



United States Department of Agriculture



Ensuring the Future of Agriculture



Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Agricultural Land Easements



Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

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Keeping Working Lands Working

Impacts of Farm Bill Program on Agricultural Lands

Expanding development and population pressures pose a threat to keeping farmland in agricultural production.

To address this threat, NRCS provides financial assistance through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to eligible partners toward the purchase of Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) that protect working croplands and grasslands.

Eligible partners include American Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland, rangeland or grassland protection programs.

These agricultural land easements protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses and conserving vital grazing land, including rangeland, pasture and shrub land.

Easements also help keep lands in family hands while providing an enhanced opportunity to keep productive land available for entry into farming through increased availability of affordable land for young, beginning, veteran and under-represented farmers.

Producers and partners protected more than 1.1 million acres of farmland and 340,000 acres of grassland through ACEP's predecessor programs – Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and Grassland Reserve Program.

Since the transition to ACEP in the 2014 Farm Bill, NRCS has worked with hundreds of landowners and partners to support the preservation of almost 500,000 acres through agricultural easements.



Lands protected by conservation easements provide additional public benefits, including environmental quality, historic preservation, wildlife habitat and protection of open space.

Beyond the farm gate, easements contribute to a more diverse agricultural landscape and more resilient rural economies. Easements also open new economic opportunities to those farmers, ranchers and rural communities who recognize and take advantage of birding, hunting and other recreational activities that people enjoy on their weekend trips and vacations to the countryside.

Agricultural Land Easements



Protecting Natural Resources

Conservation easements protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses. Just as important, these easements combined with the adoption of improved management techniques and additional conservation activities through an Agricultural Land Easement plan can:

- Curb carbon losses and possibly increase carbon sequestration, especially on highly erodible cropland
- Reduce soil erosion
- Improve soil quality, thus contributing to high water infiltration rates and less runoff
- Increase plant and animal diversity
- Improve water quality

Conservation Easements in Action

NRCS provides assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural uses and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in production.

Easements Combat Threats of Subdivision Development and Sustain Agriculture Forever

In a county without a single traffic light, the threat of development is real. Wallowa County, nestled in the majestic Wallowa Mountains in northeastern Oregon, is home to about 7,000 year-round residents. But with a bustling tourism economy, the county receives over 700,000 visitors per year.

Many farmers and ranchers, especially those with a view, can earn more capital by sub-dividing their property and selling it for housing development, rather than keeping it in agricultural production.

Local farmers like Woody and Megan Wolfe are determined to take a stand and protect their way of life. Woody and Megan are protecting hundreds of acres of their family's farmland forever through agricultural conservation easements. By working with the local Wallowa Land Trust, they secured two easements on 463 acres of prime farmland to ensure the property stays in agriculture for generations to come, while also protecting valuable fish and wildlife habitat.

One of the easements was completed in 2017 for 266 acres, in partnership with NRCS through ACEP-ALE, a Farm Bill program that pays up to half of the appraised easement value. The remaining value for the easement is paid by the land trust, partner or landowner.

In this case, the Wallowa Land Trust secured matching dollars through the Bergstrom Foundation, the Penstemon Fund and the Nez Perce Tribe.

The Wolfe Farm has quite the legacy in Wallowa County. It's a 555-acre century farm, and has been in the family since 1897. The Wolfes acquired additional neighboring acres over the years and currently farm more than 2,000 acres.

Woody believes that permanent conservation easements are a valuable tool to protect the rural way of life in his community and to leave a lasting legacy for future generations. "There's very few great places left," Woody says.

Through the NRCS ACEP-ALE program, the Wolfes have a management plan to use no-till farming practices. No-till causes less disturbance in the soil, resulting in higher organic matter, better water infiltration and less erosion.

They also manage healthy streamside habitats for fish and wildlife. The property is teeming with life. Sounds of crickets, woodpeckers, song birds and frogs abound as the Lostine and Wallowa rivers flow through healthy meadows.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program



"It's worth it to me if I can protect this land forever from subdivision and population pressures, and it stays in agriculture," Woody says.

Conservation Easement Successes

300 Year Old Family Farm Preserved

It was 1735 when John and Elizabeth Farnham took up residence on 138 acres of farmland in scenic Morris, Connecticut. As they tended the fields and raised a family, they most likely didn't imagine what life would be like for their descendants nearly 300 years later.

Fast forward to 2017. It was a perfect summer day, and the stage was set for celebration! And after all the t's were crossed and the i's dotted, Anne Howson Fellows, an 8th generation descendant of John and Elizabeth Farnham, emerged from the house in a joyful skip. It was official. Through a conservation easement, Farnham Farm will be forever protected from development – no purple condominiums welcome here!

"This farm has been in the same family since 1735," said Thomas Morgart, NRCS State Conservationist. "The easement permanently prevents it from being developed, which is one more step in ensuring farming and agriculture remain a growing enterprise in Connecticut."



Siblings - Cathy Balkun (far left), Anne Howson Fellows (front row in pink) and Peter Howson (3rd from right) - surrounded by family at their conservation easement celebration.

Key Sage Grouse Habitat Protected in Colorado

A conservation easement on the Yust Ranch in northwestern Colorado represents not only the preservation of a five-generation ranching entity, it also illustrates the vitality of partnerships that expand federal programs and initiatives aimed at protecting wildlife habitat, particularly for species of concern.

The Yust family has been on the ranch since 1884, and the family partnered with NRCS and Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust to enroll 955 acres of land into a conservation easement.

The property encompasses prime sagebrush-steppe, which is habitat for the greater sage-grouse. The Yust family is part of a range-wide collaborative effort to voluntarily aid the sage grouse and the sagebrush landscape. More than 1,500 ranchers in 11 Western states have enhanced more than 5.6 million acres of habitat for sage grouse, enabling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine in 2015 that protections under the Endangered Species Act were not needed for the species.



The Yust ranch harbors prime sage grouse habitat, important for trout, recreation and other wildlife. Photo courtesy of Deborah Richie with SGI.

Conservation Easement Protects a Vital Stock Trail in Wyoming

Cattlemen, woolgrowers, anglers, hikers and hunters will continue to enjoy Beartrap Meadows in the Big Horns of Wyoming thanks to a conservation easement that will forever protect a stock trail used by many ranchers.

Located high in the southern Big Horn Mountains near the headwaters of Beartrap Creek, ranchers in the region rely on the area as a stopover for rest for their cattle and sheep while driving them to summer grazing pastures. More than 20,000 head of livestock travel the trail annually to take advantage of the area's plentiful water and forage.

Through this easement, the Pheasant family will preserve the property in its current and historic

use as a stock trail. "Without it, moving livestock between these different drives and pastures would be very difficult if not impossible," said Dale Graves, president of the Johnston County Cattlemen.

Beartrap Meadows was first settled by Pheasant's grandfather in the early 1900s. Five generations of the Pheasant family have been involved in the sheep-ranching operation, with the sixth generation preparing to carry on the business.

"This land plays such a central role in so many peoples' lives," Pheasant said. "The conservation easement is not just for me or my family. It's for everyone to enjoy."



The area also provides breeding, nesting and brood-rearing habitat for sandhill cranes, Canada geese, mallards and other waterfowl. Plus, the area is home to red-tailed hawk, great horned owl and bald eagle, which can often be seen there. Photo by Matt Wells, Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust.



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