

SAVING AMERICAN FARMLAND

2017 NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF LAND TRUSTS
THAT PROTECT FARM AND RANCH LAND



Agricultural land is at risk. According to *Farms Under Threat: The State of America's Farmland*,¹ the United States converted about 31 million acres of agricultural land to development between 1992 and 2012—nearly double the amount previously reported. A disproportionate amount of development (62 percent) occurred on agricultural land, which only accounted for 49 percent of the total land area in 1992.

State and local governments have led the response to agricultural land conversion. Thirty-two states have state or local purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE) programs that buy easements from willing landowners to keep land available for agriculture. As of January 2018, state and local programs had protected more than 3.4 million acres of farm and ranch land.²

Private land trusts also play an important role. Land trusts are conservation organizations that protect natural resources by acquiring or helping other entities acquire land or conservation easements. Land trusts' involvement in agricultural land protection was fueled by a growing interest in local farms and food and the expansion in 2002 of the federal farmland protection program, which made land trusts eligible for matching funds.

To better understand the important role that land trusts play in saving agricultural land, AFT conducted a nationwide survey of

land trusts in 2012 and conducted a follow-up survey in 2017, the purpose of which was to:

- Identify organizations that *protect farm and ranch land for agriculture* and regions served by agricultural land trusts;
- Quantify the total amount of farm and ranch land protected by land trusts and PACE programs;
- Report on participation in the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program—Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) and its predecessors;
- Identify barriers, if any, to future participation in ACEP-ALE.

AFT's survey included questions about the organization, farm and ranch land protection activity, and partnerships with public programs. It also asked questions about easement provisions and additional activities offered to support agriculture. In August 2017, AFT sent an e-mail invitation and survey link to 693 land trusts filtered from a list provided by the Land Trust Alliance. This subset had reported that protecting working farm or ranch land was a priority. AFT conducted follow-up over the next six months. The overall response rate was 38 percent—266 respondents—slightly higher than the response in 2012. Respondents skipped some questions. We indicate response rates for specific questions below.

FINDINGS

■ Protection Nearly Doubles in Five Years

Eight out of 10 land trusts responding to our survey reported on their land protection activity. Together, these 216 land trusts protected 4.4 million acres of farm and ranch land nationwide. This represents a 45 percent increase from the 2012 total. Nearly all of the protected farm and ranch land—98 percent—is under 8,898 easements, which cover 4.3 million acres. Reporting land trusts also own 332 farms and ranches that encompass 82,001 acres.

■ Purchases Surpass Donations

Overall, 61 percent of the protected agricultural land was acquired through fee or easement purchases, while 39 percent was protected through donations. This is a big change from 2012 when 62 percent of the protected land had been acquired

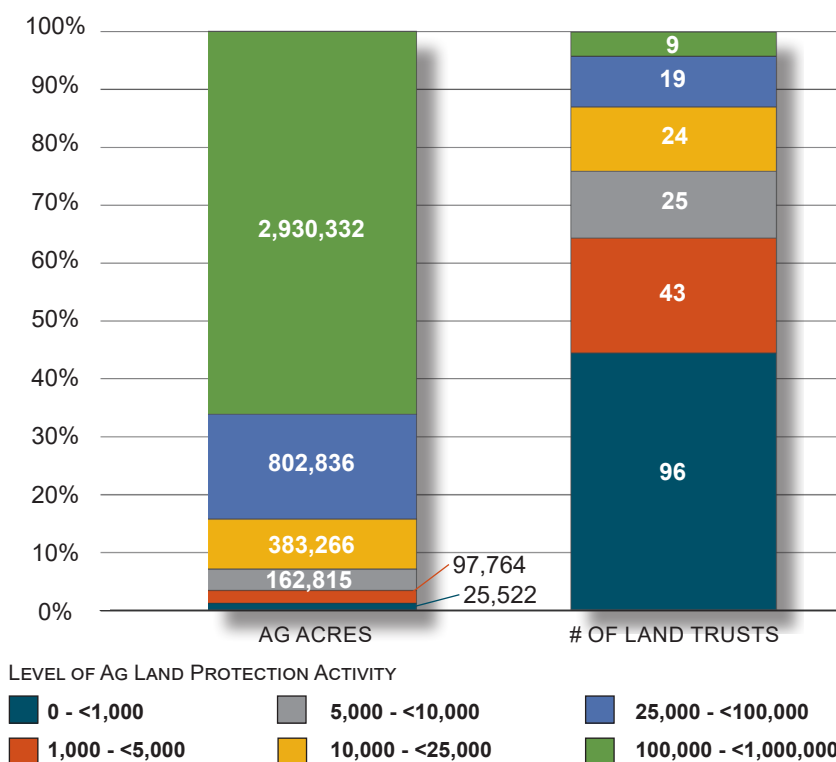
through donations. When asked whether their organization planned to offer land protection and other activities in the next five years, 65 percent (128) said they would *buy* easements on farms and ranches; 25 percent (50) said they would *buy* farms and ranches in fee.

