



2022 NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF LAND TRUSTS THAT PROTECT FARMLAND AND RANCLAND





As of August 2023, there were more than 1,200 land trusts nationwide. Land trusts are nonprofit organizations that work with private landowners and other conservation partners to protect important natural and cultural resources. Land trusts can work at the local, state, or even national level. They may acquire land outright but more often acquire conservation easements—deed restrictions that landowners voluntarily place on their property to protect resources such as productive agricultural land, ground and surface water, habitat, historic sites, or scenic views. A small but growing subset of land trusts work to protect farmland and ranchland.

The Marin Agricultural Land Trust in Marin County, California, and American Farmland Trust (AFT), founded in 1980, were the nation's first conservation organizations focused on saving agricultural land for agricultural use. State and local investments in the purchase of agricultural conservation easements increased through the 1980s and 1990s and encouraged partnerships with land trusts. This was advanced by the authorization of a federal farmland protection program providing matching funds in 1996. Engagement expanded further when, in 2002, land trusts became eligible for federal matching funds through the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection

Program (FRPP). At the same time, there was a growing awareness among communities that local food depends on local farms and ranches and a supply of agricultural land. Today land trusts are key partners with public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) programs and other state agencies to save working lands, and they help implement the current federal farmland protection program: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Agricultural Land Easements, known as ACEP-ALE.

To better understand the important role that land trusts play in saving agricultural land, AFT conducted a nationwide survey of land trusts in 2022. This was the third in a series of surveys previously done in 2017 and 2012. In particular, AFT wanted to:

- Identify organizations that protect farmland and ranchland for agriculture and track their accomplishments;
- Understand how land trusts prioritize and support agricultural land and agriculture;
- Inventory approaches to encourage the adoption of conservation practices;
- Gauge how land trusts support land transfer and access; and
- Assess participation in ACEP-ALE and identify barriers, if any, to future participation.

RESEARCH METHOD

AFT conducted the survey in 2022 and reviewed results and summarized findings in 2023. AFT sent an online survey to 643 land trusts compiled using information from AFT's Farmland Information Center and National Agricultural Land Network (NALN) and the Land Trust Alliance. The list focused on land trusts that are listed in AFT's directory of farmland protection entities; active members in AFT's NALN; active participants in the federal farmland protection programs, and/or land trusts that had reported protecting farmland and ranchland was somewhat, very, or extremely important during the LTA land trust census.

The survey included questions about the organization, farmland and ranchland protection activity, partnerships with public programs, interest in ACEP-ALE, and any perceived barriers to participating in the federal program. The survey

also asked about staff and board composition, easement provisions, additional activities offered to support agriculture and beginning farmers, and approaches used to encourage adoption of conservation practices. New questions in the 2022 survey asked about a land trust's mission to explicitly address the needs of landowners who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color, as well as tracking the diversity of staff and board members, and landowners. An e-mail invitation and link to the survey were delivered in August 2022. AFT staff conducted follow-up over the next six months.

The overall response rate was 40 percent, slightly higher than the response to the 2017 land trust survey. Responses came from 44 states. The map on page 2 shows a breakout of responses by USDA NRCS regions.

FINDINGS

Agricultural Land Protection Accelerated

Eighty-eight percent (228) of land trusts responding to our survey reported on their land protection activity. As of January 2022, together this group protected just over 6 million acres of farmland and rangeland nationwide. This represents a 35 percent increase from total acres protected by land trusts in 2017. In addition, the rate of agricultural land protected increased by 21 percent between 2017 and 2022 when compared to the amount protected during the previous five-year period (2012 to 2017).

Nearly all the farmland and rangeland protected—98 percent, or 5.9 million acres—is protected through 12,957 conservation easements. The remaining 2 percent— 97,813 acres of farmland and rangeland—were protected through outright purchase of 393 properties.

