

ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)



Directors Corner

*Carrie Lindig,
Director
NRCS Easements
Program Division*

What's New For FY2025

The collaboration NRCS has with partners across the country is invaluable for successful agriculture land conservation. Since 1990 these partnerships have closed more than 24,500 easements protecting more than 5.6 million acres. In fiscal year (FY) 2024 alone, more than 330 easements closed protecting more than 140,000 acres.

These successful partnerships have only just begun. In FY 2025, \$950 million is available for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program including both Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and farm bill funding. Applications for ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE are continuously accepted with State established **batching periods**. The current ACEP IRA priorities are unchanged from FY 2024. For ACEP-ALE, NRCS is prioritizing grasslands and agricultural lands in areas of highest risk of conversion to non-grassland uses and some state-specific priorities. For ACEP-WRE, NRCS is prioritizing land with soils high in organic carbon, lands and existing forest cover that will be restored and managed as forests, and several geographically specific priorities.

In FY 2025, the Easement Program Division continues to identify ways to streamline ACEP to improve the program delivery and implementation for landowners and partners. Sentinel Landscapes Partnership Announces Upcoming Expression of Interest

Sentinel Landscapes Partnership Announces Upcoming Expression of Interest

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership announced the 2026 Sentinel Landscape Designation Cycle will begin in January 2025 with the release of an Expression of Interest (EOI). On the EOI release date, guidance on the proposal process and criteria will be posted on the [Sentinel Landscapes Partnership](#) website and distributed via the partnership listserv.

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is a coalition of federal agencies, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations that work with willing landowners and land managers to advance sustainable land use practices around military installations and ranges.

To begin planning for the EOI, please review the following resources:

2024 Sentinel Landscape Cycle webinar power point

2024 Sentinel Landscape designation cycle application guidance. (for guidance only, will be updated for the 2026 cycle)

For further information, please click [here](#).



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) helps landowners, Indian tribes, land trusts, and other entities protect working farms and ranches through conservation easements. ACEP is administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Under the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) component, NRCS helps American Indian tribes, state and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations protect working agricultural lands and limit nonagricultural uses of the land.

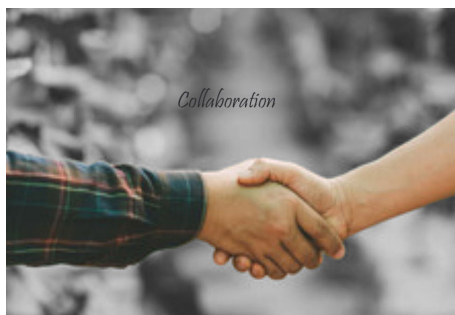
NRCS accepts program applications on a continual basis, but establishes application batching dates for evaluation, ranking, and funding selection of eligible applications. Applications received after the batching date are deferred to the next funding period.

Ranking deadlines for each state can be found on the NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/ranking-dates.

More information about ACEP can be found at www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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Easement Networks

To meet the agency's significant stewardship responsibilities and ensure the long-term function and protection of the acres enrolled in NRCS easement programs, NRCS national headquarters has initiated the NRCS Easement Networks project to ensure NRCS state office staff have the appropriate level of technical support, expertise, and resources to meet the agency's responsibilities for program implementation. The goal of the project is to build a mentor-type relationship between NRCS national headquarters and state office staff. There are two components to the project:

1. Easement Technical Workgroups

Nine workgroups will consist of small groups of states based on shared ecologies and geographies. The focus of the workgroups is on technical information sharing to improve technical understanding and exchange best practices and current science as it relates to easement restoration and long-term management. Opportunities will consist of a combination of virtual and in-person meetings.

2. Easement Program Topic Forums

The forums are peer-to-peer and

will be interactive on specific topics to be held as needed to encourage discussion and information exchange. These forums will focus on the non-technical program administration side of easements, hot topics, or emerging issues. Participants and groups will vary based on the topic. The forums will be primarily virtual webinars, workshops, and office hours. The forums will be scheduled based on demand, outcomes, and needs.



FY2025 AGI form Update

The 2018 Farm Bill requires an average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitation for payment eligibility for most programs administered by USDA, including those administered by NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Landowners participating in programs subject to AGI rules have to annually certify their eligibility to receive program benefits by completing and signing USDA form CCC-941, "Average Adjusted Gross Income Certification and Consent to Disclosure of Tax Information".

FSA has released the new CCC-941 for FY 2025. NRCS program applications are being determined tentatively eligible pending the IRS processing and determination of the CCC-941.