■ Small Subset Saved the Most Ag Land

AFT only surveyed land trusts that prioritize agricultural land protection. But among respondents we found that most had protected other types of resources and had not saved significant amounts of farm and ranch land. When asked which resource type accounts for more than half of their land or easement acquisitions, only 31 percent of 251 respondents (78) said farm and ranch land. What's more, 44 percent (96) had protected fewer than 1,000 acres, and 11 percent (24) had not protected any farm and ranch land. Just 52 land trusts had saved 10,000 acres or more. They accounted for 94 percent of the protected acres. Nine accounted for two-thirds of protected acres (*see chart, page 3*); eight of those nine focus on ranch land protection. In addition, 47 percent held fewer than 10 easements on agricultural land, and 12 percent did not hold *any* easements on farm and ranch land. Only 32 percent had acquired at least 25 agricultural easements and they accounted for 89 percent (7,963 easements) of the total.



SMALL SUBSET SAVED THE MOST AG LAND



■ Participation in ACEP-ALE Increased

In our recent survey, a greater proportion and larger number of land trusts reported participating in the federal farmland protection program compared to 2012. Ninety-eight percent of those that answered the question, or 100 land trusts, specified that they participated in ACEP-ALE in contrast to the 36 percent, or 82 land trusts, that reported participating in 2012. Land trusts said they had enrolled 294,459 acres, a 58 percent increase from the number of acres enrolled as reported in 2012.

■ Matching Funds Barrier to ACEP-ALE Participation

When asked if their organization planned to participate in ACEP-ALE in the next five years, 45 percent (93) said they didn't know; 40 percent said they would participate; and 15 percent said they would not. A follow-up question asked land trusts if there were barriers that may prevent them from participating in ACEP-ALE.

Among respondents, 44 percent (92) said yes, there are barriers; 42 percent said they didn't know; and 14 percent said there were no barriers. Of the 89 respondents who described challenges to participation, 45 percent cited matching funds; 18 percent said their organization lacked the capacity to complete the process; and 12 percent said the time-frame was too long for landowners.

■ Ag Resources & Viability Protected

Of the 191 respondents who provided information, the vast majority—92 percent—said that their easement includes the right to use the property for agriculture. In addition, 97 percent said their easement limits subdivision. Sixty-nine percent said that their easement's primary purpose is the protection of agricultural resources and/or agricultural viability. Agricultural structures are allowed by overwhelming majorities: 95 percent permit agricultural buildings and fencing and 82 percent permit farm residences. Significant majorities allow activities that could enhance income or reduce expenses, including: facilities to generate energy for on-farm use (58 percent), agritourism (55 percent), and facilities for value-added processing (55 percent). Eighty-four percent do not set limits on the types of livestock raised/crops grown or when they can be harvested.