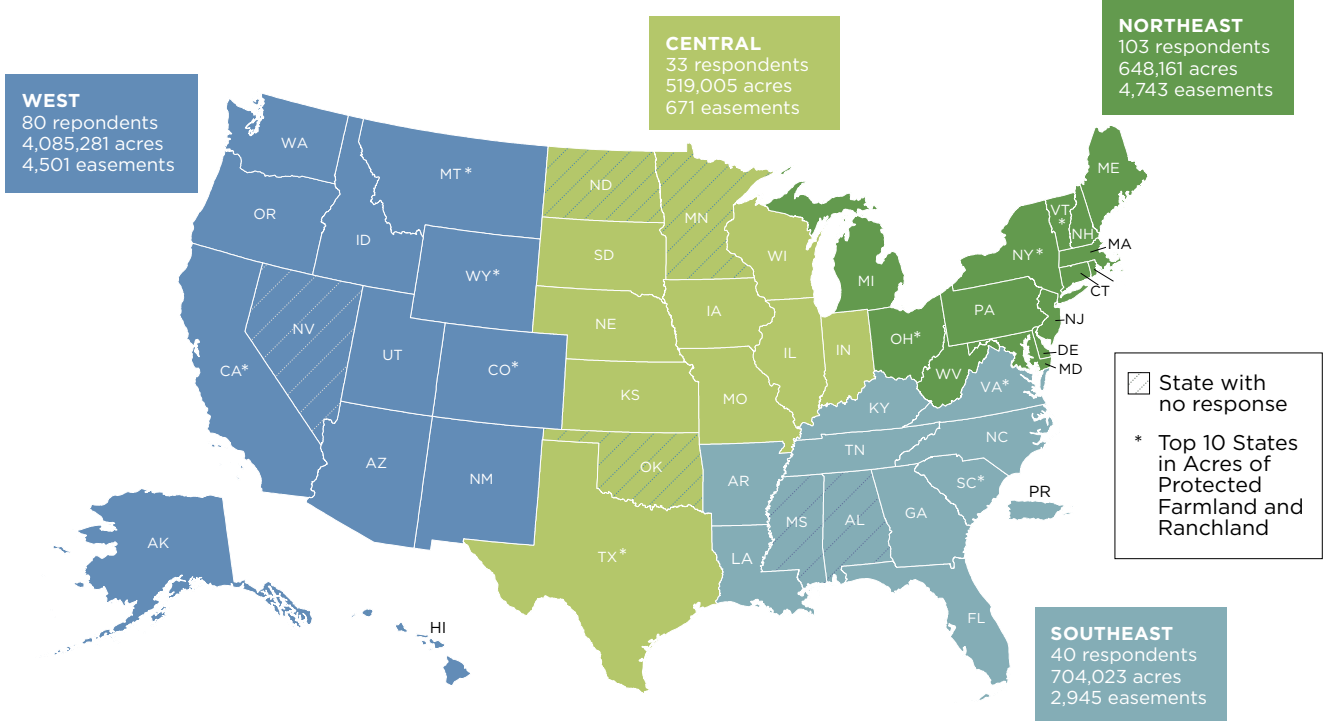
Overall, 70 percent of the protected agricultural land was acquired through fee or easement *purchases*, most of which was supported through partnerships with public PACE programs. Thirty percent of protected agricultural land was accomplished through land or easement donations. Of these, nearly all— 99 percent—were donated conservation easements, and the remaining 1 percent was donated land.

FARMLAND AND RANGLAND PROTECTED BY LAND TRUSTS

Farms/ranches owned in fee	393
Acres of farmland and rangeland owned in fee	97,813
Easements held that protected farmland and rangeland	12,957
Acres of farmland and rangeland under easement	5,917,910
Total acres of farmland and rangeland protected by land trusts	6,015,723



LAND TRUSTS, EASEMENTS AND ACRES BY NRCS REGION



Ten land trusts that provided information about their farmland protection activity protected farmland and rangeland in more than one region. In this map, the acres protected were put into the region of the land trust's main office address. The map excludes two land trusts that work nationwide.

■ Many Land Trusts Are Positioned to Protect Agricultural Land

Most organizations have staff and board members either with direct experience owning or operating a farm or ranch (67 percent), or through a family connection with someone who farms or ranches (53 percent). In addition, 85 percent of respondents (190) said their easement includes a statement establishing protection of agricultural resources and/or agricultural viability as the primary purpose of the easement. Seventy-eight percent (173) have easements that include the right to use the property for agricultural purposes as defined by state law, and 32 percent (71) require the land be kept in active agricultural use. Further, a majority of responding land trusts incorporated three categories of easement provisions that indicate support for working farms and ranches: 86 percent allow adding or altering agricultural structures and fencing (e.g., barns), 76 percent permit farm dwellings, and 60 percent allow for agritourism that is ancillary but contributes to the viability of the operation.

