estuary, it provides an important wild-life corridor in a heavily developed part of St. Simons.

The purchase was made possible by a generous bequest from longtime island residents Steve and Miranda Hires. ☺



ATTI BEEBLES

↑ The new Douglas County Land Protection Program in Kansas will help make land conservation more accessible by providing financial support for landowners to permanently protect their land.

Pilot Program Boosts Land Protection in Kansas

Douglas County, Kansas—which includes the college town of Lawrence—has a new tool to protect private land, thanks to a partnership with the accredited Kansas Land Trust. The pilot Douglas County Land Protection Program aims to make land conservation more accessible by providing financial support for landowners to permanently protect their land.

Funding from a federal American Rescue Plan Act grant from the county will cover costs associated with conservation. Up to \$225,000 is available to support the pilot program as part of Douglas County’s open space initiatives.

Kaitlyn Ammerlaan, Douglas County’s heritage conservation coordinator, shared her excitement about the program: “In developing the Open Space Plan, we heard from many landowners and community partners about existing barriers to conserving open space. We hope that this pilot program is a first step to reducing barriers and supporting the long-term protection of open spaces.”

Private landowners in Douglas County may qualify for funding if their property meets land trust criteria, aligns with community goals and offers significant public benefits like natural, historic or agricultural value.

Kaitlin Stanley, director of the Kansas Land Trust, added that this collaboration is a key step in addressing some of the state’s biggest environmental challenges. “This pilot program will highlight the power of local partnerships, which are especially important in a state that severely lacks designated funding for conservation,” Stanley says. ☺

FROM PUTTING GREENS TO TRAILS IN MARYLAND

Land occupied by a shuttered golf course and a former farm is gaining new purpose as a trail network and protected area, thanks to the efforts of the Lower Shore Land Trust. The accredited land trust worked with the state of Maryland to acquire two parcels west of Berlin, transforming the 675 acres into 12 miles of trails that accommodate a diverse range of activities.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are working with the land trust to restore wetlands, install pollinator meadows, revitalize habitats and plant trees.

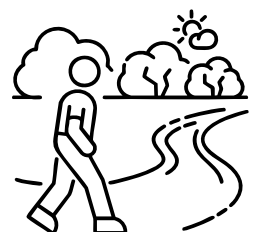
“The trail network will follow the golf cart paths closely,” says Matt Heim, executive director of the Lower Shore Land Trust. “There are also a couple of ditch crossings with bridges. We envision this being a place where lots of folks with different uses can come, including equestrian, bicycling, mountain biking, hunting and hiking.”

Mountain biking in particular promises a powerful economic boost to the area. A new Trust for Public Land report found that mountain biking tourists spend an average of \$416 per visit, supporting local lodging, restaurants and retailers—helping rural communities turn natural resources into sources of sustainable growth.

View the complete report at tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Economic-Benefits-of-Mountain-Biking.pdf. ☺

675
acres

▽
12
miles of trails



Endangered Trout Get Second Chance After Fire

More than 200 critically endangered Southern California steelhead trout have found a new home in Arroyo Hondo Creek following their dramatic rescue from Topanga Creek after the Palisades Fire in January. The fire devastated the Topanga watershed, and subsequent storms triggered mudslides that buried the trout's native pools under debris.

Acting swiftly, a coalition of partners—including The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County (accredited), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains—relocated the fish to Fillmore Hatchery before safely releasing them into Arroyo Hondo Preserve in February.

The trout are already adapting to their new habitat, and biologists will monitor their progress closely. In April, the land trust announced that the fish have successfully spawned in their new home.

“We’ve been holding our breath for months to see if this delicate transfer would be successful,” says Meredith Hendricks, executive director of The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County. “We are so pleased to be able to share that the fish have survived and are engaged in normal activities, including spawning.”

The Arroyo Hondo Preserve, long protected by conservation efforts and restored after the 2021 Alisal Fire, was identified as an ideal match for the trout. A fish passage project completed in 2008 ensured the stream's connectivity to the ocean, critical for steelhead survival.



↑ Rescuers relocate endangered Southern California steelhead trout to The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County's Arroyo Hondo Preserve.

Such efforts pay dividends in many ways. The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County worked with Earth Economics recently to put a price tag on the value of nature in the county. Their newly released report, “Thriving Open Spaces Support Healthy Economies: Nature’s Value in Santa Barbara County” shows that nature contributes \$2.96 billion annually to the region. Read it at sblandtrust.org/earth-economics-economic-report. ☺

HOUSING PROJECT OFFERS HOPE TO LOCAL FAMILIES



A workforce housing project years in the making is welcoming its first residents in Priest River, Idaho. The Village at River View, a community initiative led by the accredited Kaniksu Land Trust, is transforming six houses into affordable homes for local working families.

Priced at \$260,000—well below the county's average home price of \$618,000—the three-bedroom, two-bath homes aim to make ownership attainable for families earning less than 120% of the area's median income.

The Land Trust Alliance provided a grant to support the business planning for the housing project through the Alliance's Pacific Northwest Advancing Conservation Excellence (PNW ACE) program, a

strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of land trusts across Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

“These homes are for families in our community who have been priced out of the real estate market,” says Katie Cox, executive director of Kaniksu Land Trust. “There are walking trails and sidewalks, and the homes are in close proximity to the town center and schools.”

To qualify, buyers must live or work locally and meet income and residency requirements. A monthly lottery will be held until all homes are sold. Organizers hope that projects such as this will be one solution to Bonner County's affordable housing crisis.

The project is a continuation of Kaniksu Land Trust's many community outreach efforts, which include rewilding schoolyards, a community garden at a forest preserve that strengthens the local economy, a folk school and more. ☺

← Kaniksu Land Trust's affordable housing initiative, The Village at River View in Priest River, Idaho, is accepting applications now.



DJ GLISSON, IFFIRELY IMAGEWORKS

FLYING HIGH AT ADVOCACY DAYS

By **COREY HIMROD**

Emails and phone calls are good. But sometimes, the best way to get something done is simply to do it in person.

That's the idea behind the Land Trust Alliance's annual Advocacy Days, a yearly event for land trust staff, board and volunteers to come to Washington, D.C., for four days and advocate in person about the importance and benefits of voluntary private land conservation.

"At a time of increased funding uncertainty, it's more important than ever for the land trust community to come and educate elected officials about the vital role they play to help landowners conserve and steward our most precious natural and working lands," says Lori Faeth, the Alliance's senior director of government relations.

This year's event drew a record 168 attendees combined for the virtual and in-person portions, representing 40 states. Highlights included high-profile speakers and close to 220 meetings scheduled with congressional member offices and the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Energy.

Considering the uncertainty about funding for federal conservation programs this year, the Alliance's top priority was to educate decision-makers about the benefits of voluntary private land conservation and the importance of federal programs that advance those efforts. We also advocated for a robust new Farm Bill with adequate funding for Farm Bill conservation easement programs, and pushed back against efforts to spread disinformation about conservation easements and private property rights.

← Celebrating some good conversations on Capitol Hill. Pictured (from left to right): Cynthia Kanner, executive director of Prairie State Conservation Coalition; Ajiah Gilbert, program manager for community-centered conservation at the Land Trust Alliance; and Emily Reusswig, vice president of conservation and policy at Openlands.

HITTING THE GROUND RUNNING

To get attendees prepped and ready for their meetings, in late April the Alliance held a virtual issue briefing centered on current policy priorities and a virtual first-timers training focused on conservation advocacy and leveraging the potential impact of earned and social media.

The in-person event began on Tuesday, May 6, in the nation's capital with a morning briefing led by Faeth and the Alliance's new CEO, Ashley Demosthenes.

"This work could not be more important than it is right now, and your voices are vital to advancing our federal priorities," Demosthenes told attendees. "Our top priority is underscoring the benefits of voluntary private land conservation and the programs that help you do your work every day. It's more important now than ever that Congress understands how these programs help families and provide public benefits."

Following the briefing, it was time to hit the trail and start visiting offices. Land trust representatives shared stories with members of Congress about the ways they utilize federal programs to help families conserve land. They talked about how these programs not only help families but provide so many other benefits to communities and states, such as clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat and food security. They underscored why these programs are an excellent investment for the American people.

"Federal conservation programs ensure that we have habitat for wildlife, land to grow our food, clean water, and all the ancillary community and economic benefits that come from protecting these lands," says Faeth. "Advocacy Days provides our members the opportunity to share their personalized stories about how federal programs are essential to their work and assist in the protection of our most precious lands."

A FUTURE FOR THE FARM BILL?

Farm Bill conservation programs are the largest single federal source of funding for voluntary private land conservation.

They create significant opportunities for land trusts to protect high-priority farmlands, ranchlands, grasslands, wetlands and forests. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) oversees Farm Bill programs like the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

With the current Farm Bill extension set to expire on Sept. 30, 2025, Advocacy Days attendees shared stories of this important program in their congressional meetings, urging Congress to pass the next Farm Bill this year and adequately fund the easement programs to meet increasing demand.

"We have a farmer in eastern Idaho who has been able to leverage support through ACEP to protect his land, to be able to pass it on to future generations and to be able to retire comfortably," says Kim Trotter, executive director of the accredited Teton Regional Land Trust, which works throughout eastern Idaho and western Wyoming.

Landowner Hope Yankey spoke up, too. She has worked with Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust, NRCS and others to protect her land and help safeguard the headwaters of the Potomac River that runs between D.C. and Northern Virginia.

"I bought my farm not realizing this legacy of being at the headwaters, but my goal is to protect that water in perpetuity," says Yankey. "NRCS has been instrumental over a four-year period—I couldn't have done this on my own."

