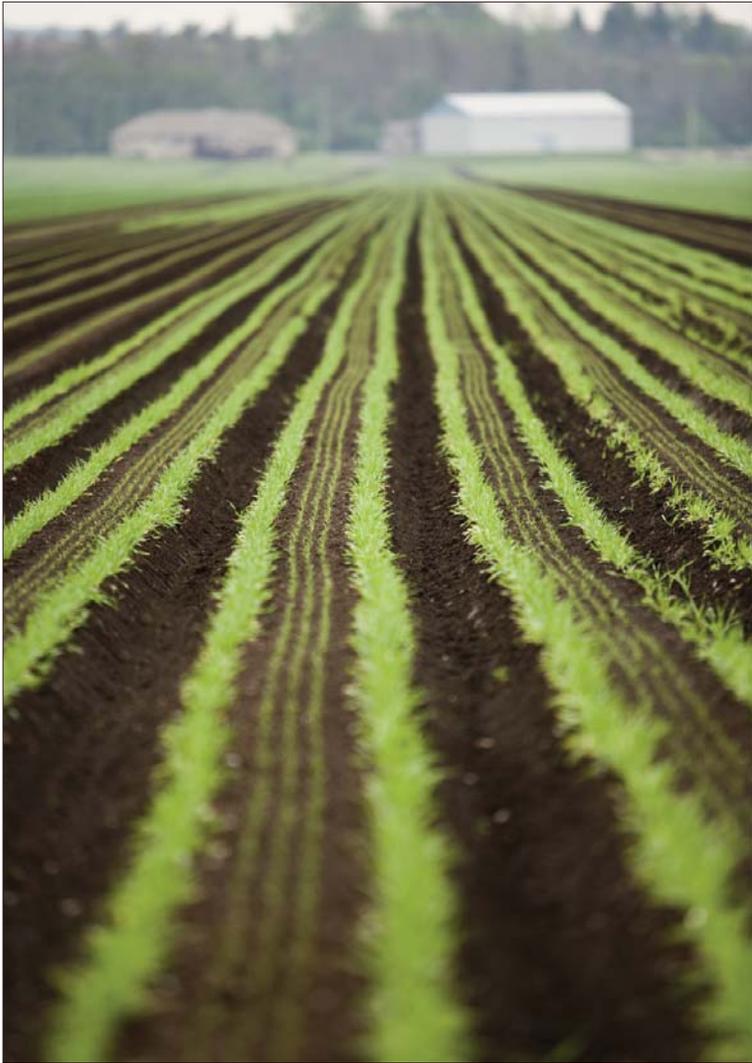


SAVING AMERICAN FARMLAND



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



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Agricultural land is at risk. According to the National Resources Inventory (NRI), 23 million acres of agricultural land were developed between 1982 and 2007¹—an area the size of Indiana. As development encroaches on farmland it increases the costs and risks of production and drives up land values beyond the reach of producers.

State and local governments have led the response to agricultural land conversion. Thirty-one states have authorized purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE) programs that buy easements from willing landowners to keep land available for agriculture. As of January 2012, state and local programs had acquired 16,548 easements on more than 2.7 million acres of farm and ranch land.²

Private land trusts also save farm and ranch land. Land trusts are conservation organizations that protect natural resources by acquiring or helping other entities acquire land or conservation easements. Land trusts' role in farm and ranch land protection has grown since the expansion of the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) in 2002. Changes to the program made land trusts eligible for matching funds to buy easements on productive agricultural land.



Photo courtesy of G. L. Sweetnam

To better understand the part land trusts play, American Farmland Trust (AFT) with support from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conducted a nationwide survey of land trusts. The purpose was to:

- Identify organizations that actively protect farm and ranch land for agriculture; and
- To quantify the total amount of farm and ranch land protected by land trusts and public programs.

RESEARCH METHOD

AFT developed a Web-based survey that included questions about the organization, farm and ranch land protection activity, partnerships with public programs including FRPP, easement provisions and additional activities offered to support agriculture.

To build the survey distribution list, AFT started with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) list of land trusts and narrowed it to organizations that had reported during LTA's 2010 census that protecting "working farms or ranchlands" was a priority.³ AFT also

reviewed the list of non-respondents to the LTA census and added organizations to the survey list if their name, mission statement or other information available online indicated that they protected working land. Lastly, AFT added entities that had participated in FRPP but were missing from the list.

An e-mail invitation and link to the survey was delivered to 763 land trusts in April 2012. Staff followed up over the next four months. The survey's overall response rate was 36 percent.

FINDINGS



■ Land Trusts Complete the Picture

Survey respondents have protected close to 3 million acres of farm and ranch land nationwide. Nearly all is under easements (*see figure, left*).

AFT estimates that land trusts protected more than 2.2 million acres *without* assistance from state and local easement acquisition programs. Most of this activity—83 percent—was the result of landowner donations. Some involved *other* public programs including the federal easement programs.⁴

The survey results provide a more complete picture of how much farm and ranch land has been saved nationwide for the next generation. Altogether, AFT estimates that nearly 5 million acres of farm and ranch land have been protected by 192 land trusts and 119 state and local PACE programs.

