

ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)



Director's Corner

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Happy Summer! I hope you had a chance to enjoy summer activities with your family and friends. I have had the opportunity for both visiting family in New York and friends in Michigan. We are rapidly working to close out fiscal year 2025 and preparing for 2026, which is right around the corner.

This newsletter includes some new information and reminders I hope are helpful. Along with sharing some stories that illustrate our easement successes.

I also wanted to introduce you to the new NRCS Chief, Aubrey J.D. Bettencourt, who is a leader in agriculture, water, and sustainability, most recently serving as the Global Director of Government Relations and External Affairs for Netafim, an Orbia Company. Chief Bettencourt's previous roles include serving as President and CEO of the Almond Alliance and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the U.S. Department of the Interior. Her work reflects a strong commitment to water policy, agricultural support, and sustainable practices, supported by her family's farming roots in Kings County, California.

Since becoming Chief of NRCS, she has begun travelling around the country meeting with farmers and ranchers who implement voluntary, locally led conservation to help them help the land and meeting with the local NRCS staff and partners who help make it happen. Chief Bettencourt is sharing her travel experiences through a new video

series called Dishin' the Dirt. These videos can be viewed on the [NRCS YouTube channel](#) or through a link on the [NRCS website](#) and highlight farmers Mandi and Dillon Bird of Daviess County, Missouri and NRCS' own Plant Materials Center in Manhattan, Kansas.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act was signed by President Trump on July 4, 2025, which brings increased funding levels in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program from 2026 through 2031. Beginning in 2026, ACEP funding increases to 625 million, and ramps up to 700M by 2029, which will allow NRCS to continue working with farmers and ranchers to protect their farms and ranches across the United States.

Best Appraisal Practices When Partnering with NRCS Factsheet

The Easements Program Division has developed a factsheet for the best practices to use when partnering with NRCS in obtaining appraisals for conservation easements.

The factsheet includes tips on selecting a qualified appraiser, items to provide to the appraiser, how to find an appraiser, an appraisal checklist, fatal flaws, and steps for a national appraiser review.

The factsheet is available on the [ACEP-ALE website](#).



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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Monitoring NRCS Conservation Easements

Entities have the primary responsibility for conducting annual monitoring activities to ensure compliance with the terms and conditions of the easement deed.

NRCS may accompany the eligible entity at their request during onsite monitoring, however, NRCS does not conduct its own monitoring of these easements unless NRCS must exercise the United States' right of enforcement, is a Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRLPP) easement enrolled between 2006-2008, or to review highly erodible cropland plans. At a minimum, monitoring must be conducted every year after an easement closes, and the findings must be documented and reported to NRCS. Please check with your state's easement program manager to ascertain the deadline for submitting reports each fiscal year. NRCS staff must have all monitoring reports entered into easement business tools prior to September 30, please submit your monitoring reports to NRCS with sufficient time for data quality assurance and entry prior to September 30 annually.

To determine compliance with the terms and conditions of the conservation easement deed and if program- and site-specific objectives are being met, the person conducting the monitoring should review the relevant documents governing that easement. Documents to review depend on the type of easement,

but at a minimum should include the following:

- Annual verification of ownership including documentation of current land ownership
- Individual conservation easement deed
- Active easement plans (conservation, management, restoration, etc.)
- Baseline reports
- Easement violation notices and remediation plans
- Correspondence
- Approved post-closing modifications, known as easement administration actions
- Any other documents that will aid the monitors in determining whether the terms and conditions of the recorded conservation easement deed are being met

Eligible entities may use the NRCS Annual Monitoring Worksheet or submit their own version of an annual monitoring report that contains sufficient information to determine whether the terms and conditions of the recorded conservation easement deed are being met.

Monitoring is an essential part of maintaining landowner contact and gives the landowner an opportunity to evaluate the management of the easement and to discuss any desired changes with the entity.