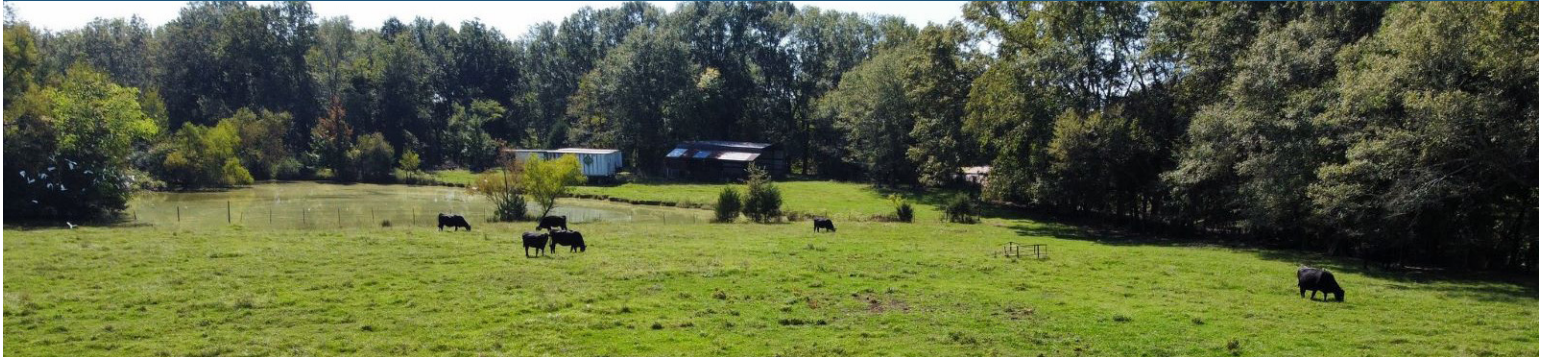
Guide to ACEP-ALE for Heirs' Property Landowners

The NRCS National Easement Programs Division worked with the American Farmland Trust to create a Guide to ACEP-ALE for Heirs' Property Landowners. The guide describes what heirs' property is and highlights opportunities for participating in NRCS programs, including ACEP-ALE. It lists key considerations and provides examples of how a family can use the program to achieve its goals. The guide ends with steps for getting started and organizations and resources that can support them.

A hard copy of the pdf version of the guide will be mailed to each NRCS state office. The downloadable version is available at [Guide to ACEP-ALE for Heirs' Property Landowners](#).

Please email Lori Valadez, NRCS Easement Programs Division public affairs specialist, at lori.valadez@usda.gov if you would like a copy.





Updates from the American Farmland Trust



American Farmland Trust

Announcing AFT's Saving America's Working Lands National Conference

Save the dates--April 23 through 25, 2025--to attend American Farmland Trust's **Saving America's Working Lands** national conference in Dallas, Texas.

Saving America's Working Lands, hosted by American Farmland Trust, focuses on the threatened and irreplaceable land that America relies upon to grow food, fiber, and fuel; provide critical environmental benefits; and sustain rural communities and agricultural economies.

Saving America's Working Lands is intended to meet growing demand for cutting-edge information about protecting and retaining U.S. agricultural land. Designed for new and seasoned conservation practitioners, agricultural industry representatives and service providers, researchers, planners, policymakers, farmers, and ranchers, the conference will feature three days of workshops, field trips, discussion groups, and conference sessions that elevate successes and respond to practitioner needs for

approaches to save the land that sustains us.

Attend *Saving America's Working Lands* to deepen your knowledge of agricultural land protection tools, discuss emerging issues and trends, and explore and elevate new ideas and strategies to save America's farm and ranch lands.

Registration will open on Jan. 6, 2025. AFT is grateful to NRCS for their Gold Level sponsorship. To inquire about sponsorship opportunities, contact Beth Fraser at bfraser@farmland.org.

AFT's ACEP-ALE Toolkit

American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center partnered with the NRCS to develop a toolkit that helps landowners and entities participate in and promote ACEP-ALE. The ACEP-ALE Toolkit is a series of webpages with links to factsheets, checklists, and NRCS policy and forms. The toolkit introduces NRCS, conservation easements, provides details about eligibility criteria, and explains how to apply to the program. It also covers steps to complete transactions and then details stewardship and monitoring requirements.

You can access the toolkit on AFT's Farmland Information website at farmlandinfo.org/acep-ale-toolkit/.

