

# ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)



## Directors Corner

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## Effective Partnerships Start With Communication

Effective partnerships and collaboration are vital for successful agricultural land conservation. We heard this message from both Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees and conservation partners at the recent Easements Summit in Denver, Colorado. Land trust practitioners and staff from NRCS and the Land Trust Alliance gathered for the third time since 2018 to collaborate on how to work together better to acquire conservation easements through both the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

We all recognize that we can get more conservation on the ground by working together:

- **Innovative Solutions:** Diverse perspectives can foster innovative approaches to conservation challenges, leading to more effective and adaptable strategies.
- **Shared Goals:** Collaborating with various stakeholders, including landowners, government agencies, non-profits, and local communities, ensures that conservation efforts align with the needs and goals of all parties involved.
- **Resource Pooling:** Combining resources, expertise, and funding can lead to more comprehensive and sustainable conservation solutions.

If you don't have a relationship with your NRCS easement staff in your state, I would encourage you to develop one. You may start with a more formal relationship by establishing monthly or bi-weekly check-in calls and requesting to participate in the State Technical Committee meetings. I have suggested to all NRCS state easement staff that they have regular check-in meetings with you.

The more successful partnerships take the relationship a bit further by meeting to talk about priorities and potential projects; inviting each other to attend a hosted function, workshop or a field visit; or meeting casually to grab coffee or a beverage together. If you work on the partnership relationship and get to know each other as individuals committed to the same conservation goals, you will develop one of the most important aspects of a partnership relationship which is trust. And partnerships that share trust are unstoppable.



## 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](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/ranking-dates).

More information about ACEP can be found at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

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## NRCS Direct Hire Event at the Land Trust Alliance Rally 2024

Interested in a conservation career with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)? You won't want to miss the NRCS direct hire event at Rally on Friday, Sept. 27, 2024, in Hall D at the Rhode Island Convention Center from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. NRCS is looking to fill conservation careers across the United States.

NRCS will be hiring the following full-time, permanent positions:

- Soil Conservationist
- Soil Scientist
- Range Management Specialist
- Natural Resource Specialist
- Biologist
- Civil/Agricultural Engineer
- Realty Specialist
- Program Analyst

While NRCS encourages applicants to attend the in-person event, attendance is not required to be considered for a position. All applicants must apply online at [USA Jobs](#). NRCS's in-person hiring event will offer career and resume feedback, on-site USA Jobs support, and in-person interviews for potential candidates. It will also give you the opportunity to possibly receive tentative job offers on the spot.

Positions that will be filled are located throughout the United States. When viewing a position on [USA Jobs](#), you will find the available locations under the "Overview" section on the column to the right on the vacancy announcement. Applicants will be asked to rank their top three locations.

Potential applicants should bring a complete resume (preferably one built within USA JOBS Resume Builder linked to their USA Jobs account, but other resume versions are acceptable), university transcripts (official or unofficial are acceptable) in English that include course number, title, completion, and grade. Education must be accredited by an accrediting institution recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for it to be credited towards qualifications. If an applicant has not yet conferred a degree or certificate but will within 120 days of the closing date of this announcement, a letter from the school documenting current standing, degree being obtained, and expected graduation date must be submitted with the application.

All applicants are encouraged to bring a brief cover letter and letters of recommendation, if available; laptop or tablet, to apply directly to USA Jobs; and pen and paper.

The entire in-person process generally takes about one hour. Having an active USAJOBS account and all required application documents available electronically and hard copy in advance would reduce the amount of time you need to spend at the hiring event.

Potential applicants can learn more about how to apply by checking out the OPM Navigating USA Jobs: The Gateway to Federal Employment [Video Series](#) to learn more about the USA Jobs application process.

## IRA ACEP Batching Periods

For fiscal year (FY) 2025, Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) will have \$500 million in funding and financial assistance will be allocated to states nationwide to deliver the ACEP program.

There will be two batching periods ending on October 4, 2024, and December 20, 2024, for landowners and eligible entities to submit applications for funding consideration. Unfunded applications received in previous fiscal years will be considered during these batching periods.