These stories will hopefully resonate with members of Congress and stick with them as the year progresses and Farm Bill discussions intensify.

MONTHS OF PREPARATION PAY OFF

The work that goes into each Advocacy Days is intense. The Alliance brings on several interns each spring to assist with the process, and government relations staff spend weeks scheduling congressional meetings, booking speakers, reserving conference and reception spaces, coordinating hotel options and prepping

BY THE NUMBERS

168
ATTENDEES

40
STATES
REPRESENTED

222
MEETINGS WITH
CONGRESSIONAL
OFFICES AND
FEDERAL
AGENCIES

materials for guests, including fact sheets, congressional bios, maps and even restaurant recommendations.

"Our members and their on-the-ground work make all the challenges of planning such a large-scale event so worthwhile," says Robert Schwartz, the Alliance's senior government relations program manager, who oversees much of the planning.

Attendees reciprocate this appreciation.

"This is my first Advocacy Days with the Land Trust Alliance, and I'm so happy to be here, because the Alliance has done a fabulous job setting up appointments and meetings with all of our representatives in both Idaho and Wyoming," says Trotter. "I couldn't have done it without them." ☺

COREY HIMROD is media relations manager at the Land Trust Alliance.



Ethan Tapper.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ETHAN TAPPER

STEWARDSHIP By ETHAN TAPPER IS AN ACT OF LOVE

I was a forester for years—first as a consultant and then as a service forester—but it was becoming a landowner myself that made the biggest impact on the way that I care for forests.

When I bought my land—I call it “Bear Island”—it was extremely degraded, suffering from the impacts of short-sighted forest management, introduced invasive plants, deer overpopulation and more. At first, I saw Bear Island as a symbol of everything that was wrong with the world—a forest with every problem that a forest could have. I had to ask myself: Would it be a greater act of care and compassion to leave this forest alone, or to do everything in my power to help it heal?

A lot of people who love forests and “nature” believe the only way to care for ecosystems is to leave them alone. From a distance, it’s easy to say that all we have to do is to remove ourselves from ecosystems and somehow the thing we call “nature” will heal itself. When you work in forests, when you are in deep relationship with them, you see that in many cases our ecosystems and our biodiversity are not going to survive this moment without our help.

This was one of the main ideas that I wanted to express in my book: how doing nothing is not always an act of compassion for ecosystems. In many forests, the most profound acts of care and compassion are taking radical action—even actions as counterintuitive as cutting trees, killing deer to attenuate deer overpopulation and using herbicide to control invasive plants.

In my early twenties, I remember being skeptical of conservation easements. But, over my career as a forester, I’ve seen how frequently ecosystems are lost. Now, I believe that conservation easements are absolutely essential—the only way that we can ensure that ecosystems are here for future generations. I donated a conservation easement on Bear Island to the Richmond Land Trust in 2022. I believe it’s one of the most radical things I’ve ever done.

Over the last year, I’ve been privileged to become an advocate for forests and conservation. As an author, I’ve gotten to travel all over North America talking about forests and what it means to care for them. I’ve also built social media channels with more than 100,000 followers and videos that are watched millions of times per month.

Key to my message is hope. I believe that hope is a self-fulfilling prophecy: that helping people feel hopeful inspires them to take action. I often tell people: “I’m not here to tell you about all the things that have been lost from ecosystems, all the things that are missing. I’m here to tell you that there is so much that is still here.” We already have the tools and the resources to save our ecosystems and each other—we just have to choose to do so. Let’s do it! ☺

Ethan Tapper’s book “How to Love a Forest: The Bittersweet Work of Tending a Changing World” was inspired by his experiences as a landowner of a 175-acre forest in Vermont. Tapper is on the board of the Richmond Land Trust in Vermont. Visit him online at ethantapper.com, and on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok under the handle [@HowToLoveAForest](https://www.instagram.com/HowToLoveAForest).



“Land conservation highlights our shared values.”

CAITLIN WILLARD/SUMMIT LAND CONSERVANCY

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“I found the experience of going to Washington, D.C., and meeting my senators and congressmen, and their dedicated staff, patriotically inspiring. **Land conservation highlights our shared values. As we work together to save the places we love, we get to shake hands and see the humanity in people** we otherwise might disagree with. There’s hope in every one of those handshakes.”

—**CHERYL FOX**, executive director of Summit Land Conservancy and board member of the Land Trust Alliance

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Cultivating Common Ground

A photograph of two men in cowboy hats standing in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. One man is leaning against the front of a white pickup truck, holding a can. The other man stands with his back to the camera, looking out over the field. The sky is a clear, warm orange, suggesting sunset or sunrise.

**SHARED VALUES AND TRUST ARE THE
WAY FORWARD FOR CONSERVATION**

By MEGHAN MCDONALD

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Above: Erik Glenn, executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, shares a conversation with a landowner at the end of the day. Opposite: A child enjoys the ranch lands around her.



DJ GLISSON, I/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

In challenging times, it can be helpful to take a step back and reflect on what we know: Conservation is something Americans care about, and land trusts' work is farsighted.

"It can be hard to keep a glass-half-full perspective," says Kendall Van Dyk, managing director of the accredited Montana Land Reliance. "But across my state, I see ongoing collaborations bringing together what could be considered diametrically opposed worldviews. It's been breathtaking to see this commitment to open space."

Van Dyk cites an emphatic victory for conservation in his state this spring, when Montana residents helped halt a state Senate bill that would limit all conservation easements to 40-year terms. Statewide and regional land trusts helped rally hunters, anglers, farmers, ranchers and industry representatives around the shared understanding that perpetual conservation easements enable them to meet their goals—including keeping the land intact for future generations.

In many ways, it's not surprising to see communities rally around conservation. Public opinion polls regularly show that Americans care about conservation, whether for water protection or keeping public lands intact, and 2024 was a banner year for passing local and state ballot measures that raise tax-payer dollars for conservation.

"Land is connected to nearly every aspect of our lives," says Land Trust Alliance CEO Ashley Demosthenes. "That link continues to drive conservation forward, even in times of change and uncertainty. When other issues divide our communities, conservation is our common ground."

But conservation success is never a slam dunk. Despite broad public support and inherent nonpartisanship, conservation faces significant threats, from competing priorities and misinformation to changes in funding sources and policy regulations. Today those threats may seem greater than ever, but they are not new. Conservationists cannot take anything for granted; at every step of the way, they must work proactively to build trust, mobilize support, educate decision-makers at all levels of government, develop strong collaborations and communicate the benefits of conservation for all people.

"The long-haul work of conservation is building trust and investing in people," says Demosthenes. "This is the work we need to continually lean into, because it's what will carry us forward, through the opportunities and challenges."

DJ GLISSON, I/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS



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M. FREDERICKS

When talking with farmers, Jess Laggis of Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy says, "We lead with our shared value—love of the land." Above: Full Sun Farm in North Carolina.



"Americans have broad consensus on conservation, and they're willing to pay for it and even raise their own taxes to protect these assets.

That gives me hope."

—ANDREW TUCK, The Nature Conservancy

Conservation Is a Core Value

A 2012 national survey commissioned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) found that 82% of registered U.S. voters agreed that conserving land, air and water was patriotic, and 69% of survey respondents considered themselves conservationists. Fast-forward to 2025. In a different political context, new polls point toward the same conclusion: Land conservation is a core American value shared across political boundary lines. Three public opinion polls conducted in the first half of 2025 poignantly illustrate the nonpartisan nature of conservation:

- 92% of American voters say reliable water access is very or extremely important, according to a US Water Alliance national poll.
- 72% of voters in eight Western states want their elected officials to emphasize conservation priorities over oil and gas development, according to the most recent State of the Rockies poll.
- 74% of U.S. residents oppose closing national public lands to reduce federal spending and 71% oppose selling public lands, from a recent Trust for Public Land (TPL) poll.

And it's not just national polls that reflect this support for conservation. In November 2024, millions of voters around the country—Republicans and Democrats alike—passed state and local ballot measures that focused specifically on funding conservation initiatives. For decades, TNC and TPL have worked with local land trusts and other partners to develop measures and secure voter support.

"Federal funding is important, but state and local funding are vital to close the gap," says Andrew Tuck, TNC's senior director of advocacy campaigns for global conservation campaigns. "Ballot measures can be an important way to create millions, sometimes billions, of dollars for a wide variety of conservation priorities."

Tuck notes that "for the conservation ballot measures TNC has engaged in over more than 30 years, our win rate is 90%." He considers 2024 one of the conservation community's most successful years in terms of the number of funding measures approved and the total amount of funding generated—more than \$18 billion. "Even in this hyper-polarized era, voters across geographies, demographics and the political spectrum are still approving conservation-related ballot measures at phenomenal rates," says Tuck.

From coast to coast, voters approved long-term conservation funding through multiple mechanisms. For example, California's new \$10 billion bond is dedicated to clean water, climate resilience and wildfire prevention. In Minnesota, 77%



DI GLISSON, I/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

Water, quality of life and future generations are some of the reasons why Americans across the country voted for a whopping \$18 billion in local conservation funding in 2024. Above: The Bitterroot River in Montana.



of voters approved an amendment to continue allocating lottery proceeds to the state's Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. Four Illinois counties passed conservation funding measures, including a small property tax increase. Suffolk County, New York, passed a \$6 billion sales tax dedicated to protecting land and preventing ocean pollution.