American Farmland Trust Website



Creative Collaboration with Ducks Unlimited Increases Capacity for Easement Acquisition Branch

If you do not know, the Easement Acquisition Branch (EAB) is one of three branches in NRCS's Easement Program Division. EAB supports private lands conservation through NRCS easement programs by providing conservation easement acquisition services to NRCS, landowners, and partners. EAB is led by Branch Chief, Jeremy Stone, and comprises four teams providing full services to 27 states with a backlog of states waiting to be added. Benefits of EAB teams include increased legal adequacy and defensibility of recorded easements. States that are serviced by the EAB can reduce their time spent on administrative and acquisition activities and allow more time for program implementation and getting "conservation on the ground."

Of the four teams mentioned above, two of those were added in 2024 to increase capacity to meet new agency needs including funding through the Inflation Reduction Act, Emergency Watershed Protection Program (floodplain easements), and the 2018 Regional Conservation Partnership Program. These Flex teams have the same goal as the





teams but are comprised of non-federal hires through contracts or agreements and they have built up the agency capacity to service all states as necessary. The Flex teams assist states in the easement enrollment and acquisition processes the same as the teams providing full service to states. They do not impact state processes such as ranking development, funding priorities, project selection, or stewardship and management activities.

The two Flex teams, comprised of contractors and Ducks Unlimited partner staff, hit the ground running in FY2024 after an in-person training event in March of 2024, and projects started rolling in. Members of the team began assisting states on Wetland Reserve Easement and Agricultural Land Easement applications funded through the Inflation Reduction Act – with the end goal of obligation by September 30. As you can imagine, there was a learning curve for these teams as they were inundated with acronyms, easement policy and processes, business tools, and how individual states worked. NRCS is happy to report that these very new teams assisted 20 States. Their successes included the federal obligation of more than \$137.5 million on 94 projects covering over 46,000 acres to protect wetland, grassland, and farmland habitat. These teams are led by Jason Keenan and Jeff Vander Wilt, both with NRCS, and Abby Rokosch with Ducks Unlimited. The three appreciate the teams' hard work and are looking forward to an even busier FY 2025.

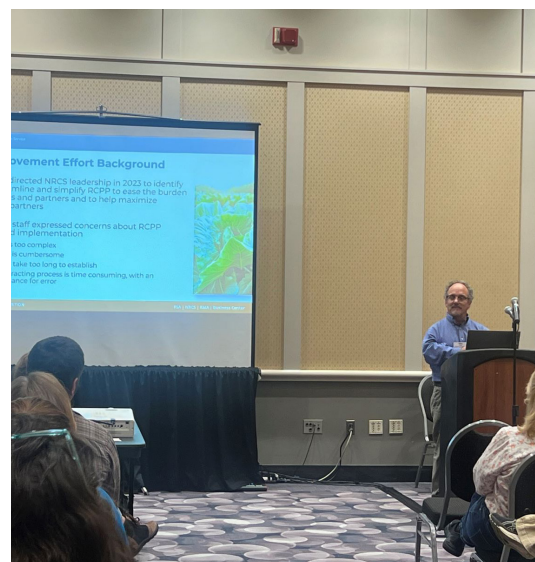
NRCS Gathered with Partners at 2024 Land Trust Alliance Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference

NRCS employees led two workshops at the 2024 Land Trust Alliance Rally held in Providence, R.I., Sept. 25-28.

Matt Oliver, national ACEP-ALE program manager, led one workshop on strategies for streamlining **ACEP-ALE** acquisition. Oliver offered tips and strategies to make the easement acquisition process easier. NRCS RCPP team members Russell Ames and Seth Fiedler led another workshop and discussed how to streamline implementation of easement projects through the NRCS **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** easement activities.

As part of a panel presentation, Edwin Martinez, NRCS state conservationist in Virginia, discussed the success of three Sentinel Landscape partnerships in Virginia and how they create resilient and connected landscapes. The Sentinel Landscapes partnership is a collaboration among the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Department of Defense working with landowners to advance sustainable land use practices around military installations and ranges to buffer them from development encroachment which could impact mission delivery. There are currently 18 designated **Sentinel Landscapes** around the nation.

Rally is an annual gathering of land conservation practitioners from North America who are dedicated to conserving land and natural resources offering educational sessions focused on land conservation topics, networking events, exhibits, and plenary sessions.



NRCS RCPP team members, Seth Fiedler and Russell Ames, provided information on streamlining RCPP easement projects.





