

ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)



Directors Corner

Carrie Lindig,
Director
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Program Division

Final Farewell

Greetings all! I wanted to take a minute to let you know that I have chosen to depart from federal service and my last day was April 30, 2025. I appreciated working with each and every one of you on our shared passion for conservation easements.

There will be many changes ahead for federal agencies and it will impact our work together. You will likely see less oversight and also less opportunities for customization. I am asking in advance for your patience with the remaining staff. There will simply be less people in NRCS, but I assure you they will not lack passion for the conservation mission.

During my 5-year tenure as the Director for Easements at NRCS I was able to see the NRCS portfolio increase 900,000 acres of protected agricultural land, wetlands and floodplains! Until NRCS is allowed to hire again, Danielle Balduff will be serving as Acting Easement Program Division Director. She can be reached at danielle.balduff@usda.gov. Keep conserving!

Carrie Lindig carrielindig129@gmail.com

Thank you!
FOR YOUR HARD WORK

FY24 Easement Data Summary

In fiscal year (FY) 2024, working with landowners and partners across the country, NRCS provided technical and financial assistance closing 339 conservation easements protecting 141,014 acres. (NRCS Tableau 2024 Q4)

Conservation purposes protected in FY 2024 included: (NRCS Tableau 2024 Q4)

- Wetlands - 144 closed easements protecting 30,534 acres
- Agricultural conservation - 132 closed easements protecting 48,431 acres
- Grasslands - 24 closed easements protecting 56,588 acres,
- Floodplains - 12 closed easements protecting 2,186 acres
- Forestland - 3 closed easements protecting 725 acres

In FY 2024 ACEP-ALE closed 140 easements protecting 77,843 acres. Montana contributed 14 ACEP-ALEs, protecting 26,135 acres and Vermont protected 1,982 acres under 13 easements.

ACEP-WRE closed 141 easements, protecting 29,181 acres. Louisiana led the nation with 36 ACEP-WRE closed easements restoring and enhancing the functions and values of wetlands on 10,849 acres. Through RCPP Farm Bill 2014 and 2018 funding, 32 easements were closed protecting 15,469 acres and Michigan contributed with seven RCPP easements protecting 659 acres.

Through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program Floodplain Easement (EWPP-FPE), 12 easements were closed, reducing threats to flooding on 2,186 acres, Illinois closed six easements protecting 1,201 acres.

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.

**ACEP-ALE News Flashes
FY 2025 Edition 2**



Since 1992, 24,871 easements have closed protecting 5,656,541 acres.

The thousands of acres protected would not have been possible without the outstanding partnerships NRCS has across the country. With these partnerships, keeping working lands in family hands and protecting America's agricultural, forests, and wetlands is unstoppable!



American Farmland Trust

Land Transfer Navigators: Supporting Transition and Access on Agricultural Lands

The goal of the Land Transfer Navigators program is to significantly increase the transfer of farm and ranch land to a new generation of producers. The program is catalyzing practitioners from across the country to support farm and ranch transfers that work for both retiring and aspiring generations.

In partnership with NRCS, American Farmland Trust (AFT) has developed a multi-year, multi-faceted program to address the challenges affecting:

- Retiring landowners grappling with transferring their land and operations.
- A new generation of farmers and ranchers looking to access land.
- The next generation within farm and ranch families who are involved in a transfer.
- Organizations interested in providing land access and transfer support.

To meet these challenges, AFT is training and building the capacity of Navigator organizations.

Through this four-year program, AFT is providing training, along with technical and financial assistance, to support organizations holding Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) easements. Training and networking opportunities will build organizations' capacity to guide farmers, ranchers, and landowners through farm and ranch transfer journeys.

The first in-person training took place in January 2024 in Savannah, Georgia. Navigators came from as far away as

Alaska and Hawaii to meet, learn, and share.

