

Comprehensive Stewardship in the Upper Snake River Valley Teton Regional Land Trust

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**For Easement Stewardship Systems Roundtable
American Farmland Trust, Washington, DC
March 21, 2005**

BACKGROUND

The mission of the Teton Regional Land Trust (TRLT) is to conserve agricultural and natural lands and to encourage land stewardship in the Upper Snake River Watershed for the benefit of today's communities and as a legacy for future generations. At TRLT we plan strategically to protect priority agricultural and natural areas, and their ecological and economic linkages, with a landscape perspective. We also work to influence how people interact with the land through widely valued outreach, education, and stewardship programs.

Our 4.5 million acre service area (1.9 million acres of private lands) encompasses most of the Idaho portion of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) in seven Idaho counties; and also includes a small segment of Teton County, Wyoming (Figure 1) west of the Teton Mountain Range (figure 1). Our geography largely defines who we are. The GYE straddles the middle Rocky Mountains in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming and is considered the last large nearly intact northern temperate ecosystem on earth (Reese 1984; Keiter and Boyce 1991). This 18 million acre ecosystem encompasses approximately 13.9 million acres of federal lands, including Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, seven National Forests, three National Wildlife Refuges and lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management. However, despite the large percentage of public lands in the region, private lands in the Greater Yellowstone's mountain valleys are pivotal elements to both the ecological and economic vitality of the area.

Within our large service area we have employed conservation planning to focus most of our conservation efforts within three priority landscapes: the South Fork of the Snake River Corridor, the Henry's Fork Snake River Corridor and the Teton River Basin. Here in the arid west, the lands under the greatest pressure for recreation driven second home and resort development are along the major river corridors. This is also where we find our richest fish and wildlife habitats and the best of our farm and ranch lands.

Our landowners come from many backgrounds, from families with generations on the land to wealthy newcomers seeking refuge in the Rocky Mountains. Our traditional landowners, and the holders of many of the larger properties (hundreds to thousands of acres), are cattle ranchers and farmers of cultivated crops growing small grains, potatoes, hay, and rapeseed. Many of these families have been on the land since the homesteading era of the late 1800s. In many cases rapid appreciation of property values has made these landowners land rich, while agricultural markets keep them cash challenged. In the past two decades, some of our communities have experienced phenomenal population growth as new residents come to enjoy the scenic beauty and nature of

the Greater Yellowstone region. Some of our rapidly growing communities have doubled in population over the past decade. Newer landowners often hold small (40-acre) to large properties, primarily for natural amenities, but in some cases to operate viable ranches and farms.



Figure 1. The Teton Regional Land Trust Service Area, Upper Snake River Valley.

We steward a total of 90 **conservation easements** in Teton, Fremont, Jefferson, Clark, Madison and Bonneville Counties in Idaho and Teton County in Wyoming. By the close of 2004, some 69 families have partnered with the Teton Regional Land Trust to protect nearly 20,000 acres.

Our Board ensures that our conservation easement lands provide significant public benefit through defined easement criteria and conservation planning. Lands must have significant value in one or more of the following categories:

- wetlands, floodplains, and riparian habitats,
- active ranching, farming, or other productive agricultural use,
- endangered, threatened, or rare species or natural communities,
- important, wildlife habitat or migratory routes,
- ecosystems that remain in relatively natural, undisturbed conditions, or have potential to,
- recognized historic value,
- valuable open space due to its proximity to developing areas or its prominent position in how people perceive their community,
- lands situated such that development would obstruct or diminish scenic views or would interfere with views across already protected open space.

STEWARDSHIP SYSTEM

The Teton Regional Land Trust Stewardship System is governed by Board adopted policy and implementing procedures that link stewardship into the Land Trust's entire conservation program. At TRLT, stewardship begins at the initiation of each conservation project. A land protection and stewardship staff team is formed during preliminary field review of each proposed easement project to determine how the property fits into TRLT conservation goals and to begin to formulate conservation easement terms. Each proposed project must go through both an initial and a final Board review and approval, and discussion of conservation values and long-term stewardship are major parts of both reviews. As a project gains momentum, stewardship staff begins an intensive Baseline Study and informs land protection staff of due diligence and resource concerns. Project development is an interactive process among staff departments all the way to completion, at which time land protection staff are responsible for handing over a fully documented project file to stewardship staff. The intent is to ensure both a fully informed process, and to begin the stewardship staff's relationship with the landowner early in the process. From this point, TRLT stewardship staff works to maintain an active relationship with landowners through completion of *Core Stewardship* responsibilities, and where applicable, value added stewardship through our *Strategic Stewardship* program.

TRLT pursues a system of *Comprehensive Stewardship* that incorporates two primary elements – the *Core Stewardship* program and the *Strategic Stewardship* program. Core Stewardship responsibilities are those that support land protection activities (i.e. conservation team consultation, Baseline Documentation Reports) and activities related to maintenance of conservation easement terms (i.e. easement monitoring, record-keeping, work with successor landowners, exercise of reserved rights, amendments, enforcement). Strategic Stewardship includes activities conducted primarily by the stewardship staff to enhance or restore conservation values, increase the stewardship staff's value to landowner partners as resource extension entities and generally strengthen TRLT's landowner relationships.