The IRA ACEP priorities remain the same as FY 2024, as listed below.





ACEP-ALE enrollment prioritization will focus on:

- securing grasslands in areas of highest risk for conversion to non-grassland uses to prevent the release of soil carbon stores,
- agricultural lands under threat of conversion to nonagricultural uses, and
- state specific priorities including rice cultivation on subsiding highly organic soils.

ACEP-WRE enrollment prioritization will target:

- eligible lands that contain soils high in organic carbon,
- eligible lands that will be restored to and managed as forests such as bottomland hardwood forests, and
- several geographically specific priorities including restoring land formerly used as cranberry bogs, restoring Montane wet meadow ecosystems, and restoring ephemeral wetlands surrounded by grasslands.



## American Farmland Trust

### ACEP-ALE Appraisal Requirements Virtual Workshop

NRCS and American Farmland Trust (AFT) co-hosted a virtual workshop on June 27, 2024 titled “NRCS Appraisal Requirements for the Agricultural Land Easements Component of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-ALE).”

National ACEP-ALE Program Manager Matt Oliver reviewed program specifications for appraisals for both certified and non-certified entities, and highlighted policy changes extending the effective date of appraisals for ACEP-ALE.

NRCS National Appraiser Mark Sonderby offered tips for finding qualified appraisers, described key qualifications, and suggested screening questions for entities to use when seeking appraisers for ACEP-ALE. Sonderby also described the agency’s current appraisal valuation team, including both the NRCS appraisers and the contracted technical review appraisers as well as the appraisal technical review process. Both Oliver and Sonderby offered insights about

the common pitfalls and offered a list of items to check before submitting appraisal reports to NRCS for review.

The workshop recording and responses to questions asked during the session are posted online and expand AFT’s ACEP-ALE toolkit for entities and landowners. This virtual workshop was the last in a series of three held in April, May and June addressing topics raised by public officials administering state and local purchase of agricultural conservation easement programs who attended AFT’s 2023 ACEP-ALE Summit. Prior workshops focused on:

- **ACEP-ALE Program Agreement Optional Exhibit #4—Considerations, Development, and Examples**
- **ACEP-ALE Land Eligibility: Projects that Further a State or Local Policy.**

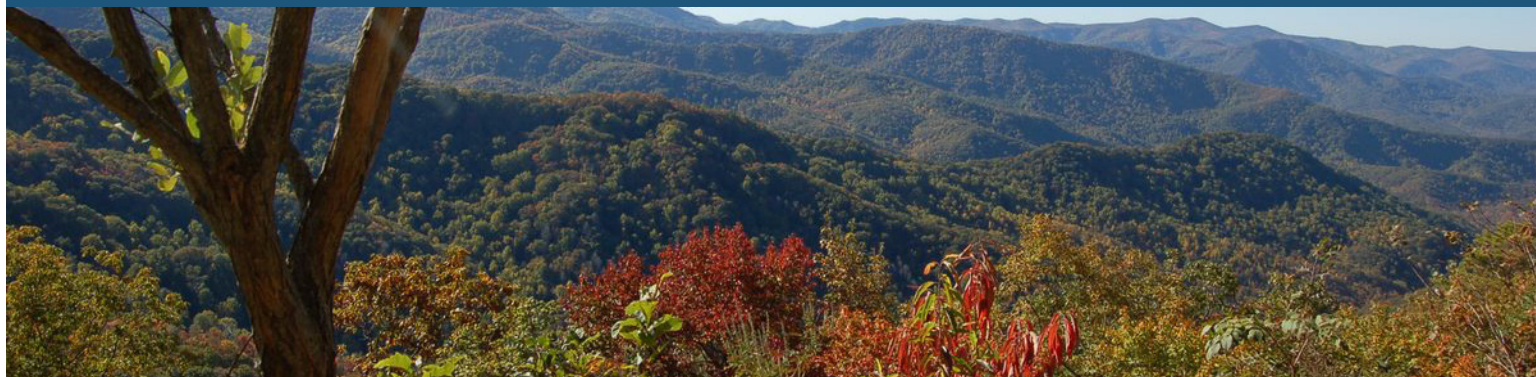
The next ACEP-ALE Summit for public PACE programs will be held in April 2025.