■ A Few Continue to Protect the Most Agricultural Land

A subset of all respondents focus on protecting farmland and rangeland and use easements that prioritize agriculture. While nearly all respondents reported that they protect agricultural land (98 percent), only 43 percent (112) indicated farmland and rangeland accounts for most of their easement acquisition projects. Moreover, a relatively small number of land trusts account for most of the activity as measured both by acres of

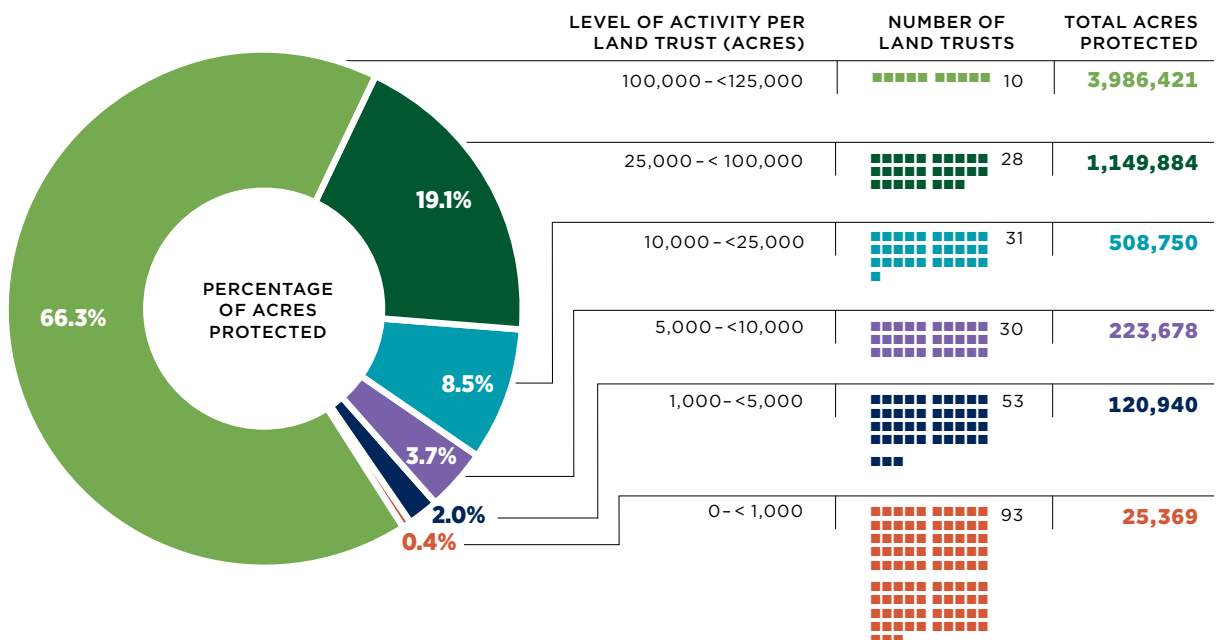


SHAWN LINEHAN

agricultural land protected and the number of easements held. This has been a steady trend over the 2012 and 2017 surveys. Just 38 percent (99) protected at least 5,000 acres, yet this accounted for 98 percent of the total farmland and rangeland protection activity (5,868,733 acres). Meanwhile, 22 percent of respondents protected fewer than 200 acres of agricultural land, and of these organizations about 59 percent (35) had not protected *any* farmland and rangeland.

In terms of agricultural easements held, only 36 percent of land trusts (93) had acquired at least 25 agricultural easements, yet this group accounted for 92 percent of the total number of easements acquired (11,953 easements). Thirty-six percent of land trusts (94) hold fewer than 10 easements on agricultural land, and 16 percent of this group (15) do not hold *any* easements on farmland and rangeland.