Easements also include provisions to help farmers and ranchers gain access to land: 81 percent limit future housing footprint, which helps maintain affordability; 22 percent require land to be in active agricultural use; and 11 percent include an option to purchase at agricultural value.

■ Activities Supporting Farmland, Farming & Farmers

Seventy-five percent of the 184 respondents who answered this question said they offer at least one additional activity. Forty percent support the implementation of conservation plans. Thirty-five percent encourage local planning for agriculture. Dozens work to improve land access: 34 percent lease land to farmers and ranchers; 24 percent provide farm succession planning; 20 percent assist farmers and ranchers looking for land; 13 percent maintain a list of farm seekers or farms for sale; and 7 percent sell protected land to farmers or ranchers.

TOP TEN LAND TRUSTS IN AG ACRES PROTECTED

1	The Montana Land Reliance	990,321
2	Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust	500,689
3	California Rangeland Trust	281,155
4	Colorado Open Lands	260,509
5	Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust	236,912
6	Texas Agricultural Land Trust	225,890
7	Vermont Land Trust	185,026
8	The New Mexico Land Conservancy	140,840
9	Tejon Ranch Conservancy	108,990
10	Palmer Land Trust	97,704

TOP TEN LAND TRUSTS IN AG EASEMENTS

1	Vermont Land Trust	843
2	The Montana Land Reliance	838
3	Lancaster Farmland Trust	489
4	Colorado Open Lands	403
5	Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust	334
6	Black Canyon Regional Land Trust	306
7	Dutchess Land Conservancy	267
8	Western Reserve Land Conservancy	219
9	Mesa Land Trust	208
10	The Land Trust for Tennessee	185

DISCUSSION

Private land trusts have saved at least 4.4 million acres of farm and ranch land nationwide—nearly double the amount reported in 2012. This work—measured in acres, easements, and fee acquisitions—was accomplished by a relatively small number of organizations that focus on saving agricultural land for agriculture (see tables, page 3). Just 52 land trusts saved 4.1 million acres—94 percent of the total.

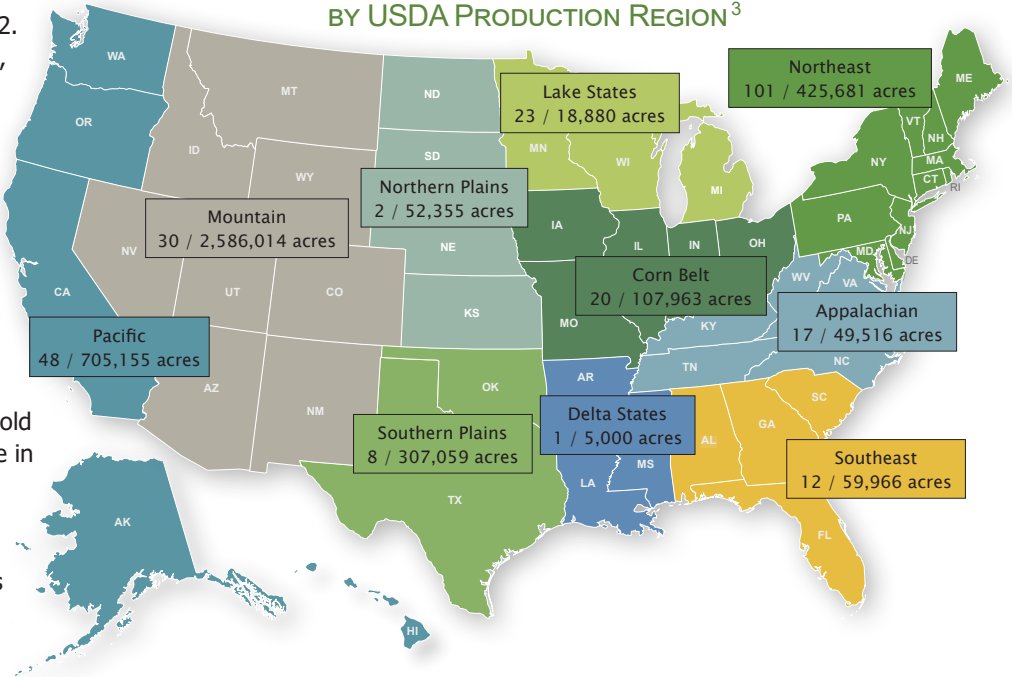
Increased collaboration between land trusts and public programs was key to increased protection. The most active land trusts work in states with state-level PACE programs. Among land trusts that hold at least 25 easements, 83 percent operate in states with PACE. Among those that had protected at least 5,000 acres, 86 percent are in states with PACE programs. States in Northeast, Pacific, and Mountain regions have both active PACE programs and the most land trust coverage. Accordingly, these regions reported the most acres protected (see map).