**Workshop: ACEP-ALE Appraisal Review Process**

**ACEP-ALE Appraisal Review Process Workshop Questions and Answers**

**American Farmland Trust Website**





## Updates from the Land Trust Alliance Partnership



The Alliance team is now at full steam ahead with new staff, expanding resources and just back from a successful third Easements Summit.

### Alliance NCAT Team Goes Live

Between May and July, three new staff joined the Alliance NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team (NCAT). Project Assistant Lindsay Reamer, and Project Specialists, Josh Holmes and Dyan Holt joined Senior Project Team Manager, Justin Merrifield. The team provides direct support to land trusts to develop and track strong applications for ACEP-ALE and RCPP entity-held easements. In June, the team held a well-attended kick-off webinar rolling out the team services. And coming up, the full NCAT team will be at Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference. The team will have a booth set up all week for partners to bring questions and get support troubleshooting challenges as they navigate NRCS programs.

### NRCS – Alliance Easement Summits

In 2018, the Alliance and NRCS held the inaugural easements summit focused on the Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) component of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The first summit,

focused largely on strengthening the collaboration and partnership between land trust practitioners and NRCS national staff. During the facilitated summit, attendees walked through the ALE program process, and identified sticking points and potential solutions to strengthen program participation. Results included the development of resources such as webinars, factsheets, the ACEP-ALE toolkit, along with ongoing dialog via working groups.

Much has been accomplished since 2018 and there is more opportunity on the horizon. A second summit was held in 2022 which reinvigorated communication and collaboration, along with a renewed focus on entity certification among other priorities.

In 2023, NRCS rolled out a number of improvements to ACEP-ALE including raising the national appraiser review threshold from \$1 million to \$3 million and a proactive strategy to help well-

qualified partners become certified entities - yet NRCS knew the work was far from done.

Thanks to unprecedented funding of both programs, NRCS expanded its partnership with the Alliance to bring even more resources to the table to support land trust participation in both ACEP-ALE and RCPP entity-held easements. This included the new NCAT team, a program manager to provide support for RCPP, and most importantly, a third facilitated easements summit that would address both programs.

### The 2024 Easements Summit

The 2024 Easements Summit was built upon a strong foundation of partnership. Eighty leaders, ranging from seasoned NRCS national staff to land trust easements practitioners and experts, gathered for four days in Denver, Colorado, July 29 through August 1, 2024.



*NRCS and the Alliance celebrated six newly certified ALE entities during Summit. The total number of ALE Certified Entities is up to 53.*





Hosted by NRCS and the Land Trust Alliance, with co-host Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT), the event kicked off with a field trip to Lewis Heritage Farm where attendees heard from the original landowners, representatives of CCALT, FFA, and the Trust for Public Land. The farm was protected through ACEP-ALE.

The summit continued with an opening reception where the Interim President and CEO of the Alliance, Jennifer Miller Herzog, and NRCS Regional Conservationist for the West, Astor Boozer, among others, highlighted the importance of partnerships to see the full potential of ACEP-ALE and RCPP come to fruition.

Throughout the summit attendees dove into workshops, panels and break-out discussions to identify ways to promote dialogue, learning, and practical solutions for advancing land conservation efforts through the two programs. Throughout the week NRCS staff shared program updates, fielded questions, and worked to create more transparency around program policy and process.

Land trust attendees brought great enthusiasm and real-life issues and questions to work through together.

Thanks to stellar facilitation by Clarus Consulting and Indufor North America, the group collaborated to identify still existing challenges and next steps to address them.

[Land Trust Alliance Website](#)

## Entity Success Stories from Across the Country

### Horseshoe Bar Ranch

The Nebraska Land Trust completed an easement with owners Brent and Janet Steffan on the Horseshoe-Bar Ranch in the northcentral part of Nebraska known as the Nebraska Sandhills. The ranch contains 4 miles of frontage on the Dismal River. Despite its name, the Dismal River offers some of the most beautiful scenery in the state which is what drew Steffans to purchase the 6,000-acre ranch. The ranch has historic origins, being initially homesteaded by a friend of Buffalo Bill and is the subject of a book titled *The Horseshoe Bar Ranch: Remembering a Prairie*.