In all these cases, land trusts played a critical role in informing voters about the benefits of conservation. Local land trusts acted as “on-the-ground representatives” to fundraise, communicate and educate voters and decision-makers about these measures. Case in point: Open Land Trust and Lowcountry Land Trust (both accredited), as well as the South Carolina Land Trust Network, played critical roles in passing a new sales tax initiative dedicating \$94 million to land and water protection in rural Jasper County, South Carolina.

Says Tuck: “Americans have broad consensus on conservation, and they’re willing to pay for it and even raise their own taxes to protect these assets. That gives me hope.”

‘Building Trust Is a Continual Process’

In Western North Carolina, where small family farms dot the rural mountainsides and valleys, nearly 70% of Buncombe County voters approved a \$30 million bond in 2022 to increase outdoor recreation and conserve both forest and farmland.

“I think everyone living here, farmers or otherwise, recognizes that these bottomland farms are the anchor to the cultural heritage, viewsheds, recreation opportunities and so much

of what we love about the southern Appalachian Mountains,” says Jess Laggis, farmland protection director at the accredited Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC).

Laggis sees how land protection—particularly farmland protection—is something that people across the political spectrum value, because it connects to basic needs that everyone shares. Particularly in times of trouble.

“Significant strains on food systems and supply chains—like during COVID—have emphasized the importance of local food production,” she says. “In our region, we just had Hurricane Helene. It makes people think, if the grocery store is gone, where will they get food?”

But protecting farms here is not without challenges.

“Interest in farmland conservation easements is high, but this is a historically underserved area with a history of eminent domain use. Many people are skeptical of government and nonprofit intentions,” Laggis says. “Building trust is a continual process with each farm owner. We lead with our shared value—love of the land.”

For reasons related to size and soils, Laggis says, “It is the rare Western North Carolina farm that successfully competes for general funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).” SAHC and four other area land trusts have turned to a different NRCS program instead: the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In 2017, they pitched and received an \$8 million allocation of RCPP funds specifically earmarked

for Western North Carolina. This award was renewed in 2022.

“We’re thankful for RCPP dollars and for the robust mix of local public and private funding sources we use to match those dollars,” Laggis says.

RCPP dollars recently supported the purchase of one of two easements for Full Sun Farm, a small direct-to-consumer vegetable and flower producer with important agricultural soils.

“Having dedicated RCPP funds helps build trust with landowners because we can confidently deliver on what we promise,” Laggis says. “In this case, because of the price we could offer, the owners of Full Sun Farm felt confident donating the other easement entirely. By designing this with two easements, the owners’ two daughters can each inherit an intact, smaller farm.”

“RCPP is a powerfully effective program for farmers and a good bargain for the American people,” Laggis says. “This program is bringing \$8 million to a historically underserved region. In the first year of renewal, we submitted over \$50 million in matched funds! I don’t know the future of NRCS programs, but I don’t see anyone wanting to take away this support from our farmers.”

With so many farmland projects in SAHC’s pipeline, Laggis anticipates that new easements will close in 2030. “That delay might seem negative, but farmers are in this for the long haul, and so are we,” she says. “We’ll use the time developing relationships and helping them understand how easements connect to their goals.”

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A restoration site visit at Pyeatt Ranch in the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape in Arizona.



Trust Brokers Goodwill

For farmers and ranchers across the country, caring about the land is a way of life.

“I was born and raised in ranching,” says fifth-generation rancher Manuel Murrietta. “It’s important to me to save this way of life. As cities grow, if we don’t keep open spaces in ranching and farming, how will we feed our nation?”

Murrietta pursued a conservation easement for his family’s Pyeatt Ranch with the accredited Arizona Land and Water Trust. Pyeatt Ranch is located in the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape, a vast stretch of land protected by more than 50 federal, state, local and private partners.

Sentinel landscapes are designated by the Departments of Defense (DOD), Agriculture and Interior to buffer high-value military installations, support working agricultural lands and conserve high-priority natural resources. Situated in Arizona’s open rangeland, Fort Huachuca supports the U.S. military through electromagnetic technology testing and training, as well as unmanned aerial vehicle training. Encroaching development threatens to introduce electromagnetic interference.

“The DOD wasn’t an obvious potential partner,” says Michael McDonald, Arizona Land and Water Trust’s former executive director. “But we’ve learned to look for alignment in needs and values. The DOD, the Trust and the landowners we work with all value unfragmented land.”

RESOURCES

- “2025 Value of Water Index” by the US Water Alliance, April 2025, uswateralliance.org/the-value-of-water-campaign-releases-2025-poll/.
- “2025 Conservation in the West” poll by Colorado College’s annual State of the Rockies Project, February 2025, coloradocollege.edu/other/state-of-the-rockies/conservationinthewest/2025.html.
- “America Needs More Public Lands, Not Less” poll and report by the Trust for Public Land, April 2025, tpl.org/resource/america-needs-more-public-lands-not-less.

McDonald describes the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape as a “patchwork quilt” of large federal lands managed by the DOD, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service; state-owned lands; tracts attached to nearby municipalities; and privately owned ranches. Within this patchwork, the Trust holds land conservation easements on private ranch lands that were completed using funding from the DOD Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program, in addition to more traditional sources such as NRCS easement programs and landowner donations. The Trust also develops land and water conservation plans and facilitates collaboration in the region.

“We’ve built trust over 47 years,” McDonald says. “That allows us to broker conversations and goodwill among partners who are coming from very different perspectives and might mistrust each other.”

“Working with multiple landowners is necessary, and public-private initiatives are key to accomplishing that,” he says. “Migratory animal species and the water running into the San Pedro River move between elevations. Public conserved lands enable urban residents to camp, hunt and hike. Private landowners help preserve vital but diminishing watersheds and protect the wide-open viewsheds people love.”

“The Trust made the conservation easement a great process,” Murrietta says. “With the money, I was able to buy another nearby ranch with an easement already on it. Originally, Pyeatt Ranch was too small to support my family without outside income. Now, it’s big enough to sustain us, and it will stay a ranch forever.”

“In a public-private partnership,” says McDonald, “there’s room for different people to find their specific priority, whether national security, a way of life, water resources or wildlife habitat. The result is the same: We’re helping save this place we call home. That’s why I’m hopeful for the future of public-private partnerships. I encourage all land trusts to look for alignment with unexpected partners.”

Advocacy Brings People Together

When the Montana state Senate bill to limit the term of conservation easements came up, Van Dyk knew it would be important to mobilize supporters of conservation. The Montana Land Reliance rallied outdoor recreationists, farmers and ranchers, and timber and other industries who all care about and depend on the land.

“Timber is an important economic sector here, so getting them on board with the importance of perpetual conservation easements as a tool for sustainable forest management was key,” says Van Dyk. “We could do that because the conservation community here had been building relationships with timber representatives for years.”

The day before the bill’s Senate hearing, Van Dyk visited the senator who sponsored it. “That evening, I found out he hadn’t received accurate information about how the tools available to his farming and ranching neighbors hinged on perpetuity. He realized this bill wasn’t the way to achieve his top priority: protecting Montana’s agricultural way of life,” Van Dyk says.

The next day, the senator introduced his bill in the Senate—then promptly offered to table it. Dozens of people had come to testify against the bill, and he graciously invited them to



DJ GLISSON, IIFIRELY IMAGEWORKS

In Montana, residents came together to halt a bill that would limit the terms of conservation easements in the state.



speak before the Senate Judiciary Committee as planned.

“The lesson I took from this: We have to get to know people. Not just community members. We can’t forget about legislators when they go home,” says Van Dyk, who participated in the 2025 Land Trust Alliance Advocacy Days two months later. “Because he and I established a relationship, it will be easier to talk with him as issues arise in the future. I believe land trusts that stay in lawmakers’ ears can better help them understand how their constituents’ concerns are tied to the land.”

“Whether your lawmakers are liberal or conservative, we’re going to be most successful by building relationships, not by fighting battles in the moment,” he says. “Over coffee, you can build trust talking about your kids or anything you have in common. You can proactively address misinformation. When the time comes for a bill, they’ll know there’s a critical mass of their friends, neighbors and constituents who really care about conservation.”

Demosthenes wholeheartedly agrees.

“The Land Trust Alliance exists to support organizations as they bring people together for conservation,” says Demosthenes. “We have a proven track record as a community that gets things done.” She cites past successes supporting nonpartisan legislation, like the Farm Bill and the Great American Outdoors Act, as well as securing the permanent conservation tax incentive and the Charitable Conservation Easement Program Integrity Act with bipartisan Congressional support.

“The results we’ve generated speak to our collective strength as well as the nonpartisan nature of what we work toward. Conservation really is something we all care about,” says Demosthenes. “Success is never guaranteed, and it doesn’t come about overnight, but if we continue to stay the course by building trust and cultivating relationships, I think we can feel hopeful.” ☺

MEGHAN McDONALD is a freelance writer focused on science, sustainability and community impacts.





Mission to Save the Magalloway

In a remote and rugged terrain near the Canadian border, four accredited land trusts have joined forces to permanently protect 78,000 acres in the Magalloway region of western Maine. Known together as the Magalloway Collaborative, the groups—Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust, Northeast Wilderness Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Society of Maine—are working to raise \$62 million to fund the project by May 2026.

The region's waterways and forests are of vital importance for wildlife, resilience, recreation and economies. Once complete, the project will connect 500,000 acres of conserved land across the region. These land and waters are part of the homeland of the Wabanaki Tribal

Nations, the People of the Dawnland, and one aim of the project is to create opportunities for Wabanaki Peoples to strengthen their cultural and spiritual caretaking of the area.