Updates from the Land Trust Alliance Partnership



Alliance NRCS Team

The Alliance NRCS Team is full speed ahead. Between August and October, LTA continued to provide support to land trusts across the country on navigating ACEP and RCPP, wrapped up planning for and delivery of NRCS participation in Rally 2024 in Providence, R.I., continued work on expanding resources and follow-up from the 2024 Easements Summit, and began program planning for FY 2025.



Rally 2024

The National Land Conservation Conference was once again a stellar

event, this year exceeding 2,350 in-person attendees. Participants descended on Providence, between Sept. 25 and 28 for a series of special events, field trips, 60 workshops, and much more.

The Alliance NRCS team coordinated with NRCS to ensure delivery of the ACEP and RCPP workshops, NRCS exhibits, along with participation in the VIP field trip and President's Reception. For the third year in a row, LTA held a special reception celebrating NRCS support of stipends awarded to 27 underrepresented conservation practitioners enabling them to attend the conference. We also held the sixth annual Easements Summit Roundup Lunch and for the first time welcomed an NRCS-led HR hiring event designed specifically for Rally.

2024 Easements Summit and the Round Up at Rally

The 2024 Easements Summit brought together 80 leaders, ranging from seasoned NRCS national staff to land trust easement practitioners and experts, for four days in Denver, Colo., July 29 through Aug. 1 to discuss implementation of the ACEP and RCPP programs. As follow-up to the summit, the Alliance NRCS Team has been working with NRCS to analyze the issues and ideas raised to create a report that captures key findings and next steps.

In addition, the Alliance organized the sixth annual Summit Roundup lunch at Rally. The event was attended by more than 55 land trust partners along with Alliance and NRCS leaders and staff who shared initial updates and

plans for addressing ways to continue strengthening both programs. Alliance senior manager for NRCS programs, Nikki Nesbary facilitated the event and shared initial steps on the ACEP front including setting up a certified entity peer forum. Fellow Alliance team members, Jeremy Lougee, Alliance RCPP program manager, and Justin Merrifield, Alliance senior project team manager, shared updates along with NRCS program-leads, including the Easement Programs Division director, Carrie Lindig, who shared updates and fielded questions from partners.

LTA is excited to continue this important work and maintain a dialogue between the land trust community and the agency to support strong participation in both programs.

Alliance NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team Update

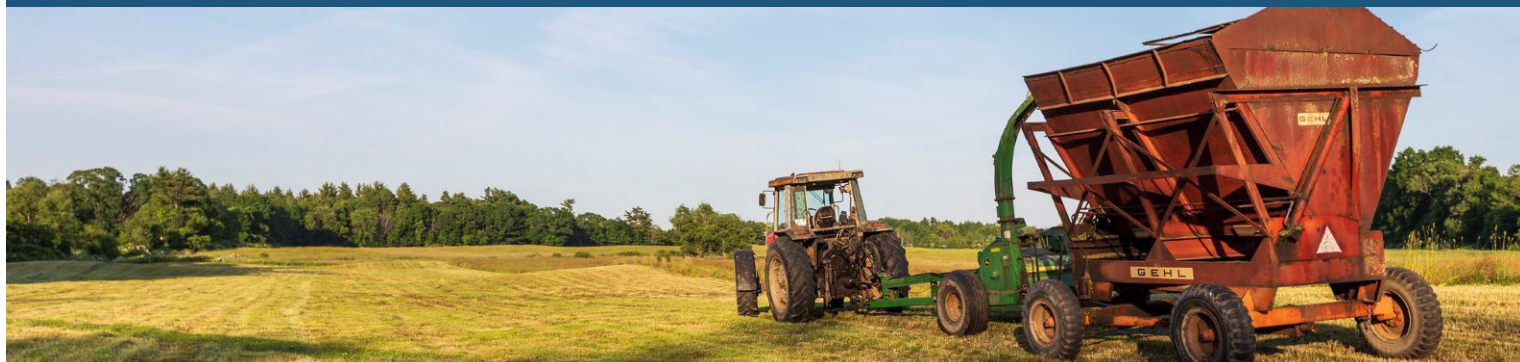
Led by Alliance senior project team manager, Justin Merrifield, the National Center for Appropriate Technology has been working closely with NRCS to help land trusts in support of participation in ACEP and RCPP in FY 2025.

With the next national ACEP funding deadline coming on Dec. 20, the team is working in close coordination with NRCS to ensure land trust partners can address concerns via state offices, navigating sticking points when needed, and ultimately submit strong applications.

