USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

ACEP-ALE News Flashes

From the NRCS Easement Program Division (EPD)

Director's Corner

Danielle Balduff, Acting Director NRCS Easement Programs Division

Welcome to Fiscal Year 2026! I wanted to share successes of the NRCS Easement Programs Division in FY 2025, the agency obligated nearly $175 million for 181 new ACEP-ALE parcels covering more than 200,000 acres. Another successful year for farmland protection, which has been recognized as an agency priority.

In FY 2026, NRCS received an increase in ACEP funding through the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and received our full appropriation through the continuing resolution, so NRCS will be able to move forward with new obligations and continue to close easements. For FY 2026, the funding level was set at $625 million with funding scheduled to increase to $700 million by 2029.

While NRCS accepts producer applications for its conservation programs on a continuous basis, application deadlines are set for funding consideration annually. All programs, ACEP, Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) will have an initial application deadline of January 15, 2026. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) continues to have project specific deadlines set by states and/or partners, depending on project type.

Application deadlines can be found on the **NRCS ranking dates** website and ranking criteria can be found on the state websites. As a reminder, NRCS only requires the following items to submit a complete ACEP-ALE application package:

- Complete and signed **NRCS-CPA-41A.** "Parcel Sheet for Entity Application for Agricultural Land Easement Agreement."
- Map of proposed easement area including access
- Proof of ownership
- Written pending offer
- All supporting documentation required by form **NRCS-CPA-41A** and policy as 440-Conservation Programs Manual Part 528.42(A)(3).

Wishing you a successful conservation new year in 2026.

NRCS Publishes Conservation Easement Story Maps Online

NRCS collected conservation easement success stories from across the country over the past year to celebrate conservation successes. This compilation features stories about ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE), Sentinel Landscapes, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE), and the ACEP-WRE Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP). The links below will take you to the maps and stories:

- **ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement**
- **Sentinel Landscapes**
- **ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement and Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership**

If you have a story you would to share with NRCS for publication in the story maps, , contact Heidi Brewer

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 2026 Edition 1

at **heidi.brewer@usda.gov** or Lori Valadez at **lori.valadez@usda.gov**. . Our goal is to celebrate conservation success in every state through these interactive maps.

Adjusted Gross Income Annual Requirement

The 2018 Farm Bill requires an average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitation for payment eligibility for most programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), including those administered by NRCS and the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

AGI for an individual is the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) reported adjusted gross income. For a legal entity, it is a comparable measure as determined by the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC).

Participants in programs subject to AGI rules must annually file form **CCC-941, "Average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Certification and Consent to Disclosure of Tax Information"** with FSA to verify their eligibility to receive program benefits. The IRS requires written consent from the individual or legal entity to provide the USDA verification of the individual's or legal entity's certification of compliance with AGI limitation provisions. Form **CCC-941** may be obtained from local FSA and NRCS offices or online at AGI Limitation.

The completed form **CCC-941** may be mailed or returned to the appropriate USDA service center. As required by law, landowners must sign form **CCC-941** to grant IRS the authority to use tax information for the purpose of AGI compliance verification requested by USDA. Failure to provide the certification and consent will result in the determination of ineligibility and the required refund of applicable program payments received from NRCS and FSA.

To participate in NRCS conservation easement programs, landowners and legal entities need to file their AGI eligibility for NRCS to finalize application eligibility.

- For ACEP-ALE, form **CCC-941** needs to be filed for all landowners of record, and all landowner entity-members, when applicable, but does not require an IRS determination for funds to be obligated for the parcel contract; however, IRS determination of met eligibility is required before an easement can close.
- For ACEP-WRE, form **CCC-941** must be filed for all landowners of record, and all landowner entity-members, when applicable, and an IRS determination of met eligibility for funds to be obligated.