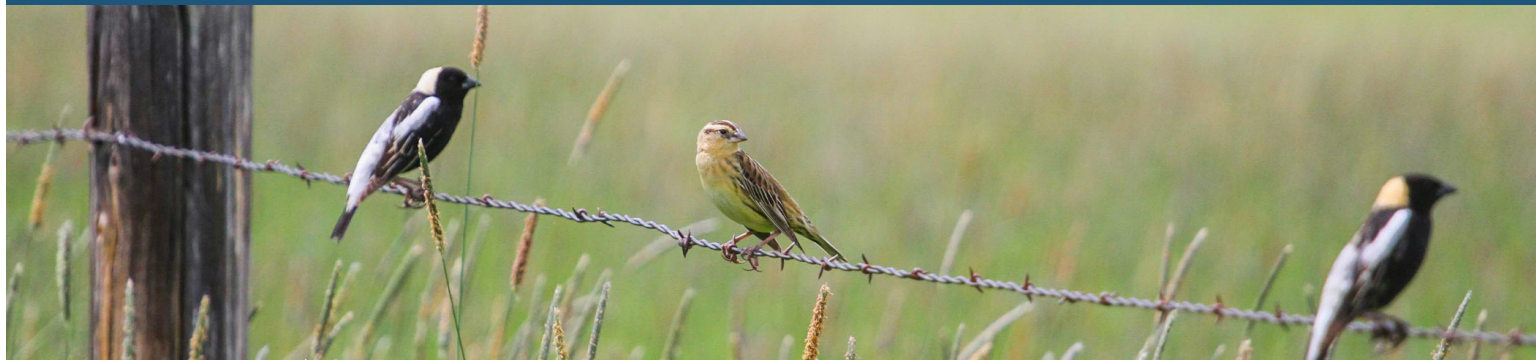
AFT built regional networks to foster direct support for farmers, ranchers, and landowners. While Navigator roles in this program are currently reserved for Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program easement holders, we are also engaging all farm and ranch transfer service providers through regional forums.

Regional forums bring together local professionals to support farm and ranch transfers. Service providers such as attorneys, appraisers, lenders, mediators, and others who specialize in agriculture gather to create robust networks, share resources, and learn from each other.

Land Transfer Forums are followed with the option to join the National Agricultural Land Network's online community platform. The platform is a place to continue networking and to connect to a national farm and ranchland protection community.

American Farmland Trust: Land Transfer Navigators





Updates from the Land Trust Alliance Partnership



The Alliance NRCS partnership team in action:

Led by senior manager for NRCS programs, Nikki Nesbary, the Land Trust Alliance NRCS team has been hard at work supporting land trusts as they work to help farmers and ranchers across the country conserve working lands through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The team rounded out 2024 with activities including support for land trusts applying for ACEP-ALE funding, delivering the 2024 Easement Summit Executive Summary, preparing for fiscal year 2025 NRCS partnership activities including training and participation at regional and national land trust conferences, and convening the first ALE Certified Entity Peer Group meeting.

Over the past few months, the team has worked to build out and launch a new online hub for Alliance resources on NRCS programs. The NRCS Partnership Resources landing page is a one-stop-shop for land trusts and other partners to access materials, training and learn about Alliance services that support participation in ACEP and RCPP. The team also held two Certified Entity Peer Group meetings bringing together land trusts

from across the country to discuss ways to effectively participate in ACEP-ALE using certified status.

NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team update: Led by Alliance senior project team manager, Justin Merrifield, the NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team — or NCAT— finished supporting its first round of ACEP-ALE applications for the FY 2025 December 20 deadline for IRA funding. Project specialists Dyan Holt and Josh Holmes provided direct application support and guidance to 10 entities that ultimately submitted 15 applications to support 12 families in six states. Applications supported by the NCAT cover more than 13,000 acres of working lands. These projects include 300-acres of a family farm in Georgia, joint protection for adjacent agricultural and recreation lands in Delaware, and a 620-acre ranch amidst public lands in Nevada, with all parcels being submitted by first time applicants.



Outside of direct application support, the team has provided guidance about NRCS easement programs and processes to 26 land trusts to date, increasing awareness and knowledge of the programs within the land trust community.



In the coming year, the team is looking forward to creating additional program resources and connecting with more applicants to expand land trusts' capacity to participate in ACEP-ALE, as well as providing similar support for RCPP entity held easement applications. This work is important so land trusts can help farmers, ranchers – families – remain on their working land and continue to contribute to our communities and economy. Land Trusts can contact the NCAT at ncat@lta.org to request support or learn more about the services it offers.