Partner Updates



Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Policy Dashboard

American Farmland Trust has launched a [PACE Policy Dashboard](#) for farm and ranch land protection practitioners on the Farmland Information Center website. The interactive database catalogs key features of state-level PACE programs and highlights effective approaches. Information about the Agricultural Land Easement component of the federal [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program \(ACEP-ALE\)](#) is included alongside the state programs to show the extent to which programs are currently aligned. The dashboard helps raise awareness about effective approaches used to implement programs. The data can also be used to inform state and federal policy action and advance permanent agricultural land protection.

ACEP-ALE Application Checklist

American Farmland Trust released its [ACEP-ALE Application Checklist](#), adding to its ACEP-ALE Toolkit, a



comprehensive set of ACEP-ALE resources for entities and landowners. The checklist clarifies requirements for a complete initial application and tracks the guidance issued in November 2024 (NRCS National Bulletin 440-25-7, ACEP-ALE Complete Parcel Applications). The list of requirements includes references to the relevant section of the application form and points to more details in AFT's landowner, land, and entity eligibility checklists. The checklist also provides context for additional requests made by state offices and suggests tips to help streamline application reviews. Public entities asked for this resource at AFT's 2023 ACEP-ALE Summit convening NRCS and PACE program leaders to strengthen partnerships.

American Farmland Trust's ACEP-ALE Toolkit

Be sure to check out AFT's resources to help entities and landowners participate in ACEP-ALE, housed on AFT's Farmland Information Center website: [ACEP-ALE Toolkit](#). The toolkit covers each step of the process from eligibility to stewardship. In addition to the online toolkit, AFT staff respond to requests for technical assistance. Questions related to farmland protection efforts, including ACEP-ALE participation, can be submitted through the FIC website or you can contact staff using their 800 number.

[American Farmland Trust Website](#)



The Alliance NRCS Partnership Team in Action

The NRCS partnership team continues to support land trusts as they work to help farmers and ranchers across the country conserve working lands through the [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) and [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#). Over the past few months, team activities included support for land trusts navigating participation in entity-held conservation easements, coordinated NRCS participation at the Alliance's annual member-fly in where land trusts educated Congress on the importance of putting family farmers first by protecting farm and ranch land across the country, and held the third ALE Certified Entity Peer Group meeting and made preparations for NRCS participation at Rally: [The National Land Conservation Conference](#) taking place in Cleveland, Ohio, September 3 through 6.

In May, the Alliance was pleased to host NRCS staff and leaders at the annual Advocacy Day's fly-in held May 5 through 8 in Washington, DC. Land Trusts, farmers, landowners and key sector leaders educated decision-makers about the benefits of voluntary private land conservation and the importance of federal programs that advance those efforts. This year's event drew a record 168 attendees combined for the virtual and in-person portions, representing 40 states.

NRCS was highlighted as a key partner. Alliance members had the opportunity to hear from NRCS Deputy Chief for Programs Karen Woodrich during the Tuesday morning kick-off distinguished speaker series and - at one of her first appearances - newly confirmed NRCS Chief Aubrey J.D. Bettencourt shared remarks at the Capitol Hill reception emphasizing the agency's commitment to putting family farmers first. Alliance members also met with NRCS on our annual agency day participating in a special discussion and Q&A with Chief Bettencourt and the Deputy Chief Woodrich. The NRCS-land trust community partnership is key to protecting farms and ranches for future generations.

NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team Update

The Alliance's NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team continues to provide support to land trusts and other entities that are interested in helping families conserve farms and ranches through NRCS conservation easement programs but need support navigating the requirements of the programs. To date, the team has assisted 12 land trusts, prepared application packages for 16 projects, and provided acquisition support for 7 parcels. In addition, the team has assisted nearly 30 land trusts with unique issues or advice around specific program requirements.

Looking forward to fiscal year 2026 application period, the team has kicked off its outreach efforts to identify additional land trusts with interest



in accessing these programs. To date, the team has communicated with 11 new entities, with more anticipated. This important work allows land trusts can help farmers, ranchers, and their families remain on their working land and continue to contribute to our communities and economy. Land trusts can contact the NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team (NCAT) at <mailto:ncat@lta.org> to request support or learn more about the services it provides.

For more information on the Alliance team and its services, visit the [NRCS Partnership Resources](#) landing page, a one-stop-shop for land trusts and other partners to access materials, training, and services.