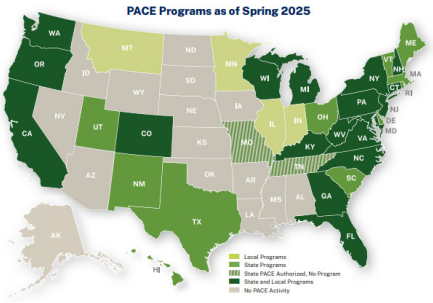
For questions about AGI, reach out to your local FSA office. USDA office contact information can be found on the USDA Service Center Locator at: **nrcs.usda.gov/contact/find-a-service-center.**

Partner Updates

American Farmland Trust

AFT's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Fact Sheet

American Farmland Trust (AFT) has released a new **PACE Fact Sheet**, designed for practitioners working to save agricultural land. This fact sheet serves as a primer on public PACE programs, showing the extent of existing programs and describing how these programs work. The resource covers program authorization, selection criteria, easement terms, and valuation approaches. It also highlights sources of funding and describes how public programs steward and monitor easements to uphold conversation purposes and safeguard public investments over time. The fact sheet serves as a reference point for those working to start a PACE program or interested in the characteristics of these public programs.



Updated Cost of Community Services Fact Sheet Released

The American Farmland Trust (AFT) updated its **Cost of Community Services (COCS)** fact sheet, a resource used by farmland protection practitioners to help make the case for saving agricultural land. COCS studies determine the fiscal contribution of local land uses. They generally show that agricultural land pays its own way while residential development demands more in services than it generates in revenues. AFT developed this approach in the mid-1980s to help communities measure the contribution of agricultural lands to the local tax base. The new resource describes the methodology, background, and purpose of COCS studies. It also features a table with results from 263 communities, including analyses in 91 Indiana counties.

Median cost to provide public services for each dollar of revenue raised. Ratios from the Indiana project are excluded.

In Partnership with NRCS, AFT Developed a Soil Health Toolkit for Agricultural Land Protection Practitioners

American Farmland Trust (AFT) released a **Soil Health Toolkit** for agricultural land protection practitioners on the **Farmland Information Center** website. The toolkit expands the reach of AFT's **Soil Health Stewards Training** to even more practitioners, introduces core soil health principles and practices and covers both the benefits and potential barriers farmers face in practice implementation. It guides entities through ways to support farmers, ranchers, and landowners in improving soil health and lays out key considerations to encourage conservation goals through permanent conservation easements. The toolkit also describes different resource assessment tools as well as technical and financial assistance programs offered by NRCS.

Topics covered by AFT's Soil Health Toolkit include:

- The basics of soil health
- The economic and environmental benefits of healthy soils
- How to assess soil health
- Tools for measuring carbon sequestration
- Strategies for engaging producers around soil health
- The role of conservation easements and resource management plans
- Technical and financial resources that support conservation practices
- Considerations for producers participating in ecosystem markets

This toolkit is part of an agreement with NRCS to provide soil health training and education to land protection practitioners who work on land protected by agricultural conservation easements.

American Farmland Trust Website

Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love

Partnership in Action

The Land Trust Alliance's Natural Resources Conservation Service partnership team provides technical assistance and policy support to land trusts as they work to help family farmers and ranchers across the country conserve working lands through the NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Between August and November, team activities included supporting land trusts navigating participation in entity-held conservation easements; organizing and delivering NRCS engagement at Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference; coordinating the grasslands of special significance and ALE-certified entity working groups;

and developing new resources and preparing for FY26 offerings. Coming soon, the Alliance website will also offer a new RCPP Toolkit designed to support entities applying for and managing easement-based projects through RCPP.

NRCS at Rally 2025

The Land Trust Alliance was pleased to host and coordinate special offerings for NRCS staff and leaders attending Rally 2025 in Cleveland, Ohio, September 3-6.

Each year, the conference brings together conservation leaders, practitioners, landowners and partners from across the nation, all to protect farmland, ranchland, forestland and other critical landscapes that put local families, including farmers and ranchers, first. The agency's participation at Rally provides invaluable training and resources that help land trusts support farmers and ranchers. For the fourth-year running, NRCS served as a lead partner. Easement Program Division team members delivered workshops, including the well-attended "Valuation Best Practices for ACEP-ALE and RCPP-Entity-Held Easements," and hosted an NRCS exhibit booth and special conservation easement-focused events. The NRCS team once again brought a first-of-its-kind offering, the "NRCS Mastering Conservation Easements Seminar," a daylong deep dive covering the ACEP-ALE and RCPP Entity-Held Easements. The Alliance coordinated the delivery and recording of the sold-out training. The recording is being developed into training modules that are expected to launch on the Alliance website in 2026.