FARMLAND AND RANGLAND PROTECTED BY LEVEL OF LAND TRUST ACTIVITY



TOP TEN LAND TRUSTS IN NUMBER OF EASEMENTS HELD THAT PROTECT FARMLAND AND RANGLAND

1	Virginia Outdoors Foundation*	1,300
2	Vermont Land Trust	998
3	The Montana Land Reliance	938
4	Lancaster Farmland Trust	568
5	Colorado Open Lands	493
6	Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust	466
7	Eastern Shore Land Conservancy	309
8	Maine Farmland Trust	300
9	Western Reserve Land Conservancy	291
10	The Land Trust for Tennessee	217

TOP TEN LAND TRUSTS IN ACRES OF FARMLAND AND RANGLAND PROTECTED

1	The Montana Land Reliance	1,220,084
2	Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust	705,415
3	California Rangeland Trust	363,008
4	Virginia Outdoors Foundation*	358,631
5	Colorado Open Lands	356,617
6	Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust	292,938
7	Texas Agricultural Land Trust	263,000
8	Vermont Land Trust	204,800
9	Palmer Land Conservancy	110,257
10	Tejon Ranch Conservancy	108,877

* Virginia Outdoors Foundation estimated the number of projects (instead of easements) and acres of farmland protected based on agricultural use being listed as a conservation purpose in their land protection database. This total may undercount their holdings because older records do not have a stated conservation purpose.

Land Trusts Support Sound Stewardship

Land trusts reported using a variety of approaches to improve protected land by encouraging conservation planning and practice adoption. A majority—64 percent (161)—indicated they support the implementation of conservation plans and practices. A smaller number of land trusts have requirements around conservation plans and practices: 43 percent (91) require the development and implementation of a conservation plan, and 48 percent (103) include required conservation practices in the easement.

Land trusts use a range of mechanisms to encourage practice implementation. A majority (72 percent) include a reference in the easement to a separate management plan, while 51 percent establish separate zones on the property with varying levels of restrictions. More than half of respondents (113) provide technical assistance to landowners to implement conservation plans or practices, including referrals to NRCS or other service providers; this number fell to 28 percent for providing financial assistance and referrals. Five percent (11) execute separate permanent easements that enumerate management practices, and a small handful enter into fee for service contracts with annual payments if the farmer meets management practice benchmarks.

Land Trusts Help with Land Transfer and Access

An increasing number of land trusts are offering additional services to support farmers and ranchers. Thirty-three percent of land trusts (83) help with estate and/or succession planning and farm/ranch transfer, an 84 percent increase from our 2017 survey. Thirty-nine percent (98) say they lease land to farmers and ranchers, and 17 percent maintain a list of farm seekers and/or farms for sale, a 79 percent increase from the previous survey. While only 11 percent (28) sell protected farms or ranches to commercial operators, this represents a 133 percent increase from 2017.



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY STRIPS PROJECT

Land trusts also reported that their standard easements included provisions to help farmers and ranchers gain access to land: 65 percent (145) place limits on the footprint of future housing, which may help keep the property affordable. A follow-up question asked specifically about provisions to maintain affordability and support for access to land; of the 86 land trusts that responded to the question, 76 percent (74) have easements that require the land be kept in active agricultural use,



SHAWN LINEHAN

15 percent said their easements include the option to purchase at agricultural value, and 13 percent include provisions for the preemptive right to acquire. In addition, 38 percent of land trusts plan to coordinate Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) transactions in the future.¹

However, just 10 percent of respondents (26) have an organizational mission that serves landowners or farmers who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color. A small number—36 percent (91) of land trusts—track demographic information, including race and ethnicity, about staff and board members. Most do not make this information easily accessible to the public. Just 27 percent of land trusts (60) currently grant access to protected properties for cultural uses or traditional ceremonies. And only a handful of organizations (19) said they assist landowners with heirs' property disputes or resolution, and 4 land trusts provide translation services.

■ ACEP-ALE Participation Increases

Participation in ACEP-ALE continued to grow. Among land trusts that used federal programs as a source of funding for farmland and ranchland protection projects, 98 percent (128) said they had participated in ACEP-ALE or its predecessor program, FRPP. This is a 28 percent increase from 2017 survey results. When asked if their organization planned to participate

in ACEP-ALE in the next five years, 50 percent (118) said they would participate, a 10 percent increase from 2017. Thirty-five percent (83) said they didn't know if they would participate in the federal program, and 14 percent (33) said they would not. When asked about the kinds of ACEP-ALE transactions land trusts planned to use, 133 respondents said they would use a standard ALE transaction, and 45 indicated they would use Buy-Protect-Sell. Among those intending to initiate BPS transactions, 42 indicated they would also use a standard ALE transaction, while three land trusts said they would only use BPS. Seventy-five entities said the question was not applicable.