Land Trust Alliance Website



“People need a chance to be on a farm, to learn the value of it. We hope what we have out here helps people to see the value of a farm a little differently.”

Entity Success Stories from Across the Country

Peaceful Belly Farm Growing Food for the Community

Founded in 2002, Peaceful Belly Farm, also known as Vine and Branch Ranch, LLC, works to provide healthy, fresh vegetables to the Treasure Valley area surrounding Caldwell, Idaho.

While not raised as farmers, owners Josie Jensen and Clay Erskine found their passion for farming after caring for the Polly Bemis Ranch on the Salmon River in Idaho. That is where they were first introduced to growing vegetables. Shortly after, they moved to Caldwell's sunny slope and began growing organic vegetables full time.

Jensen and Erskine's farm offers a cafe, cidery, farm stand, pick-your-own flowers, and a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which allows consumers to purchase a share of a farm's harvest in advance, typically for a season, receiving regular deliveries of locally grown food. They grow 180+ varieties of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers while offering educational experiences and nourishing meals that connect people to the land.

Idaho's Treasure Valley is losing irreplaceable farmland to ever-increasing development. The population of the Treasure Valley has grown significantly, surpassing 800,000 residents according to the latest U.S. Census data. Since 2020, the region has added approximately 46,613 new residents, bringing the total population to just below 900,000. This growth reflects a broader trend of increasing population in Idaho's urban areas, with the Treasure Valley being one of the fastest-growing regions in the state. Conservation easements are a way to strengthen the region's farming heritage, ensuring sustainable agriculture for generations.

Jensen and Erskine chose a permanent easement to ensure the farm remains in agriculture and is not developed in the future. The conservation easement was made possible in partnership with the Treasure Valley Land Trust and funding received from NRCS's ACEP-ALE program.

“Nobody's going to save ag land if they don't value it,” Jensen said.

Easement partner, Land Trust of the Treasure Valley, has worked to conserve the Treasure Valley's open spaces for more than 25 years. It works with landowners, developers, government agencies, and citizens to protect the surrounding lands for generations to come.

[Land Trust of the Treasure Valley](#)



Historic Rockahock Property Conserved in Eastern Virginia

A 568-acre unique and historic property along the Pamunkey River in New Kent County in eastern Virginia is now protected through a permanent conservation easement. The Rockahock property contains approximately 362 acres of Prime Soils, as designated by NRCS.

But prime soil isn't the only thing that makes the Rockahock property unique. Rockahock is an Algonquian word meaning "sand bar." It sits across from the Pamunkey Indian Reservation, which was established in 1646 and listed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the 10 most endangered historic sites in 2025.

Its ownership history also makes the Rockahock property unique. In the 18th century, it was part of more than 6,200 acres of land owned by John Custis and passed to his son Daniel Parke Custis. Upon the death of the latter, the land became the dower of his widow Martha Dandridge Custis, who later married George Washington in 1759.

Now owned by Rockahock LLC, the goal was to protect the land from conversion to non-agricultural uses. According to the Census Bureau, New Kent County was the 10th fastest-growing locality in the nation in 2023 with an annual population growth of 4.7 percent. Over the past 40 years, the county's population has increased 208 percent from 8,900 to 26,134 residents. During the same period, farmland acres decreased 28 percent.

The conservation easement was made possible through the Capital Region Land Conservancy and funding received from NRCS's ACEP-ALE program.

In addition to its noteworthy history and contribution to Virginia's agricultural economy, the Rockahock property has significant natural resources that will also be protected.

The property contains more than 2.5 miles of frontage along the tidal Pamunkey River and its confluence with Saint Peter's Creek and White House Creek. The river is classified as federal and state endangered waters for six anadromous fish species including the alewife, American shad, Atlantic sturgeon, blueback herring, and white perch. Along with 54 acres of wetlands, a dam creates a 37-acre pond that provides irrigation to the agricultural fields.

Capital Region Land Conservancy is dedicated to conserving the natural and historic resources of Virginia's Richmond region for the benefit of people and nature. The nonprofit land trust serves the city of Richmond and 19 surrounding counties.



Capital Region Land Conservancy