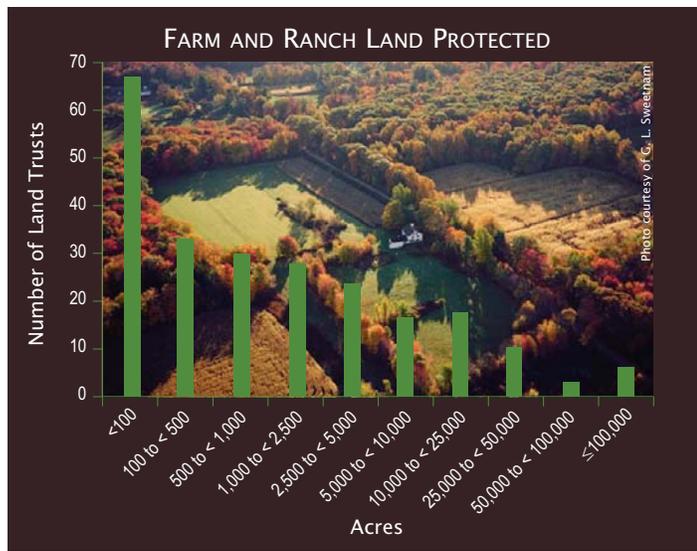
FINDINGS (continued)

■ Land Trusts Saved More Ranchland Than Cropland

Approximately 76 percent of the agricultural land protected by survey respondents is ranchland.⁵ Several land trusts have formed to protect ranchland, which involves more extensive tracts of land that are typically less productive and expensive on a per acre basis. In comparison, AFT estimates that less than one third of the agricultural land protected by state PACE programs is ranchland. PACE programs have been most active in states with productive cropland.

■ Small Subset Saved Most of the Land

Although hundreds of land trusts report that agricultural land protection is important, most have not protected significant amounts of farm and ranch land and/or have not acquired many easements on farm and ranch land. Twenty-eight percent of respondents had protected fewer than 100 acres of agricultural land, and more than half of these organizations had not protected *any* farm and ranch land. Just 52 land trusts had protected at least 5,000 acres. These land trusts accounted for 95 percent of the total farm and ranch land protection activity reported by respondents (see chart).



In addition, 59 percent of respondents held fewer than 10 easements on agricultural land, and more than half of these organizations did not hold *any* easements on farm and ranch land. Only 55 responding land trusts had acquired at least 25 agricultural easements; they accounted for 87 percent of the total number of easements. All told, 70 land trusts have protected at least 5,000 acres or hold at least 25 easements; only 37 land trusts have protected 5,000 acres *and* hold at least 25 easements.

■ Donations Drive Activity

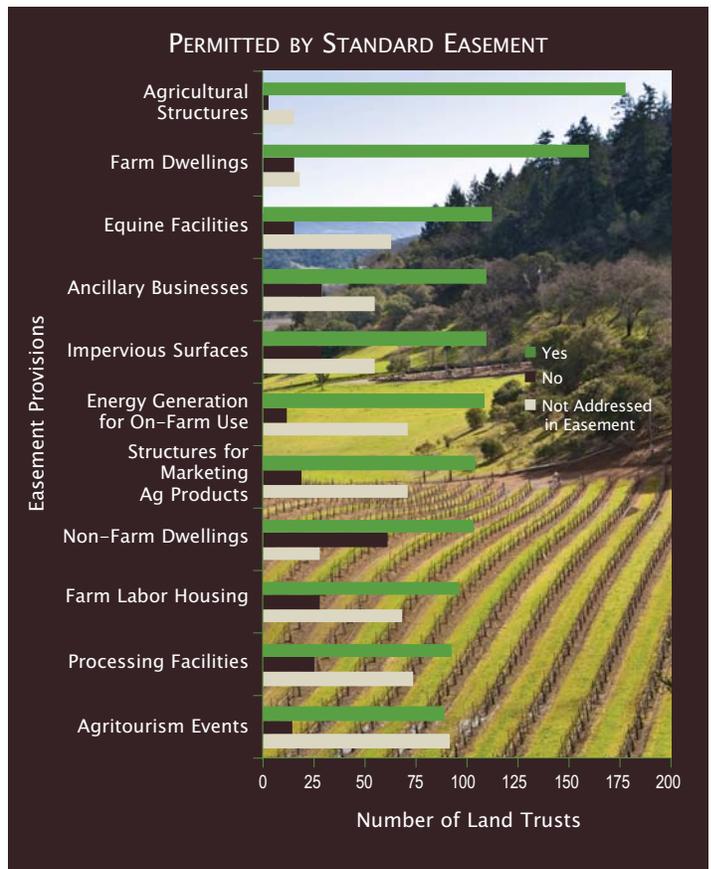
Overall, 62 percent of protected farm and ranch land was donated. As noted above, 83 percent of the *independent* land trust activity was generated by donations. When asked whether their organization planned to offer land protection and other activities in the next five years, 84 percent said they would

accept donated easements on farms and ranches and 46 percent said they would accept farms and ranches donated in fee. In contrast, only 58 percent said that they would *buy* easements on farms and ranches; only 18 percent said they would *buy* farms and ranches in fee. Among the 135 land trusts that said they would buy land outright or purchase easements on farm and ranch land in the next five years, 72 percent had partnered with a state or local public program and/or had participated in FRPP.