Under the plan, the property owner Bayroot, LLC would retain more than 62,000 acres for sustainable timber harvest under a conservation easement with the Forest Society of Maine. Another 11,200 acres near the headwaters of the Magalloway River would be acquired by Northeast Wilderness Trust to establish a new wilderness preserve. Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust would manage an additional 4,400 acres for wildlife habitat, recreation and river corridor protection. ☺

The headwaters of the Magalloway River flow into Parmachenee Lake.

BEN PEARSON



NOT FOR ME BUT WITH ME

GREENWAYS LIE AT THE NEXUS OF
COMMUNITY HEALTH AND ENGAGEMENT

By TOM SPRINGER



❖ A father and daughter enjoy time on a greenway.

ISTOCK.COM/DIGITALSKILLET

❖ Some 30,000 people live within a 10-minute walk of the South Chickamauga Creek Greenway in Chattanooga, Tennessee. When local residents said they didn't use the trail because they didn't have access to bicycles, the Trust for Public Land worked with a local bicycle co-op to change that. A map shows the connector trail that links residents of the Cromwell Hills affordable housing complex to the greenway.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

THERE'S AN AXIOM IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THAT SAYS, "DON'T DO ANYTHING FOR THE COMMUNITY UNLESS YOU DO IT WITH THE COMMUNITY."

Land trusts are used to building consensus and strong ties with residents, funders, agencies and NGOs, but greenways present their own distinct challenges. Unlike self-contained parcels of protected land, greenways are linear. They can span mile upon mile of urban, suburban and rural landscapes, passing through neighborhoods that vary widely in terms of demographics and environmental health.

Greenways intersect with multitudes of lived experiences, social histories and expectations for the future. This human diversity inherent within greenways allows land trusts to listen, learn and foster community in ways that the average land deal does not. But engagement isn't a one-and-done thing. It must continually evolve through planning, construction and ongoing operations.

"Building trust with neighbors takes consistent communication," says David Johnson, a program manager at the accredited Trust for Public Land (TPL). "We must be present and available when they identify issues."

As TPL found, it pays to ask what people want before you build it, especially if you're talking about a multi-million-dollar greenway. When it came to developing the South Chickamauga Creek Greenway in Chattanooga, Tennessee, one telling instance involved the Cromwell Connector, a 4-mile stretch of the "South Chick" that, on paper, looked like a slam dunk. The Connector would link 415 residents in the Cromwell Hills affordable housing complex to the 12-mile South Chick greenway, which ties into the 16-mile Tennessee Riverwalk. It would bring recreation and foot-powered transit to a place with low car ownership and no public transportation.

But not so fast, the residents said.



Fencing for Safety and Bikes for Access

"When we met with Cromwell residents, their main concerns were safety," says Johnson. "People were suspicious about bringing outsiders into their neighborhood, and we understood that. You can't build a trail and expect people to show up unless you discuss the barriers they have to using it."

One key issue was a fence that stood between Cromwell Hills and the trail. TPL thought that removing the fence would create more trail access. The residents feared that removing the fence would create a security breach. In the end, both goals were achieved. "During design, we proposed multiple access points so residents could easily get to the trail," Johnson says. "But the safety concerns of neighbors pushed us to consolidate access to a single path. It's located at a well-trafficked spot, farther from the residences." The security fence still stands.

TPL also worked to surmount a financial barrier that discouraged trail access. "Several neighbors said the trail didn't really feel like it was meant for them, because they didn't have bikes," says Johnson. TPL turned to White Oak Bicycle Co-Op, a grassroots Chattanooga startup that restores and distributes bikes to people of limited means. With support from TPL, residents can request a refurbished bike and even have it delivered. White Oak also teaches people to repair bikes they already own.

"The city's renaissance focused on the Riverwalk and almost all the capital investments for parks occurred downtown," says Noel Durant, TPL associate vice president and Tennessee state director. "We're serving part of the city that's largely forgotten and has public health challenges associated with lack of physical activity."

Early doubts about the greenway have eased as engaged residents realized its potential.

The Cromwell Connector was completed in 2022, facilitating physical activity and travel to work, school, shops and other destinations.

And a new subdivision in South Chattanooga, called Waterhaven, incorporated the trail into its site design and then transferred 20 acres of adjacent land to help TPL build it.

"People are leaning into the trail corridor," Johnson says. "Instead of backyards that face the trail, we're seeing houses built with front porches that are 6 feet away from it."

A Greenway that Flows Like a River

In Chicago, where the Chicago River was once famously rerouted to flow backward from Lake Michigan, there's also a greenway that takes an uncommon turn. It's the African American Heritage Water Trail, and instead of a bicycle or walking shoes, it takes a paddle and life vest to explore this trail.

The water trail was developed by the accredited Openlands, an urban conservation nonprofit that operates in northeast Illinois, in conjunction with several community and agency partners. The water trail follows the Little Calumet River, a recovering industrial waterway that freedom seekers once used to flee slavery on the Underground Railroad. The 7-mile trail leads paddlers past landmarks that span 180 years of African American history. This includes Ton Farm, once owned by Dutch immigrants and used

as an Underground Railroad safe house. There's Chicago's Finest Marina, a Black-owned business that opened when white-owned marinas prohibited Black members. The route also passes beneath the Major Taylor Trail Bridge, named for the world's first African American bicycle champion.

The African American Heritage Water Trail opened in 2020 to much acclaim. It made the New York Times' 2022 list of "52 Places for a Changed World." Yet, as with any greenway, the planning was anything but speedy. Laura Barghusen, director of restoration and trails for Openlands, says the first light bulb came on after a 2006 survey of Illinois canoers and kayakers. It found that certain Illinois rivers were not being used by paddlers, even though infrastructure such as boat ramps existed, and even though they were considered to be part of the Northeastern Illinois Water Trail system. The Little Calumet was among these underused waterways.

"In 2018 we participated with community [members] in design charettes led by the Forest Preserves of Cook County and American Institute of Architects to figure out how to connect

"PEOPLE ARE LEANING INTO THE TRAIL CORRIDOR. Instead of backyards that face the trail, we're seeing houses built with front porches that are 6 feet away from it."

—DAVID JOHNSON, program manager at the Trust for Public Land

local communities to the Little Calumet River," says Barghusen. "One good idea that came out of that was the African American Heritage Water Trail."

As in Chattanooga, some local residents have needed some coaxing to use it. And, here, too it's been engagement that's gotten them on the water.

"Due to historical prejudices and exclusion, Black and brown folks may not know about the river, may believe that the river isn't for them or a place for them, or may feel unprepared for paddling the river independently," notes Lillian Holden, water trail manager for Openlands.

Openlands has held public paddle trips to boost boating skills and awareness since the water trail opened in 2020. Since paddlers must share the river with power boats and barges that can create waves as they pass by, the trips are guided by safe and experienced paddlers. Some guides use oversized, Voyageur-style canoes that hold up to 10 paddlers. In the future, Openlands and partners plan to install containers near public access sites where canoes and kayaks can be stored for trips on the water trail.

Last summer, Openlands began offering a paddling and interpretation training program for youth. Through paid



Launched in 2020, the African American Heritage Water Trail follows the Little Calumet River, a recovering industrial waterway that freedom seekers once used to flee slavery on the Underground Railroad. Through Openlands' internship program, youth learn about the ecology of the trail and adjacent nature preserves (left). A new gathering space (right) near the boat ramp at Beaubien Woods provides a resting spot along the river.



Walkers enjoy the Rotary Trail, part of the Red Rock Trail System in Birmingham, Alabama.

KALLI JONES

internships, local youth ages 14-18 learn about paddling, history, environmental justice and ecological restoration at Cook County forest preserves; they also receive interpretation and public speaking training. As youth ambassadors at river events, they promote pride and interest in the history of the river and its future, including the dream for a “blue economy” where local businesses cater to water trail tourists with services such as food vendors and kayak transport.

“You can have as many paddling events as you want,” says Barghusen, “but if you don’t have people to interpret and explain what happened along the trail and why, then you can’t convey the real significance of the region.”

Along with interpreting history, water science and aquatic ecology themes have been added to Openlands’ paddling excursions. This includes testing and explaining dissolved oxygen levels, a key indicator for water quality and survival of aquatic species (above 7.0 mg/L is good, below 2.0 mg/L is fatal for fish). For much of the 20th century, heavy industry and a concentration of landfills around the largely African American neighborhoods on Chicago’s Southeast Side spewed untold tons of toxins

into the soil, air and water. Residents have suffered higher than normal levels of asthma, lung disease and cancer. While pollution remains, the river’s water quality has much improved over the past 50 years. The adjacent forest preserves, wetlands and river teem with birds and wildlife. Openlands’ website describes them as “some of the most majestic yet underrated natural areas in the Greater Chicago region.”

Openlands promotes community engagement and wants the water trail to have a life of its own. “We don’t gatekeep information about the trail,” says Holden. “We provide training, talking prompts and educational materials for partners interested in leading paddles.”

During a paddle on the Little Calumet, the river’s appeal tends to sell itself. Many stretches of water are remarkably wild and unpeopled, a setting that invites contemplation. “One of my paddling partners from the community was surprised by how relaxed she was on the river,” says Holden. “It’s very rich, very biodiverse. We see ospreys, kingfishers, hawks and great blue heron. We see beavers and muskrats. It’s ethereal and spiritual when you preface the river’s historical component with that.”



“If you never notice the creek unless it’s flooding your house, you can’t care about it. IF THERE’S SHADE AND A NICE BENCH TO SIT ON, YOU MIGHT START SEEING IT AS AN ASSET instead of a nuisance.”