The Alliance team also coordinated and moderated a panel session at Rally that featured land trusts sharing their experience about the first time they accessed an NRCS conservation program. Land trusts with experience in ACEP-ALE, RCPP and EQIP talked about their history with the programs, what they learned from the experience, what they wished they knew going in, and answered questions from attendees. Workshop participants shared positive feedback, with several saying that the session helped them make up their mind to apply. The team was thrilled to highlight the opportunities and impact of land trusts partnering with NRCS to help farmers, ranchers and other landowners meet their conservation goals.

To cap off NRCS engagement, the Alliance was pleased to host the seventh annual NRCS-Alliance Conservation Easement Summit luncheon at Rally. Danielle Balduff, acting director of the Easement Programs Division, provided an update and fielded questions alongside fellow NRCS team members on the agency's easement program activities to a packed room.

The Alliance team is grateful for NRCS's continued commitment to engagement and partnership with the land trust community at the conference.

NRCS National Easements Staff, pictured left to right is Matt Oliver, Wayne Van Rooyen, Danielle Balduff, Tim Aaron, and Kelly Ireland.

NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team update

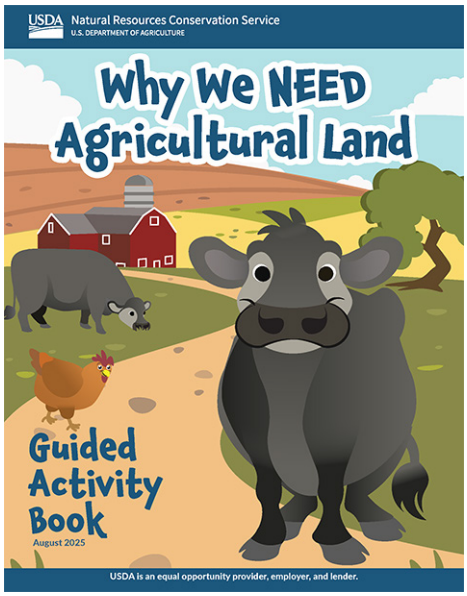
The Alliance's NRCS Conservation Acquisition Team, or NCAT, continues to assist land trusts and other entities interested in helping families conserve farms and ranches using NRCS conservation easement programs and that need support navigating program requirements. Since launching in the summer of 2024, the team has assisted 19 land trusts to prepare application packages for 22 total projects and provided acquisition support for an additional seven parcels. This work has helped about 50 farm and ranch landowners work towards their conservation goals. The team also advised nearly 50 land trusts with implementation questions or technical issues on specific program requirements.

Ahead of the national FY2026 batching deadline in January, the team continues to recruit entities that are interested in accessing the program but need additional assistance. For this application period, NCAT has helped seven entities submit either their first parcel application or establish their first program agreement. This expert assistance gets land trusts off to a strong start, positioning them to help farmers, ranchers, and families remain on their working land and continue to contribute to our communities and economy.

Land Trusts can contact NCAT at **ncat@lta.org** to request support or learn more about the services it offers.

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



NRCS Created Two Guided Activity Books about Conservation Easements

The guided activity booklets created by NRCS contain coloring pages, puzzles, and games to help children learn about agriculture and natural resources conservation. NRCS hopes the activity books plant the seeds of conservation and stewardship and why it matters, in our youth.

"Why We Need Agricultural Land" focuses on the importance of agricultural land and **"Are You a Champion for Wetlands?",** looks at the value of healthy wetlands.

If you would like to receive hard copies of the activity books, send an email to Heidi Brewer at **heidi.brewer@usda.gov** or Lori Valadez at **lori.valadez@usda.gov.**

What are Sentinel Landscapes?

The Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is a coalition of federal agencies, state and local governments, and private organizations that work with willing landowners and land managers to advance sustainable land use practices around military installations and ranges. Founded in 2013, the partnership aligns the objectives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Department of War, and Department of the Interior to strengthen military readiness, conserve natural resources, bolster agricultural and forestry economies, increase public access to outdoor recreation, and enhance landscape resilience.

Land trusts can play a critical role in Sentinel Landscapes by acquiring and stewarding conservation easements within the boundaries. A special authority allows federal funds provided by other partners such as the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service or Department of Defense to match ACEP-ALE funds within Sentinel Landscapes boundaries thus making these projects attractive and affordable to land trusts who operate in these areas to achieve shared conservation goals.