The stewardship staff, under supervision of the Executive Director, implements TRLT's stewardship policy and procedures. The stewardship staff is comprised of the Stewardship Director, one full-time Resource Specialist and two part-time Resource Specialists. (In addition, the Operations Director manages all fee-owned lands held by TRLT. The Stewardship Director

consults with the Operations Director on fee-owned land management programs as requested.) The Stewardship Director reports directly to the Executive Director, manages stewardship staff to execute primary stewardship responsibilities, communicates necessary program information to the Executive Director, other staff, Board of Directors, and general public as needed, conforms to Board and organizational policies and directives, and maintains records for responsible programs such that they are accessible to all authorized personnel. The stewardship staff also contributes to other TRLT programs such as outreach and events cooperatively with other TRLT staff as instructed by the Executive Director.

Primary stewardship staff responsibilities include:

1. Coordinate with land protection specialists to ensure that conservation easements and fee acquisitions meet TRLT conservation plan goals, meet standards for public benefit, protect key resources, and are sustainable for the long-term.
2. Ensure the integrity of all conservation easements through thorough and consistent easement monitoring, defense and enforcement.
3. Maintain professional, measured and fully documented relationships with all easement property owners and their assigned representatives.
4. Prepare high quality Baseline Documentation Reports and thorough project records to facilitate future property stewardship.
5. Maintain TRLT's credibility as regional natural resource professionals and contribute to regional conservation planning.
6. Where appropriate act as a resource extension entity for landowner partners to facilitate natural resource Best Management Practices.
7. Develop and improve resource knowledge and conduct ecological monitoring on high-priority resources or landscapes to facilitate achievement of ecological and community outcomes envisioned in the TRLT mission statement.
8. Execute TRLT's habitat restoration program and manage ongoing TRLT restoration projects to accomplish targeted habitat goals, remain within budget constraints and achieve full compliance with state and federal regulations.
9. Implement outreach and education events designed to foster community land stewardship, and contribute to a widely held conservation ethic.

Table 1 summarizes the level of effort expended by TRLT's stewardship staff by major work category in 2004.

Table 1. Teton Regional Land Trust Stewardship Staff Level of Effort Summary by Task 2004.

Core Stewardship		Strategic Stewardship	
<i>Program Element</i>	<i>Hours 2004</i>	<i>Program Element</i>	<i>Hours 2004</i>
Stewardship Administration	1,825	Outreach and Events	606
Baseline Preparation	1,550	Habitat Restoration	488
Easement Monitoring	625	Ecological Monitoring	315
Program Coordination	552	Stewardship Staff Training	197
Total	4,552	Total	1,606

The TRLT Board of Directors has approved policies that guide the Teton Regional Land Trust stewardship program. These policies are now being updated to reflect the ethical and technical guidelines outlined in the 2004 revisions of the Land Trust Standards and Practices prepared by the Land Trust Alliance. To date, TRLT stewardship related policies include:

1. A comprehensive *Project Development and Stewardship Policy*, with policy provisions for proposal development and review, baseline documentation, property surveys and legal descriptions, title reports, stewardship contributions, fee-owned lands, easement monitoring, exercise of reserved rights, amendments, enforcement, successor landowners, and management for fee. This policy is implemented through numerous procedural documents, including the Conservation Project Checklist, Baseline Documentation Outline, Monitoring Checklist and Report, Enforcement Guidelines, and Management for Fee Guidelines. The Successor Landowner Procedures direct monitoring of property ownership transfers and building of relationships with successor landowners.
2. A *Records Policy*, with accompanying detailed records procedures, for all elements of the Land Trust's conservation program.
3. A *Long-term Investment Policy* (stewardship quasi-endowment) to assure that TRLT will be able to monitor and defend its conservation easements in perpetuity.
4. A *Conflict of Interest Policy*, with provisions for Memoranda of Understanding for easements on properties owned by Board Members.

It is TRLT policy that the Board of Directors will conduct an internal audit of our stewardship program once every three years, and will facilitate an external audit of the program once every five years. The TRLT stewardship program has benefited from both internal and external audits of our program—we are still implementing new policies and procedures suggested by a LTA sponsored external audit of our program.

REASONS FOR THE CURRENT SYSTEM

TRLT's founding board members and Executive Director recognized that maintaining the conservation values of protected lands is dependent on rigorous long-term stewardship. Our mission statement, policies and organizational values reflect this early commitment to long-term stewardship. TRLT is increasingly interested in the outcomes of our ongoing conservation programs. Our targets are not the dollars we spend or acres we protect, but rather the long-term sustainability of farm and ranch operations and functional fish and wildlife habitats. In recent years the Executive Director has enhanced the role of the stewardship staff to improve the effectiveness of the overall organization through programs such as refined conservation planning, habitat restoration, community outreach and ecological monitoring. The goals of these strategic stewardship elements are to increase our relevance as stewards to our landowner partners, increase conservation value to the public and improve our performance as a conservation organization. Current stewardship staffing reflects this commitment.

SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

Table 2 summarizes metrics used to assess TRLT's stewardship program.

Table 2. Teton Regional Land Trust Stewardship Assessment Summary.

Metric Categories	Individual Metrics	Measure
General Conservation Program	Acreage protected by TRLT conservation easements or acquisitions facilitated by TRLT	19,777 acres
	Conservation easements held by TRLT (responsible for enforcement)	81
	Acreage held in easement by TRLT	13,787
	Easements transferred to Bureau of Land Management	8
Resource Protection Summary	Conservation Easements with agricultural operations	36
	Agricultural land protected by conservation easement	12,700 acres
	Conservation Easements with significant wetlands	51
	Acres of wetlands protected by conservation easement	5,000 acres
	River or major tributary stream corridor protected	31 miles
	Acres intensively restored or enhanced for conservation priority fish and wildlife species (completed or in-process)	1,715 acres
Stewardship System Assessment	Easements monitored by TRLT (includes BLM held easements)	89
	Acreage monitored by TRLT	18,286 acres
	Balance of Stewardship Quasi-Endowment	\$760,000
	Current easements in violation.	0
	Current easement violations in arbitration or legal dispute	0
	Conservation easements with outstanding stewardship issues (non-violations)	11
	Number of easement properties in second generation ownership	5
	Conservation easements properties currently for sale	4
Landowner Support	Conservation Easement Landowners that have contributed to the Stewardship Endowment Fund	65 (73%)
	Conservation Easement land owners who support TRLT through membership donations	48 (54%)
	Total donations made by conservation easement landowners - 2004	\$119,061

TRLT has facilitated 19,817 acres of land conservation protection within the upper Snake River Watershed. TRLT also partners with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to secure easements within the South Fork and Henry's Fork River Corridors. These easements are assigned to the BLM, but by formal agreement TRLT conducts the stewardship. Currently TRLT

holds 73 easements on 13,787 acres of land but with our BLM easement responsibilities we steward a total of 18,286 acres. Stewardship staff also prepares Baseline Documentation Reports by contract for The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund in our region.

Sixty easements (approximately 12,700 acres) stewarded by TRLT have some agricultural operation. Fifty-one easements protect significant wetland resources (approximately 5,000 acres) and TRLT facilitated conservation easements protect 31 miles of river and major stream tributary corridor in the upper Snake River Watershed. TRLT easements also protect habitat for an array of fish and wildlife species and rare plants identified regionally or nationally as conservation priorities. These include Ute ladies' tresses orchid, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, bald eagle, grizzly bear, elk, trumpeter swan and long-billed curlew.

TRLT is engaged (completed or in progress) in habitat restoration to benefit some of the above-described priority natural elements. To date our program contains over 1,715 acres primarily focusing on restoring wetland and associated uplands habitat.

Eleven easement properties have management practices that pose challenges to maintenance of conservation values outlined in easement terms. In four cases, improper interpretation of permitted building rights may be potential violations if not resolved, but to this point, none are adversarial or approaching violation status, and we anticipate cooperative resolution of all four cases. The remaining seven cases are resource uses that are not outside the frame of the conservation easements, but which do compromise conservation values. The Stewardship Director is working with these landowners to advocate improved implementation of BMPs.

Gauging landowner support or perception of TRLT is difficult. All of our easement donors are granted lifetime membership in TRLT, and although some of these landowners do not make annual contributions to operations, they are active in TRLT activities and promote our work. Several indirect measures of landowner support may be the number of landowners that have donated to the Stewardship Endowment or who donate as members. Sixty-five holders of easement lands (73% of TRLT's 89 easements) donated stewardship costs for maintenance of long-term stewardship of their easement properties. In 2004, easement landowners donated \$119,061 to the organization.

ONGOING CHANGES

Stewardship has been a priority of the Teton Regional Land Trust from the outset—the third TRLT staff member hired was the Stewardship Director (with an Executive Director and Office Manager). In the last five years TRLT's total staff has grown from three full-time employees to a staff of seven full-time employees and three part-time employees. Of that total, the stewardship staff is made up of two full-time and two part-time employees, or 36% of the full-time equivalents. To meet perceived future staff needs, TRLT recently completed a three-year capacity campaign to add these stewardship staff.

The Stewardship Staff workload has continued to grow with an ever increasing number of conservation easements, refinement of Baseline Documentation Reports, more follow-up with easement property transfers and exercises of reserved rights, and the addition of major

restoration programs, resource extension, outreach, and ecological monitoring. The expected continuing growth in conservation easement projects will challenge TRLT's ability to maintain our commitment to Comprehensive Stewardship in the upper Snake River Watershed.



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