—CAROLYN BUCK, director of the Red Rock Trail System for Freshwater Land Trust in Birmingham, Alabama

History and Health in Birmingham

In Jefferson County, Alabama, the genesis of the Red Rock Trail began with a “Communities Putting Prevention to Work” grant from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2010. A look at the county’s health disparities helps explain why. Black residents have a life expectancy that’s 2.5 years shorter than white residents, along with higher death rates from heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Given the vital role of exercise in chronic disease prevention, Red Rock planners set an ambitious goal: Every Jefferson County resident would have access to a trail or greenspace within 1 mile of where they live.

The trail’s development has been led by the accredited Freshwater Land Trust (FLT), based in Birmingham. FLT led a community input marathon over the first two years of the CDC grant: 40 stakeholder meetings that solicited comments from 3,000 people in-person and online. Attendees could suggest trail routes by drawing on maps and penciling suggestions in the margins. FLT has since worked with local and federal partners to build 129 miles of the proposed 750-mile system.

Much of the trail has been built in Birmingham, where geography and Civil Rights history have shaped its course. Birmingham sits in a narrow valley, surrounded by parallel ridges at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains. The Red Rock Trail’s main corridors align with five streams that converge on the city. While the creeks promote conservation and recreation now, their human legacy has been less sanguine.

“Historically, often because of redlining, people bought homes in flood plains because it was the only land available,” says Carolyn Buck, FLT director of the Red Rock Trail System. “The creeks were ‘flashy’ with a lot of flooding that damaged houses.” Such losses brought increased hardship to Black neighborhoods that already suffered under segregation. With development of the Red Rock Trail, FLT hopes residents can view the creek as an amenity, instead of an adversary.

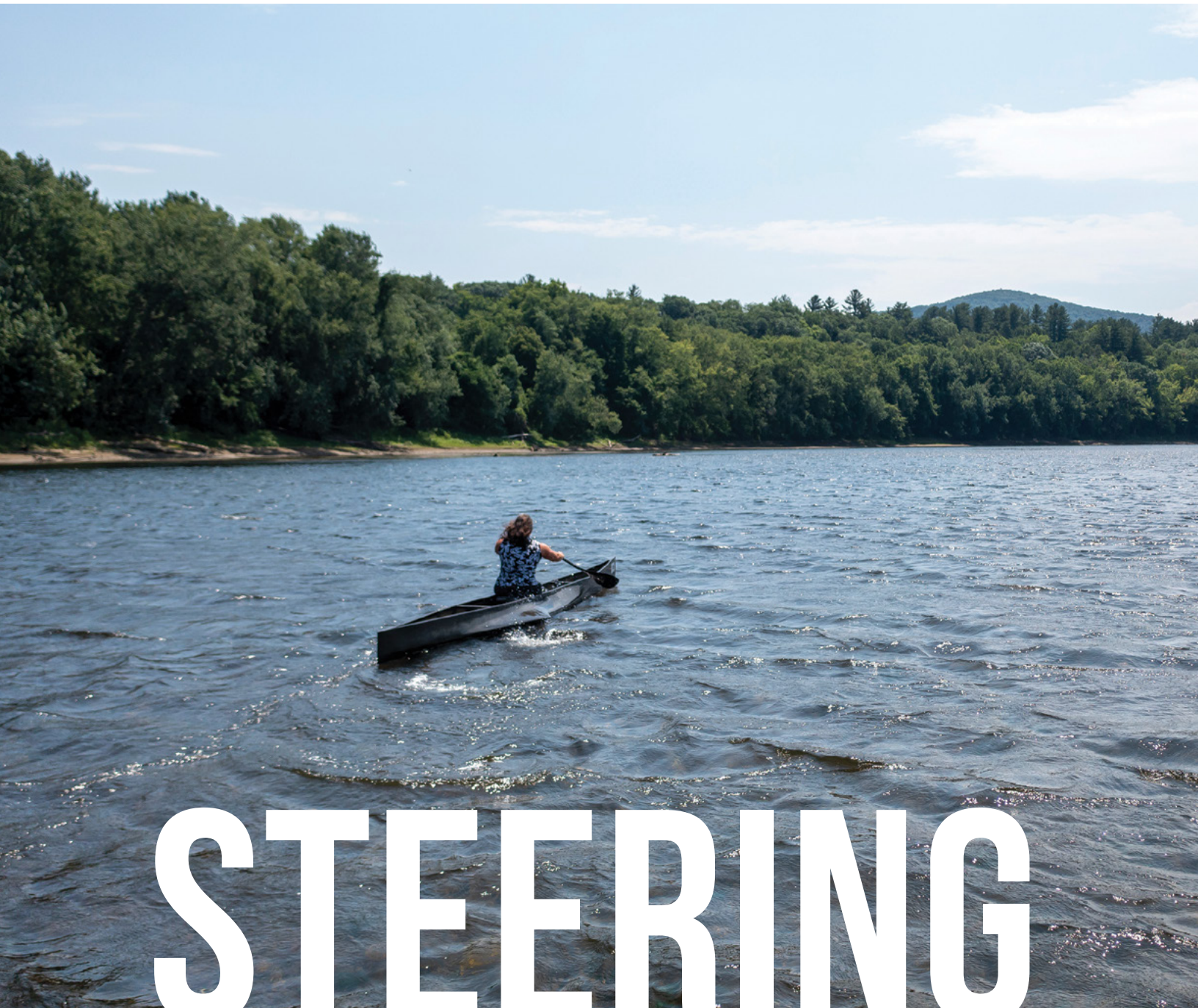
“If you never notice the creek unless it’s flooding your house, you can’t care about it,” Buck says. “If there’s shade and a nice bench to sit on, you might start seeing it as an asset instead of a nuisance.”

Shade trees are another resource where less-affluent neighborhoods can get short-changed. The city’s GIS data clearly show this discrepancy. When the Cool Green project at the University of Alabama at Birmingham looked at the city’s 1930s redlining maps, they “matched up almost exactly” with areas that have little tree canopy today, notes Buck. Then, as now, neighborhoods devoid of trees face higher temperatures and increased air pollution. The Red Rock Trail project works to lessen these disparities by planting trees and buffer strips that will reduce temperatures and pollutants in the air in addition to absorbing storm runoff to reduce flooding.

The project took a leap forward in June 2023 with a \$21 million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). The project includes 3.16 miles of new urban trail near the 16th Street Baptist Church, the sight of a deadly bombing by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963. The trail project will connect the Civil Rights District and historic Civil Rights Neighborhood of Smithfield. This year, FLT received an \$11.75 million DOT grant for the Fairfield Trail. It will link Miles College, a historically Black college, to the growing trail system.

Even with such big wins, a greenway and its rolling cavalcade of users, residents, supporters and critics never stays static. But Buck celebrates victories where she finds them. “When I met with neighbors on the trail today, I saw where people who built fences to screen the trail have now put in gates that open onto it,” she says. “One guy, who was a big skeptic, now plants fairy gardens there for kids! That’s what we want the trail to do: become organic and part of the fabric of the community.” ☺

TOM SPRINGER has served in several roles for the accredited Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, including board member, volunteer and writer.



STEERING

YOUR ORGANIZATION

By **DARCI PALMQUIST**

THROUGH TOUGH TIMES



↑ Emma Ellsworth, executive director at Mount Grace Conservation Land Trust, powers across a Massachusetts pond.

DI GLUSON, III/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

Change always brings uncertainty, and lately it seems as if every day offers a new hurdle to overcome. Land trusts are navigating upheaval at the federal level while trying to continue the daily work of running organizations, conserving landscapes and delivering services to communities.

“In many ways, we are in unprecedented times,” says Land Trust Alliance CEO Ashely Demosthenes. “However, this is what the Land Trust Alliance was made for: We are here for you, and together we’ll get through whatever is coming our way.”

The Alliance has created or shared numerous resources in recent months to help land trusts weather these tough times—if you haven’t checked them out already, we’ve got the highlights below. All of these can be found in our online Resource Center.

OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL ACTIONS

The new administration has taken numerous actions since coming into office in January, as well as reversed many actions of previous administrations, that have the potential for widespread impacts on the land trust community, including:

- Federal funding freezes and elimination of grants.
- Sweeping reductions of regulations for energy siting, wildlife, climate change and more.
- Shrinking the federal workforce.
- Eliminating anything related to diversity, equity and inclusion, environmental justice and climate change.
- Proposing tax law changes that would harm nonprofits.

Nearly 400 staff or board members of land trusts attended our complimentary webinar, “**Strategies for Navigating the New Federal Landscape**,” on March 4 to

hear more about these actions, how they might impact land trusts and how the Alliance is supporting land trusts. Said one webinar participant: “Please continue to track all the changes in D.C. and keep us all informed as best you can. It is reassuring to know you are acting on our behalf in D.C.” The Alliance is regularly posting updates on the actions that are most relevant to land trusts—check back frequently at lta.org/resources/new-federal-landscape/.

ASSESSING RISK

Assessing financial health and new legal risks are some of the first things land trusts should do in times of upheaval. Two webinars introduced land trusts to financial strategies for this time of shifting state, local and federal resources. In “**Financial Scenario Planning in Uncertain Times**,” consultant Kay Sohl provided land trust executive directors, board chairs and financial directors the opportunity to sharpen their financial acumen with financial modeling scenarios, smart credit and debt strategies and more. In “**Fundraising in the New Federal Landscape**,” the Alliance’s Mindy Milby Tuttle, director of principal giving, offered practical strategies to diversify revenue, strengthen donor relationships and leverage technology to sustain and grow fundraising efforts.