Sentinel Landscapes promote their work through newsletters and other forms of outreach. The Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape publishes a quarterly newsletter and posts it to their website: **fs.usda.gov/r03/coronado/fire/management/fort-huachuca-sentinel-landscape-newsletters.**

There are currently 19 funded Sentinel Landscapes. You can learn more about them on the Sentinel Landscapes website: **sentinellandscapes.org/landscapes**.

Success Stories from Across the Country

Cienega Ranch Protects 33,000 Acres of Grasslands, Willcox, Arizona

Cienega Ranch is in one of North America's most biologically diverse corners near the iconic Chiricahua Mountains in Arizona.

Cienega Ranch once contained numerous wetlands surrounded by thousands of acres of native grasslands. Cienega, in Spanish, refers to springs that create a wet marshy area. Ranchers in the valley pass on stories of how their parents went to swim and cool down in the wetlands on their ranches.

When Cienega Ranch owner, Josiah Austin, acquired the lands that now make up the 33,000-acre ranch, there wasn't much left of the cienegas except memories. The ranch was degraded with a network of steep, eroded gullies dotted with shrubs. There was not enough water or grass for the cattle and wildlife that reied on the land.

Since taking over the ranch, Austin has improved and restored its grasslands and established successful cattle ranching practices. Restoration work includes improving wetlands health, managing herd size and livestock practices to increase grassland health, and reintroducing wildlife such as fish and frogs.

The benefits of the conservation easement extend beyond saving Austin's cattle operation. By analyzing the conservation science and data, the Nature Conservancy of Arizona identified the landscape of Cienega Ranch as critical for wildlife providing habitat for birds, bats, deer, and even the endangered jaguar.

The health of adjacent and nearby public lands also depends on keeping large ranches like Cienega Ranch intact. Any development of these grasslands would significantly disrupt the preservation of this ecologically and historically rich environment.

The easement was possible with a partnership between the New Mexico Land Conservancy and funding received from NRCS's ACEP-ALE. The Trust for Public Land purchased the permanent conservation easements from the landowner protecting the 33,000 acres of Cienega Ranch in perpetuity.

Funding partners in addition to NRCS included the Nature Conservancy in Arizona, Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Acres for America Program, Knoblock Family Foundation, and several private donors.

> ***"I feel very strongly that the cattle operation should coexist with wildlife. The cattle operation is important, but it's just one aspect of my responsibility to this land." Josiah Austin***

255 Years of Growing Grapes at Greenvale Vineyards, Rhode Island

Located off Wapping Road in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, landowners Bill and Nancy Wilson protected 13 acres of their beloved vineyard with a conservation easement, allowing it to be forever farmed.

The land, with its excellent farm soil, has been working farmland for centuries. While Greenvale Vineyards stretches all the way to the Sakonnet River, the conserved portion is along Wapping Road. The land is also connected to other conservation properties, adding to the protected corridor of lands on the eastern side of Aquidneck Island, known as the Sakonnet Greenway. The Sakonnet Greenway Trail is the longest contiguous nature trail on Aquidneck Island.

"We have some of the best farming soils in the state here on Aquidneck Island, yet our farms are under tremendous development pressure. The state has lost 80 percent of its farmland since the 1940s," said Terry Sullivan, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Land Trust. "Our island's working farms are essential to our economy and community. We are thrilled to work with our partners and the Wilsons to save this important tract of farmland on scenic Wapping Road."

Wapping Road is a quiet, residential neighborhood known for its scenic views and close-knit community.

The 13-acre conservation easement on the vineyard property guarantees that it will remain protected open space for generations to come.

> ***"After we purchased the land in 2003 to keep it as a farm, we learned that the land was used by Aaron Lopez as a vineyard in the 1760s. It is amazing to think that we are growing grapes on the same land 255 years later."***
> ***Bill and Nancy Wilson***

The easement is a partnership between the Aquidneck Island Land Trust, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management through the State Land Conservation Program, Agricultural Land Preservation Commission (ALPC), and NRCS's ACEP-ALE.

> ***"We are so pleased to have established this portion of our farm to be forever farmed and remain in open space. Open space and farming are critical to the Island's future and an important component of our mission at Greenvale."***
> ***Bill and Nancy Wilson***