Many land trusts reported potential barriers to future program participation. Of those who responded to the question, 61 percent (112) cited the challenge of raising matching funds, with some specifically noting difficulties covering transaction costs. Fifty-seven percent indicated the complexity of the application and acquisition process was a barrier. Fifty-two percent (96) said time was a factor, and among this group some respondents said that the duration of the enrollment process was an obstacle both for landowners and their organizations. For land trusts, an extended process increased their costs. Fifty-two percent said their organization lacked staff capacity or knowledge to complete the process; six land trusts noted that a lack of local NRCS staff capacity and knowledge was also an issue. Thirty-six percent cited insufficient state ALE allocations.

DISCUSSION

Private land trusts have saved more than 6 million acres of farmland and ranchland nationwide. 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. Just 99 land trusts saved 5.8 million acres: 98 percent of the total.

Public funding fuels farmland and ranchland protection activity. Most land trusts protected agricultural land through fee or easement purchases with funding from public programs. Nearly 70 percent of respondents (161) reported partnering with state or local entities, and a high proportion—86 percent (139)—involved PACE programs. More than half of responding land trusts used federal funding, and 98 percent of them had participated in ACEP-ALE or its predecessor program. Together, land trusts and PACE programs—many using ACEP-ALE funding—have protected more than 7.8 million acres of farmland and ranchland: a 15 percent increase from 2017.^{2,3} ACEP-ALE plays an especially important role in places without reliable state or local funding. Among the 42 land trusts in states without a state-level PACE program, a majority—59 percent (24)—had participated in ACEP-ALE. 2023 Farm Bill proposals that seek to increase ACEP-ALE funding, increase the federal share, and cover transaction costs could address barriers to program participation identified by land trusts and their landowners, especially those with limited resources. Compensation is critical for operator landowners who may not be able to afford donating the value of their land. A majority of land trusts—68 percent—plan to buy easements in the next five years, which enables them to be more strategic.

Land trusts help safeguard the public investment by assisting with land transfer and access to ensure protected lands stay in agricultural use. These organizations can serve as a bridge between landowners and farmers and ranchers seeking land. A small number are devoted to serving historically underserved landowners and producers. In the future, more organizations could share information about staff and board composition to help landowners and farmers find suitable land protection partners and offer services to better support historically underserved landowners and farmers.

NOTES

1 Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) is a strategy used by some land trusts and public agencies to protect land and facilitate its transfer to a farmer or rancher. The land protection entity steps in as an interim buyer when a farm or ranch is likely to be sold for development, places an easement on the property, and then sells the protected property to a farmer or rancher at its agricultural value. Recognizing its value in helping young, new, and historically underserved farmers gain access to affordable ground, Congress authorized the use of BPS in the 2018 Farm Bill through the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

2 Farmland Information Center, *Status of State PACE Programs and Status of Local PACE Programs*, Northampton, Mass.: American Farmland Trust, 2023 and 2020.

3 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.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

AFT's surveys of land trusts that protect farmland and ranchland are available at: farmlandinfo.org/publications/nationwide-survey-of-land-trusts-that-protect-farmland-and-ranchland.

AFT's **Farmland Protection Directory**, a tool to find public and private farmland protection partners, is available at farmlandinfo.org/farmland-protection-directory.

American Farmland Trust is the nation's leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. For more information, visit www.farmland.org or call (202) 331-7300.

The **Farmland Information Center** is a clearinghouse for information about farmland protection and stewardship. It is a project of AFT maintained on behalf of the USDA NRCS. Visit www.farmlandinfo.org or call (800) 370-4879.



SHAWN LINEHAN



SHAWN LINEHAN

This survey was made possible through a cooperative agreement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Thank you to the land trusts that responded to the survey and work with agricultural landowners to protect farmland and ranchland nationwide.

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: CLINT FOLINGER/ALAMY, ECOPHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHAWN LINEHAN