In addition to these webinars, the Alliance has added dozens of new resources to

help land trusts assess their financial and legal risks. **“Resources to Build Resilience”** compiles suggestions for assessing an organization’s strengths and vulnerabilities with tools to help review financial forecasting and identify—and address—potential risks; a framework for considering the organization’s role in advancing or highlighting programs, values or positions that may be viewed as controversial by some; and examples of organizational statements and actions in our community and beyond.

compassionate way, including how to care for the people involved and support remaining staff.

Communication is as essential as ever and carries with it both new potency as well as potential risks for land trusts, in particular around communicating about diversity, equity and inclusion. An article from the Harvard Business Review—**“The Legal Landscape Around DEI Is Shifting. Your Messaging Should, Too”**—provides insights on how to think about commu-

important work. You can submit stories anonymously through our quick online form at: lta.org/resources/new-federal-landscape/impact-of-federal-actions.

WHAT LAND TRUSTS CAN DO

In addition to organizational risk assessments, land trusts are urged to continue educating constituents and decision-makers about the benefits of land conservation by:

- **Sharing stories.** Communicating the impacts of the administration’s orders and directives is essential, as well as continuing to communicate the many benefits of private land conservation for everyone. Our **op-ed submission template** helps land trusts structure an op-ed that highlights the impact of federal funding freezes and policy decisions on local land conservation. It provides a framework and suggests ways to incorporate local examples to help craft a compelling and informative piece that explains the challenges land trusts face and illustrates the broader importance of land conservation.
- **Contacting public officials.** Reach out to contacts in local and state government, members of Congress and the administration. Tell them how land trusts’ work helps communities thrive—and, if relevant, how cuts in federal funding or changes in federal policy will negatively impact this work. The Alliance has created **key messages** and other resources to assist with this outreach.
- **Becoming Advocacy Ambassadors.** While the Alliance has lobbyists and consultants to educate legislators and keep a watchful eye on what is going on in Washington, it is no substitute for local advocacy voices. Ambassadors gain assistance and training on how to build enduring one-to-one relationships with their political representatives.

Putting a twist on another age-old maxim: When times get tough, the tough get going—together. The land trust community is staying informed, active and united. ☺

Alliance members can watch recordings of all webinars and read the resources cited here by logging in to our online Resource Center and searching by titles.

When times get tough, the tough get going—together.

Another useful resource is the **cash flow projection template** from the Nonprofit Finance Fund. This essential tool helps organizations determine how much working capital they need to maintain or build in order to manage low cash points over the year, providing insights into periods when the organization will have adequate cash to cover expenditures and when it will not.

Recent political actions to withdraw nonprofits’ tax exemption status have raised concerns. Two articles explore this topic: **“Nonprofits Under Fire: How the IRS Can—and Cannot—Revoke Federal Tax-Exempt Status”** from Nonprofit Quarterly examines the legal and procedural realities of how the IRS can—and cannot—revoke a nonprofit’s federal tax-exempt status, and **“Myth v. Reality: Executive Branch Lacks Authority to Target Nonprofit Organizations”** from the National Council of Nonprofits debunks misconceptions about the executive branch’s authority over nonprofit organizations.

Land trust leaders faced with the possibility of staff reductions during times of uncertainty should watch the webinar **“Compassionate Leadership in Times of Financial Crisis.”** Downsizing can be one of the hardest jobs of an executive director or board chair, and this webinar offered strategies for doing so in an ethical and

nication under the federal unraveling of diversity, equity and inclusion programs. The authors, from NYU School of Law’s Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, identify best practices, share strategies to disseminate these best practices and offer some sample language to avoid legal risk.

LISTENING TO YOU

Alliance field staff hosted nine regional listening sessions throughout the spring to check in on land trusts, learn about what they need and provide an opportunity to connect to others in this tumultuous time. Land trust executive directors across the country were invited to attend sessions by region: Southeast, New York, New England, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, California, Southwest, Pacific Northwest and Intermountain. Participants engaged in open dialogue and offered support to one another. While none of us have all the answers, there is strength in coming together to share concerns, strategies, hopes and plans.

The Alliance is also gathering stories of federal impacts on land trusts through an online form that takes just a few minutes to fill out. These stories help us better understand the impacts and continue to advocate for land trusts and their

A RIGHT OF WAY MAY NOT BE THE “RIGHT” ANSWER

Being a good neighbor can sometimes be complicated. Regardless of good intentions, neighbor disputes may arise. Land trusts need to know their responsibilities when it comes to rights of way (ROW) on conservation easements, leased lands and owned properties.

As of March 31, 2025, Terrafirma Risk Retention Group LLC had a total of 126 disputes over access and ROWs. Of those, 55 are covered claims costing money to enforce, and 15 are claims that were covered and closed already. Combined, these 70 claims have cost \$614,000 so far. Demands over access and ROWs are on the rise in both volume and severity, increasing a land trust's risk of costly litigation.

While a ROW might seem benign, especially if there is an existing dirt track or even a road, the problems associated with ROWs are numerous and serious—not the least of which are adverse conservation impact, unexpected expansion of use and impermissible private benefit. Even a benign use can lead to severe, damaging and expensive problems later. There is no requirement to agree to a ROW, so new ROWs should be a last resort. Any ROW must be strictly limited—overly broad ROWs increase litigation risk. Some problems can be stopped or abated early if the land trust acts promptly to limit the access use or demand by a neighbor.

Many land trusts, and even attorneys, assume that any neighbor can obtain court-ordered access rights (called prescriptive rights or

easement by necessity or use). This court process is highly variable, very fact dependent and subject to the laws of each state. It is not a slam dunk by any means—to establish such a right requires long-term, visible, unauthorized use and other criteria. Prescriptive rights at most only permit the existing use, not expanded uses. To make that case in court is difficult, detailed and expensive. So don't assume that you have to give an access easement—you do not.

DUE DILIGENCE FIRST

Alternatives are always the first and best option. Are there alternatives the landowner can pursue, even if less convenient and more expensive? Due diligence and documentation are critical—land trusts have lost two cases in court over expanded ROW uses because the documentation and restrictions on the ROW were lacking.

Amendments to existing conservation easements to permit a new ROW outside of building areas may be contrary to conservation purposes and may be too risky to allow. Use the 2017 edition of the Amending Conservation Easements report to assess any such requests for existing conservation easements including full due diligence. For preserves, the amendment report is also the best guide for evaluation and due diligence.

It is also critical to consult with an attorney, preferably a trial attorney who is not on your board, so that you understand the laws in your state regarding prescriptive easements, implied easements by necessity, adverse possession, declaratory judgment to establish easement, cartway statutes and quiet title.

As with any request, start with obtaining a full written description of the proposed use so that you fully understand the purpose, scope, location, duration, ongoing maintenance, access, surfacing, width and other issues. Then evaluate consistency with the conservation values and purposes, impermissible private benefit, risks of unexpected future demands for expanded uses and widths. Any evaluation should consider the heightened risk of losing in court if land trusts attempt to limit the use or dimensions of a ROW after the fact. ☺



ILLINOIS CLEAN ENERGY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

A TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENT

In 2023, when I was hired as the first executive director of Prairie State Conservation Coalition (PSCC), the organization was on a path to growth. Established in 2005, PSCC is a nonprofit that provides a collective voice for land conservation in Illinois, offering educational, collaborative and networking opportunities, and advocating for strong statewide land conservation policies that benefit all Illinoisans.

Soon after I arrived, we began developing a strategic plan that would position the organization to expand while better serving our constituents. As part of the plan, we intended to raise funds to help support land conservation in Illinois.

In mid-2023, we learned that PSCC would receive a major grant. Originally expected to be \$42 million, the final grant actually totaled \$47.1 million! This amazing grant was completely unexpected by PSCC. Although we were hoping to raise better prospects for statewide conservation funding through PSCC, we never expected to receive such a large grant at this stage. Suddenly, we were in the enviable position of being on an accelerated path to growth.

By **CYNTHIA KANNER**



ILLINOIS CLEAN ENERGY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

↑ Prairie State Conservation Coalition's Chairman Brook McDonald (left) and Executive Director Cynthia Kanner (middle) present a special recognition award to Dennis O'Brien (right) of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

← The Prairie State Conservation Coalition was surprised to receive a large grant that will help it expand upon decades of solid progress in preserving and expanding natural areas and wildlife habitat in Illinois.

“Land conservation and nature-based solutions are a cornerstone of environmental health. They are a positive solution for the environment and for people.”

—JERRY ADELMANN, board member of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation

A LASTING IMPACT

This amazing grant came from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (ICECF), a long-time partner that had decided to wind down its operations.

“In our 25 years, we made a significant impact on energy efficiency and on the preservation and enhancement of natural habitats and wildlife areas throughout the state of Illinois,” says Dennis O’Brien, who served as ICECF’s executive director. “However, we were getting to the point that we would become less effective and would need to decrease the size of the grants we were administering if we didn’t make a significant change.”

On deciding to wrap up its work, the organization looked to how it could have a lasting impact by making a single grant “that would allow an organization such as Prairie State Conservation Coalition to effectively take up the mantle of helping preserve natural areas and wildlife habitat in Illinois,” says Jerry Adelman, who served on the board of directors of ICECF.

No doubt, there are several factors that went into PSCC being chosen as the recipient of this transformative grant. For more than 20 years, PSCC has supported land conservation and biodiversity protection in the state, representing more than 40 conservation organizations that have together protected over 200,000 acres. ICECF had attended PSCC’s annual conference over the years and provided grants to help fund our work and strengthen the organization, including a two-year grant that was received just months before I started as executive director.