■ Easements Prioritize Agricultural Resources and Support Agriculture

The vast majority—92 percent—of respondents said that their easement document used to protect farm and ranch land included an explicit right to use the property for agricultural production. In addition, 78 percent reported that their easement’s purpose statement included references to productivity of the land or agricultural viability, and 72 percent said that their easement established the protection of agricultural resources or agricultural viability as the *primary* purpose.

Two activities were allowed by overwhelming majorities of the land trusts: 90 percent permit agricultural structures (e.g., barns and fences) and 81 percent permit farm dwellings. Significant majorities allow activities that would enhance income or reduce production expenses. These include equine facilities (57 percent), ancillary businesses (55 percent), impervious surfaces (55 percent), energy generation for on-farm use (55 percent) and structures for marketing agricultural products (53 percent) (see chart).





FINDINGS (continued)

■ Other Activities Support Farmers and Farming

In addition to land protection, 78 percent offer at least one other activity to support farming and ranching. The top response was supporting conservation planning and implementation of conservation practices on agricultural properties (120 land trusts). One hundred seven land trusts said they encourage local planning for agriculture. Seventy land trusts deliver public education programs about agriculture, which helps build a constituency for farm and ranch land protection.

■ Dozens Work to Improve Access to Land

A small group works to expand opportunities for new and established farmers to acquire land. Forty-seven land trusts provide assistance with farm succession planning; 30 buy land, protect it

with an easement and sell it to farmers or ranchers; 22 provide technical assistance to farmers and ranchers looking for land; and 21 maintain a list of farm seekers or farms for sale.

In addition, 67 organizations reported that they lease fee-owned land to farmers or ranchers. Most (83 percent) enter into leases of five years or less. Seventy-six land trusts plan to lease land to producers in the next five years.

Land trusts also reported that their standard easements included provisions to help farmers and ranchers gain access to land. For instance, 61 percent place limits on the size of future housing, which may help keep the property affordable. In addition, 25 percent said they included affirmative obligations to keep the land in agricultural use, and 9 percent of respondents from 12 states said they included terms to protect future affordability.

DISCUSSION

Private land trusts have saved a significant amount of farm and ranch land nationwide. However, the survey results highlight some issues that may create barriers for agricultural landowners and impede land trusts' efforts at protecting land for agriculture.

■ Active Land Trusts Are in States with PACE Programs

When we analyzed where the most active land trusts were located, we found that the vast majority are in states with public PACE programs. For instance, among land trusts that hold at least 25 easements, 87 percent were located in states with state-level programs. Likewise among organizations that had protected at least 5,000 acres, 81 percent were in states with PACE programs. This pattern presents a significant problem for agricultural landowners and leaves agricultural land in some parts of the country—like the Cornbelt—at risk. Strengthening land trusts' capacity in underserved states while advocating for public programs and funding to support them could help fill the gaps.

■ Many Land Trusts Rely on Donations

As noted above, much of the farm and ranch land protection activity reported by respondents was generated through donations. Land trusts' inability to provide compensation is a serious drawback for agricultural landowners. Their land may be their most valuable asset, and they may not be in a financial position to take advantage of federal and state tax benefits that encourage conservation. In addition, relying on donations forces the land trust to be less strategic.

To expand viable options for commercial farmers and the extent and strategic importance of land projects, more land trusts need to be able to *buy* land or easements. This points to the need for public funding at the federal, state and local levels to support land trusts' efforts.

For the full survey report, visit www.farmlandinfo.org.

NOTES

1. The NRI is a survey of the nation's non-federal lands conducted by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in cooperation with Iowa State University since 1982. The 2007 NRI report is available at: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1041379.pdf
2. Farmland Information Center, *Status of State PACE Programs and Status of Local PACE Programs*, Northampton, Mass.: American Farmland Trust, 2012.
3. Katie Chang, *2010 National Land Trust Census Report: A Look at Voluntary Land Conservation in America*, Washington, D.C.: Land Trust Alliance, 2011.

4. Eighty-two respondents said they had participated in FRPP as a cooperating entity. This subset reported that they had enrolled 186,440 acres in the program. The proportion of participation was higher among the land trusts that work in multiple states or nationwide (35 percent compared to 30 percent). A handful of land trusts also reported protecting land through the Grassland Reserve Program.
5. This analysis is based on the names of the organizations, location of the land trusts and review of projects on land trusts' websites.

This survey was made possible through a contribution agreement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. AFT is grateful for assistance provided by Katie Chang and the Land Trust Alliance. Thank you to the land trusts that responded to the survey and work with agricultural landowners to protect farm and ranch land nationwide.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) 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.