Steffans weren't the only ones who appreciated the beauty and scenic views of the Sandhills. The area has seen an increase in buyers purchasing parcels of ranches and turning them into "ranchettes" or even golf courses. Steffans did not want to see their ranch subdivided and never be a working ranch again.

The conservation easement placed on the ranch helps maintain the ranch's impressive ecological diversity. The easement contains a cedar management plan. It's important to remove cedars in this area as they spread quickly and can rapidly turn native grasslands into cedar forests. With the proceeds from the easement purchase, the Steffans were able to implement more efficient methods of cedar tree removal, thereby

maintaining native grasslands preserving the ecological diversity on the ranch.

The Sandhills sit atop the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the largest aquifers in the world. It supplies drinking water to many in the Great Plains states and is used for agricultural irrigation. Native grasses are especially important in the Sandhills area as they capture and filter water before it descends into the permeable rock layers below. The grasses also sequester carbon which protects the carbon stores in the event of fire.

"Our major objective entering into this conservation easement was that we didn't want to see the ranch developed. We wanted it to stay as close to how God made it as it could be. We wanted it to stay in agriculture," said Brent Steffen.

The easement was made possible by the Nebraska Land Trust and funding from the NRCS ACEP-ALE Grasslands of Special Significance. Grasslands of special significance contain little or no noxious or invasive species and are subject to the threat of conversion to non-grassland or fragmentation.





## Southwest Florida Agricultural Land Easement Protects Habitat for Endangered Wildlife

USDA NRCS and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Florida have partnered to purchase a conservation easement at G Road Grove, an active citrus grove and tree nursery in Florida panther habitat. G Road Grove expands the protected area within the Florida Panther Dispersal Zone, a 30,000-acre corridor in Hendry and Glades counties that helps connect the panthers' current breeding population in areas south of the Caloosahatchee River to suitable habitat north of the river.

G Road Grove is also part of the designated 18-million-acre Florida Wildlife Corridor, a network of connected lands and waters that span the state. With this conservation easement, NRCS and TNC are creating and supporting large areas for wildlife to feed, breed, and roam. G Road Grove joins nearby conserved lands in this corridor, including the Spirit of the Wild Wildlife Management Area, Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, and several conservation easement lands, such as Black Boar Ranch, Lone Ranger Forge and Chaparral Slough.

Florida panthers rely on a network of protected, connected public and private lands to hunt and breed. They use this mosaic of lands, including ranch lands and other agricultural lands such as the citrus groves and tree nursery found on G Road Grove, as

safe movement pathways and sources of food and water.

The Florida panther population declined due to a loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation, and human activities. State and federal agencies have stepped in to help manage the population, which mainly breeds in available habitat south of the Caloosahatchee River in southwest Florida. Successful management and land protection efforts have helped the population recover to approximately 200 panthers.



Along with large swaths of protected land, Florida panthers need reliable food sources. Agricultural lands are home to prey species including white-tailed deer, rabbits, and raccoons. One of the panthers' favorite prey species are non-native, invasive feral hogs, which are common across Florida.



*Photo courtesy of Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission*

Controlling non-native, invasive feral hogs requires intensive hunting and trapping, which is costly and labor intensive for land managers. One of the best ways to manage the hogs is through their predators: Florida panthers.

Non-native, invasive wildlife and plant species damage habitats that native Florida species need, taking up valuable food, space and water resources and causing an imbalance to natural systems. The landowner of G Road Grove plans to work on controlling non-native, invasive plants on the property with the help of NRCS for cost-share programs.

Florida panthers once roamed the southeastern United States but are now found only in parts of southwest and south-central Florida. The Florida panther was added to the state endangered list in 1958 and federally listed as endangered on the first federal Endangered Species List in 1967.

Story of the easement made TV news headlines on NBC-TV 2 News (Fort Myers). The news coverage can be watched on the NBC-TV 2 News website.