“Over the years, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation had provided support for Prairie State Conservation Coalition and for many of our members, but certainly not at the level of this final grant,” says Brook McDonald, board president of PSCC and president/CEO of The Conservation Foundation. “This grant will help Prairie State Conservation Coalition be an even more effective voice for land conservation in Illinois.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

PSCC plans to significantly expand its reach and services. In 2024, we created the Prairie State Conservation Fund, which will award grants to eligible organizations statewide for land acquisition and purchase of conservation easements; stewardship of natural habitats and wildlife areas preservation; and capacity building. Additionally, a portion of the grant will be used to support the work of land conservation organizations led by Black, Indigenous and people of color. We plan to increase the fund to at least \$100 million while working with others to create a feasibility plan to encourage more funding even within the state apparatus in the years to come.

PSCC has spent much of the past year planning and making certain that we have all the systems, people and programs in place to accept, responsibly manage and grow the fund, and ultimately implement grant programs and further support land conservation organizations.

We are fortunate that ICECF provided a great template and solid foundation for

how to do this. As a result, PSCC will adapt and customize many of its processes. Some of the systems we need to implement such a large grant and redistribute it effectively include accounting, auditing, legal, investment plans, special committees, staff, HR/benefits, tech/computer systems, communications, compliance with privacy and other regulations/legislation, new policies and procedures, and even setting up office space for new grant program staff.

ATTRACTING A LARGE GRANT

While this major grant was a surprise, I do think it came about in large part because PSCC had worked over the years to build a solid organization that was well positioned to take on this major responsibility. Some of the factors that I believe helped PSCC attract such a large grant include:

- A solid organizational structure.
- An active, dedicated, experienced and knowledgeable board of directors.
- Follow-through on what we say we will do.
- Competence, commitment and confidence in managing our resources.
- Consistent networking and relationship building to expand our reach and ensure our organization’s voice is heard.
- Telling our story of competence and successes.
- Being innovative in our approach.

This year is an exciting year for PSCC—in addition to implementing plans for our new fund, we are also celebrating our 20th anniversary! We started the year with our annual conference in March, which attracted our largest and most varied crowd ever. With more than 150 attendees, 35 speakers and 54 sponsors, our conference set a solid foundation for our future success.

As we move forward, PSCC will spend a good part of 2025 focusing on making certain that all our systems are in place, launching our programs and growing our impact. We are honored and excited to take up the mantle of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and be active, dedicated stewards of the land. ☺

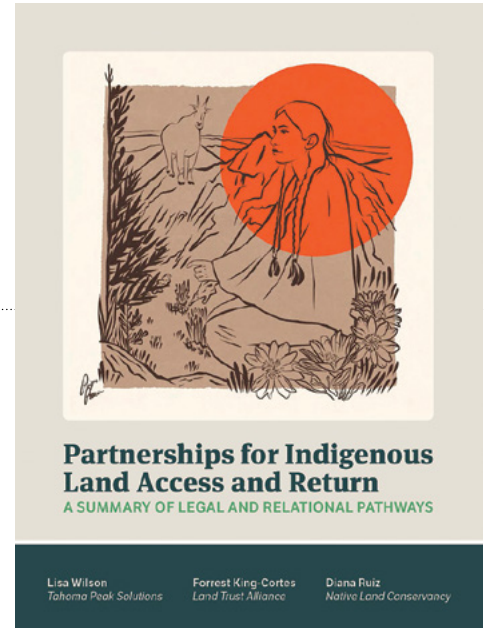
CYNTHIA KANNER is executive director of Prairie State Conservation Coalition, an Illinois nonprofit association of land conservation organizations.

CONNECTION TO THE LAND IS GOOD MEDICINE

By **LISA WILSON**

Editor's note: This spring, the Alliance, Tahoma Peak Solutions and Native Land Conservancy released a new report, "Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access and Return: A Summary of Legal and Relational Pathways." The report offers guidance, resources and case studies of Indigenous land access and return. In the course of researching this report, the authors conducted numerous interviews and identified more than 70 partnerships between land trusts and Tribal nations or organizations. The following excerpt is the introduction to the report.

Download the full report at lta.org/resources/learn/explore/partnerships-for-indigenous-land-access/.



Through this project, it has been a true honor to sit down with Tribal leaders and listen to their stories and wisdom.

When reflecting on these conversations, what resonates most for me is how the land remembers us and calls us home. To truly know ourselves, we must know the land—it's our heartbeat, our lifeline, it's who we are. Hawk Rosales, Ndé (Apache) lineage and lead consultant to the InterTribal Sinkiyone Wilderness Council, says, "Remove Indigenous people from these relationships and it's disastrous." These relationships are so essential to our health and well-being that when we're disconnected, we see it in our people. Yet, healing and hope lie in restoring these connections. Lance Foster, Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and Tribal historic preservation officer and director of Ioway Tribal National Park, says, "So if you care for the land, the land takes care of the people, it's part of each other, you know, ancestors and everything. ... Doing the land right and reconnecting to the land in that way, heals a lot, heals families. ... Connection to the land is good medicine."

For many Tribal nations and people, reconnecting to the

land can feel very challenging due to the nuance, entanglements, confusion of colonial laws, arbitrary U.S. borders, great distances, recognition status, financial limitations and lack of respect for Tribal sovereignty. Yet, as Ramona Peters, Mashpee Wampanoag and founder of the Native Land Conservancy, says, "The land itself doesn't know any of these barriers and doesn't know anything about the deeds or anything like that. ... You spend enough time outside and those lines get very blurred; it still has our ancestral imprints there. ... There's nothing that can take that away."

Regardless of current circumstances, no one can take away our relationship to the land and those land relationships that have existed since time immemorial, which make Indigenous people critical leaders in land conservation efforts. Ramona continues, "Land is recognizing the people returning to that place. Welcoming back those original people. Ancestors who are present in these places for so long. They did things that the land recalls, remembers. When it's interrupted and Native people come back, they will revitalize those connections to the land. That principle of Tribal leadership will come out and be informed by that dynamic." Those memories, knowledge and histories run deep and guide us as protectors and voices for our land and water relatives.

As I conducted interviews for this report, both Indigenous and land trust leaders emphasized the importance of centering Indigenous leadership in conservation work. This means valuing



↑ In a historic partnership, Tribes and federal agencies united to protect Bears Ears National Monument in Utah in 2022.

and prioritizing Indigenous voices, perspectives, knowledge, experiences and ways of being throughout partnerships and projects. Indigenous insights, relationships with the land, cultural values and histories are crucial to effective stewardship and addressing urgent climate concerns. Ramona states, “Tribes are not just involved, they are leading. We want to lead.” Hawk reinforces this, saying, “We look at them [plants and animals] as relatives. We are connected to them forever. That is why conservation needs Indigenous leadership. Especially with these threats upon us and growing all the time.”

Indigenous leadership in conservation is guided by relationships to land. These relationships hold deep knowledge and teachings that benefit not just Indigenous people but everyone, including our more-than-human relatives. Hawk adds, “When Indigenous leadership is there, you have amazing success and commitment and outcomes to the community. All the community—not just humans.” The relational and legal approaches outlined in this resource offer practical information on avenues for Indigenous land access and return, but the heart of the matter is, and always will be, reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous peoples’ relationships to land. These connections support the healing, health and well-being of Indigenous people and all our human and more-than-human relatives. ☺

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

The process of building partnerships and working toward Indigenous land access and return is just as important as the outcome itself. By allocating staff time and resources to relationship building, partners can lay the foundation for an effective partnership and project. Below is a summary of partnership considerations—for both Tribal nations and organizations as well as non-Indigenous land trusts—shared by case study partners who’ve navigated effective projects.

- Build trust.
- Honor Tribal sovereignty.
- Plan for the long term.
- Center Indigenous leadership.
- Commit to decolonization.
- Prioritize communication.
- Demonstrate a willingness to learn and share.
- Maintain flexibility.
- Protect cultural knowledge.

Meet Our New Board Members

Members of the Land Trust Alliance's board of directors are passionate land conservationists

who collectively govern the Alliance, setting its course and providing expert guidance. We are thrilled to welcome four new board members who bring remarkable experience and unique perspectives to the work of land trusts and land conservation. We are extremely grateful to them, to our new board chair, David Calle, and to all our board members for their service.



PHOTO COURTESY OF EBONIE ALEXANDER

Ebonie Alexander

is executive director of the Black Family Land Trust. She is the 2022 recipient of the Kingsbury Browne Conservation Leadership Award and the 2020 recipient of the Gerald P. McCarthy Award for Leadership in Environmental Conflict Resolution.

Black Family Land Trust is one of the only conservation land trusts dedicated to the preservation and protection of African American and

other historically underserved landowners' assets. Under Alexander's leadership, the land trust expanded its work from North Carolina to South Carolina and Virginia, with special projects in Alabama, Mississippi and Vermont. Black Family Land Trust has helped countless families retain their land assets for future generations—in the past five years, the land trust assisted landowners in retaining family ownership and control of more than \$12.5 million in land assets and deployed more than \$500,000 in federal USDA funding to landowners.

Alexander also serves on the boards of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, American Farmland Trust, the North Farm Stewardship Association and Virginia United Land Trusts, a coalition of land trusts in Virginia.

A native of Maryland, Alexander lives in rural Virginia on land that has been in her family for generations. She is a proud Virginian, avid reader and grandmother of two. A lover of history, she can trace her family's lineage in Virginia to the mid-1730s.

Carolyn Hendricks was introduced to land conservation in 2010 when she and her husband purchased 78 acres of land under a conservation easement in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. Hendricks began doing volunteer land stewardship work with the accredited Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC), eventually joining its board. She later became familiar with the Land Trust Alliance when she attended Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference as a WPC board member in 2018.