As of Nov. 1, the team has already helped 11 land trusts with direct support on 15 parcel applications.

Land Trust Alliance Website





Entity Success Stories from Across the Country

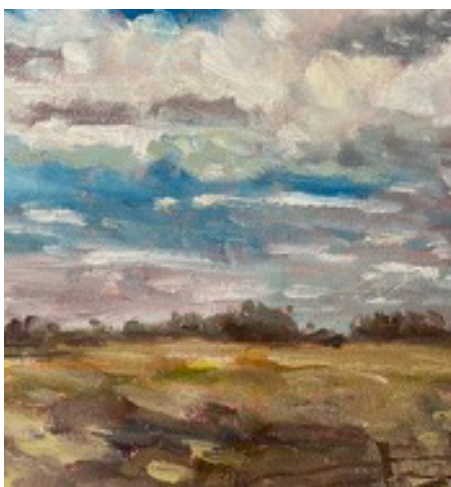
Grasslands Protected on Historic Katy Prairie, Waller County, Texas

Arborland Grassland, in partnership with the Coastal Prairie Conservancy (CPC), successfully completed a 110-acre conservation easement project adjacent to the historic Katy Prairie Preserve. This property is adjacent to the nearly 19,000 acres of land that have been protected by CPC on the historic Katy Prairie Preserve west of the Greater Houston Metro Area.

The Greater Houston area is experiencing significant development pressure. Houston's growth is consuming thousands of acres of coastal prairie, and the loss of these lands threatens the well-being of people and wildlife in the region. The urgent need to conserve land in the Greater Houston area is real as the city continues to grow.

Funding for the easement was received from NRCS through ACEP-ALE Grasslands of Special Significance. NRCS purchased the easement with Inflation Reduction Act funding, the largest investment in climate action in history. Additional funding was provided by Bass Pro Shops philanthropic grants and Cabela's Outdoor Fund, the Galveston Bay Estuary Program – Conservation Assistance Program, Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program, Texas Land Trust Council, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation ConocoPhillips SPIRIT of Conservation Program.

In a region that is experiencing significant development pressure, this land will continue to support wildlife habitat as well as keep working farms and ranches in family hands forever.



Plein air painting by Rose-Marie Demourkas Towle, landowner





Nine Mile Prairie, LLC, Lancaster County, Nebraska

In January 2024, Jon and Bill Oberg and family placed their 75-acre property in a conservation easement with NRCS and the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District.

The property is close to Lincoln, Nebraska, and lies a quarter of a mile from Nine Mile Prairie, a large protected tract of virgin prairie owned by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Foundation.

Being close to Nine Mile Prairie, the conservation easement adds more land to the tallgrass ecoregion.

Since purchasing the property in 2010, Obergs have strived to maintain the property in a native state.

Prior to the Obergs owning the property, most of the property was terraced and farmed.

In the early 1980s and 1990s thousands of black walnut trees were planted with the intent to harvest a walnut crop or potentially harvest timber in the future.

The land is an important grassland of significance because of its virgin prairie and its importance to Lincoln's greenspace.

Located within the tallgrass ecoregion, the Oberg property contains one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the world, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The native prairie that is located in the southeast corner of the property has remained unplowed since the Otoe-Missouria Tribes cession of the land to

the United States.

The property contains a diverse suite of habitats from a riparian corridor, woodlands planted to black walnuts, virgin prairie, and wetlands. The diversity of habitats provides home to multiple wildlife species including at-risk-species listed in the Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan.

Tallgrass prairie once covered more than 170 million acres of the United States, from Indiana to Kansas and from Canada to Texas. Nearly all of it is gone, plowed under for agriculture or urban development, according to the National Park Service.

Protecting the Oberg property with a conservation easement close to Nine Mile Prairie is essential to the preservation of the tallgrass ecoregion.



The conservation easement was made possible through a partnership between the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District and NRCS.

Through its Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE), NRCS purchased the easement with Inflation Reduction Act funding, the largest investment in climate action in history.

The Oberg easement provides an environmental resource as a greenspace to the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. Protecting land near Nine Mile Prairie was listed as critical in the 2020 Nine Mile Prairie Environs Master Plan.

The Oberg easement property is used primarily for hay which helps maintain the health of the prairie.

The intent of the Oberg easement is to protect the agricultural, aesthetic, and ecological value of the property that has been maintained by the Oberg family for more than 10 years.