Public programs, both on their own and in partnership with land trusts, are vitally important to securing the agricultural land base for future generations. To estimate the total amount of permanent protection, staff added up acres protected by land trusts that had not worked with public partners, acres protected with public partners other than PACE programs, and acres donated to land trusts that partnered with PACE programs. All told, land trusts have protected more than 3.1 million acres of farm and ranch land without PACE program involvement. PACE programs have protected an additional 3.4 million. In total, private and public entities—many with funding from ACEP-ALE—have protected more than 6.5 million acres of farm and ranch land—a 38 percent increase from 2012.

Other regions—particularly the Plains and Delta States, but also the Corn Belt, are underserved by farmland protection entities. Yet, according to *Farms Under Threat*, these same regions boast much of the nation’s best land for food and crop production. This presents challenges to agricultural landowners who want to protect their land and endangers the future of U.S. agriculture and our food supply.

Strengthening land trust capacity in underserved states and regions could help fill the gaps. But land trusts can’t do it alone. Partnerships with public entities enable land trusts to purchase

NUMBER OF LAND TRUST RESPONDENTS / ACRES PROTECTED BY USDA PRODUCTION REGION³



land or easements rather than rely on donations. In 2017, 61 percent of the protected agricultural land was acquired through fee or easement purchases, a reversal from 2012 when 62 percent had been acquired through donations. Compensation is critical for operator landowners who may not be able to take advantage of federal and state tax benefits for donations. Land and easement purchases also help land trusts be more strategic.

ACEP-ALE fortifies state and local investment in farm and ranch land protection. Among land trusts in states without a state-level PACE program, 75 percent had participated in a federal program and 86 percent of this group identified the program as ACEP-ALE. As noted in the findings, a greater proportion and larger number of land trusts reported participating in the program compared to 2012. The increased funding for ACEP-ALE and changes to the cash match requirement in the 2018 Farm Bill will expand opportunities in underserved regions. But because land trusts reported matching funds as the chief barrier to ACEP-ALE participation, state and local governments also need to match the federal investment in order to serve agricultural landowners and save important farm and ranch land.

AFT’s Farmland Protection Directory lists private land trusts and public programs that save agricultural land for agriculture: www.farmlandinfo.org/directory

NOTES

1. *Farms Under Threat: The State of America’s Farmland* is a comprehensive spatial analysis of the location, quantity, type, and quality of agricultural land lost to development in the continental United States between 1992 and 2012. It is the first assessment from American Farmland Trust’s multi-year initiative examining threats to U.S. farm and ranch land and evaluating policies and programs to stem the loss.

2. Farmland Information Center, *Status of State PACE Programs and Status of Local PACE Programs*, Northampton, Mass.: American Farmland Trust, 2018 and 2016.

3. Map excludes land trust respondents that work nationwide.

American Farmland Trust is the nation’s leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT’s **Farmland Information Center** (FIC) provides information about farmland protection and stewardship, and is supported by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Thank you to the land trusts that responded to the survey and work with agricultural landowners to protect farm and ranch land.