"I was enthralled with the diversity of the member organizations and their creative solutions to land conservation," says Hendricks.

Hendricks has also served on the boards of other conservation groups, including the American Bird Conservancy, NatureServe, Amazon Conservation and a local group that is cultivating a demonstration forest near her home. She enjoys helping organizations achieve and sustain healthy board dynamics.

"I have done a lot of advocacy and fostered communications and support for these organizations and plan to enthusiastically support the Alliance as a board member," says Hendricks.

She is passionate about encouraging local landowners to conserve and steward their land. She is also an avid birdwatcher, participating in a five-year survey to document all of the breeding birds in Pennsylvania. Trained at Johns Hopkins University, Hendricks is a medical oncologist specializing in breast cancer genetics, screening and treatment at Maryland Oncology Hematology.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROLYN HENDRICKS

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARISSA SAMS



Marissa Sams is the founder and head of the eponymous Marissa Sams Events, a full-service event agency that takes a multi-dimensional view to planning events in policy, advocacy, philanthropy, culture and commerce. Sams created the agency to serve an overlooked market: organizations, clients and stakeholders seeking to advance social and cultural goals for diverse audiences. During her 20 years in the events industry, Sams has managed events on five continents, hosted heads of state and celebrities, and orchestrated events from intimate birthday gatherings to tech-company rallies for thousands. She has a diverse portfolio of world-changing clients and has planned leadership forums domestically and abroad for the U.S. Department of State.

Sams became a board member of the accredited Lowcountry Land Trust in 2023.

"I believe the lands we occupy have stories. Stories that have the power to teach, heal and unify. My work with the Lowcountry Land Trust has exposed me to the richness of these stories and the constructive energy that can be harnessed if we conserve collaboratively," says Sams.

Sams is thrilled to join the Alliance and its network of conservation advocates to highlight how collectively we can use conservation as an outlet to heal and grow together.

"I aim to use my strategic planning, marketing and project management skills to amplify the great work being done as well as to raise up new voices and bring visibility to up and coming change makers," says Sams. "I'm excited to support the Alliance's deep-rooted mission to conserve and protect land through education and community programs."

Fred Van Sickle is board chair of the accredited Finger Lakes Land Trust (FLLT), an organization doing "incredibly effective and well-regarded work," says Van Sickle.

"When I moved to New York's Finger Lakes region in 2016, I was so taken by the landscape that I wanted to do my part to help conserve its lands and waters," says Van Sickle. He is inspired by the work of FLLT's talented staff and devoted supporters to ensure the protection of scenic vistas, local foods, clean water and wild places for everyone.

"It is so gratifying to see how our local communities help the rest of the world breathe better," says Van Sickle.

Van Sickle became familiar with the Land Trust Alliance during his first Rally in New Orleans in 2022, which he attended with FLLT staff. He left Rally energized by the experience of seeing "the large national movement transcending geography, culture and politics on behalf of the land." He is excited to bring his experience as a nonprofit leader to help the Alliance grow in impact and influence.

Van Sickle is vice president for alumni affairs and development at Cornell University, where he and his team work with alumni and friends around the world to help the university advance its mission to "do the greatest good." He also serves as vice chair of the board of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier. An avid gardener, he lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife, Susan; they have two adult children. ☺



PHOTO COURTESY OF FRED VAN SICKLE



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANFORD LAND TRUST

↑ Branford Land Trust's Julie Wagner (left) and Joan Merrick (right) worked together to complete the renewal of accreditation application.

ACCREDITATION MADE EASIER

By KIRSTEN FERGUSON

The Second Time Around: Lessons from Two Land Trusts

For the all-volunteer Branford Land Trust in Connecticut, accreditation was a smoother journey the second time around. The 57-year-old organization, which stewards roughly 70 preserves along Long Island Sound, owns or holds conservation easements on tidal salt marshes, wetlands and other lands, while maintaining miles of trails for the public.

Current president Julie Wagner and past president Joan Merrick partnered closely to lead the renewal effort, receiving that renewal in December 2024. Their complementary skills and strong working relationship made all the difference. "Joan and I have different strengths

and knowledge bases. We worked together very closely," says Wagner.

Merrick, who had taken a major role in the trust's initial accreditation, brought valuable institutional knowledge. Both leaders also benefited from attending Accreditation Commission seminars and having flexible schedules—Merrick is retired, and Wagner has adaptable work hours.

"We had the most efficient system for us," Merrick notes.

While the two spearheaded the process, they brought in others when needed. For financial documentation, they leaned on their treasurer. They consulted their attorney and involved two board members, including a younger one, to encourage exposure to the process and build leadership capacity.

Compared to the first time, renewal felt far more manageable. "Our land trust already had solid procedures, but during the first accreditation, our documentation fell short. That year was mostly about paperwork and ensuring we could properly demonstrate what we were already doing," says Merrick.

Following that experience, Merrick developed new documentation checklists. The trust prioritized improvements and embedded them into its strategic plan. "That strategic planning helped us focus," says Wagner. "It clarified that maintaining the accreditation requirements was something we needed to do over the next five years."

Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton, Montana, also took a team-based approach to its accreditation renewal. The mid-sized trust, with about 10 full-time staff, divided the application into sections assigned to a working group based on expertise. While the process was handled internally, the executive committee of the board remained informed.

Operations Director Kori Anderson led the effort, supported by Stewardship Director Rhiannon Klingonsmith and Lands Director Melissa Odell.

"Having a good team made all the difference," says Anderson. "Each of us was an expert in our area and knew where the documents lived. And also having a system of checks and balances

was really helpful for us. Sometimes you've been looking at something so long, you need someone else to double-check and make sure it's all there."

Branford Land Trust followed a similar philosophy. "We took free rein on each other's work—no pride of ownership," Merrick says. "One of us would write a section, the other would review it."

At Bitter Root, preparations began about a year before the deadline, with intensive work ramping up in the final six to eight months. Regular check-ins helped the team stay on track. Anderson, who went on maternity leave mid-process, credited the team's momentum and structure with keeping things moving.

"Pacing ourselves was key," she says. "The five-year work plan provided by the Accreditation Commission really helped us stay current and aware of what needed attention."

Now, the land trust has incorporated accreditation awareness into new staff onboarding and remains committed to maintaining high standards.

"Accreditation encourages you to examine your practices closely," Anderson says. "Are we doing this the best way? Are we meeting a level of excellence across the board? While it's a significant time investment, it's definitely worth it."

Merrick emphasizes that there's no universal formula for success. "Each land trust has to evaluate its people, its electronic systems and its land holdings to figure out the best approach," she says.

"This worked for us. And liking each other went a long way," adds Wagner.

Top Takeaways for Renewal Success

- **Divide and conquer:** Assign sections based on each person's expertise.
- **Play to your strengths:** Match roles with individual knowledge and availability.
- **Check in regularly:** Use scheduled meetings to monitor progress.
- **Pace yourself:** Set internal milestones well ahead of the deadline.
- **Use the right tools:** Branford used Google Drive and checklists; Bitter Root relied on Excel and the accreditation online platform.
- **Double-check everything:** Assign reviewers to catch missing details.
- **Consult the five-year plan:** Regularly review and update your work in alignment with any updates to the accreditation requirements. ☺

↓ Branford Land Trust protects tidal salt marshes, wetlands and other coastal properties in Connecticut.



COURTESY OF BRANFORD LAND TRUST

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

landtrustaccreditation.org

THE LATEST ACCREDITATION RENEWALS

The following land trusts have achieved accreditation renewal for either the first, second or third time—congratulations!

Accreditation involves a rigorous evaluation that ensures applicants are operating at the highest conservation standards. Thank you for continuing to lead the way in conservation excellence.

- American Chestnut Land Trust (MD) ♦
- Brandywine Conservancy & Museum of Art (PA) ♦
- California Farmland Trust (CA) ♦
- Conserving Carolina (NC) ♦
- Countryside Conservancy (PA) ♦
- East Haddam Land Trust (CT)
- Elkhorn Slough Foundation (CA) ♦
- Five Valleys Land Trust (MT) ♦
- Frenchman Bay Conservancy (ME) ♦
- Friends of the Columbia Gorge and its affiliate, Friends of the Columbia Gorge Land Trust (OR)
- Heritage Conservancy (PA) ♦
- Housatonic Valley Association (CT) ♦
- Hudson Highlands Land Trust (NY) ♦
- Ice Age Trail Alliance (WI) ♦
- Kestrel Land Trust (MA) ♦
- Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County (CA) ♦
- Land Trust of Napa County (CA) ♦
- Louisville & Jefferson County Environmental Trust (KY) ♦
- Norfolk Land Trust (CT) ♦
- North Branch Land Trust (PA) ♦
- North Shore Land Alliance (NY) ♦
- Placer Land Trust (CA) ♦
- Rondout-Esopus Land Conservancy (NY) ♦
- Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust (ID) ♦
- Scenic Hudson and its affiliates, Scenic Hudson Land Trust and Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail (NY) ♦
- Sonoma Land Trust (CA) ♦
- Vital Ground Foundation (MT) ♦
- Wareham Land Trust (MA) ♦
- Washington Farmland Trust (WA) ♦

List as of March 2025.

♦ Denotes second renewal ♦ Denotes third renewal.



SAVE THE DATE

RALLY 2025



September 3–6 | Cleveland, OH • Huntington Convention Center
National Land Conservation Conference • Land Trust Alliance

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Rally has all the resources you need to take your conservation career further. There's no better way to invest in your future.

Registration will open in June. We can't wait to see you there!



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