Land Trust Alliance Website



NRCS 90 Years of Helping People Help the Land

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) draws on a long history of helping people help the land.

April 27, 2025, marked the 90th anniversary of NRCS and its predecessor agencies working in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, conservation districts, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes.

NRCS was established in 1935 as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS). The new USDA agency represented the culmination of the efforts of a man named Hugh Hammond Bennett, who has been called the “father of Soil Conservation” and was the first Chief of SCS. Bennett had worked for years prior to 1935 to awaken public concern for the problem of soil erosion. At the height of the Dust Bowl – a catastrophic agricultural disaster – Congress passed Public Law 74-46, recognizing “the wastage of soil and moisture resources on farm, grazing, and forest lands...is a menace to the national welfare” and establishing the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as a permanent agency in the USDA on April 27, 1935.

In 1994, Congress changed SCS’s name to the Natural Resources Conservation Service to better reflect the broadened scope of the agency’s conservation work.





Entity Success Stories from Across the Country

Taylor-Oswald Ranch Easement Protects South Central Colorado Grazing Land

The Taylor-Oswald Ranch lies at the base of the picturesque Sangre de Cristo mountains in south central Colorado. Steve and Nancy Oswald manage the ranch that has been in Nancy's family for more than 60 years. The Taylor family history can be traced back to her great grandparents who began ranching about 10 miles away along Texas Creek in the late 1800s.

The ranch encompasses 26 miles of Arkansas River tributaries. The market for second homes in the Upper Arkansas River valley has surged, putting a strain on the working lands and water resources. As the area's popularity has increased, so have the prices of ranching properties. Long-term ranchers face inheritance taxes and other expenses that their traditional ranching operations cannot support.

The Oswalds chose a conservation easement to protect their land from development in perpetuity while allowing them to continue working the land. The 2,727-acre conservation easement ensures the working ranch's significant wildlife corridors, cultural attributes, water resources, agricultural viability, and scenic vistas will be permanently protected.

The conservation easement was made possible through a partnership between Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land, San Isabel Land Protection Trust, Great Outdoors Colorado, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) helps landowners and other eligible entities conserve, restore, and protect wetlands, productive agricultural lands, and grasslands at risk of conversion to non-grassland uses.

The ranch is a cow/calf, yearling, and direct market cattle ranch operation. The irrigated acreage is grazed. The Oswalds do not cut hay or sell calves. Instead, they've moved from a strictly cow/calf operation in the late 1990s where they sold their calves in the fall to retaining all calves and a number of 2-year-old cows and open cows that they sell as grass fattened animals.

This management strategy preserves the ranch's main resource – grass, while enabling the Oswalds to use their calf “crop” as a drought mitigation strategy. This strategy has enabled them to weather droughts by selling their steer calves while retaining their heifer calves, providing ample income to keep the ranch economically viable.





Entity Success Stories from Across the Country

Kamps Ranches Protects Agriculture Land from Urban Sprawl

Kamps Ranches lies in the picturesque Gallatin Valley of Montana. The ranch has been in the family since 1940 when Louis Kamps Jr.'s grandfather purchased the land.

Louis Jr., who now owns and operates the ranch, grew up farming the land with his father and plans to pass operations to his son.

Kamps chose to establish the 2,267-acre conservation easement to keep the working ranch intact and in the family. It was a difficult decision for Louis, but ultimately, he and his family wanted to stay in a community and on the land where they have strong ties and deep roots.

With rising property values, many landowners in the Gallatin Valley face this same dilemma as they make plans to pass their working farms and ranches to the next generation.

Kamps Ranches is a dryland farm, producing wheat and barley. Located in a historic part of Gallatin County, Kamps Ranches is surrounded by other agricultural operations and conserved land.

The property also provides important native grassland habitat for numerous species of wildlife including critical winter range for elk and mule deer. It's adjacent to four state-owned public land parcels and one conservation easement.

Three additional conservation easements are within one mile and well over 100,000 acres of conserved open space is located within five miles.

Kamps Ranches adds to this large expanse of conserved open space and serves to connect multiple protected parcels and creates a block of wildlife habitat.

