



Land Trusts and Wildlife Conservation

Federal funding opportunities for land trusts to conserve wildlife habitat



With two-thirds of land in the Lower 48 under private ownership, many species of conservation concern, including federally protected species, depend on these woodlands, grasslands, wetlands, marshlands, rangelands, and croplands. Land trusts can serve an important role in protecting and recovering wildlife on private lands nationwide.

What is a land trust?

A land trust is a nonprofit organization that acquires or stewards land or segregable rights (e.g., easements) in land or water for specified purposes, including environmental conservation. Land trusts work cooperatively with landowners to complete property transactions, purchase property interests, accept donations of those interests, and ensure that acquired land, rights, and easements are properly managed.

How can land trusts benefit wildlife?

With 56 million acres currently protected by land trusts, successfully addressing our planet's biodiversity and climate crises depends on the work of land trusts. Land trusts can conserve wildlife through habitat protection and restoration, active management for key species, and strategic and coordinated investment across landscapes or rare, unique, or exceptional habitats. Land trusts can also help attract and secure resources for wildlife conservation from other partners. The Land Trust Alliance has advanced a goal to protect 10 million acres annually by 2030, which would help meet our nation's "30x30" goal to conserve 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030.

Funding for land trusts to conserve wildlife

Federal and other programs are available to land trusts to offset the costs associated with conserving species through habitat acquisition, conservation easements, conservation partnerships, and application of conservation practices.

Habitat acquisition. A land trust can conserve land through purchase or donation, in which the landowner sells or grants all rights, title, and interest in the property to the land trust. The land trust maintains perpetual stewardship and management responsibility for the land.

- **Community Forests Program (CFP)**

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/program>

The U.S. Forest Service CFP provides financial assistance to local and tribal governments and qualified nonprofit entities to acquire and conserve forests for habitat protection and other purposes.

- **Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (CESCF)**

<https://www.fws.gov/endangered/grants/how-to-apply.html>

The USFWS CESCF provides funding to states and U.S. territories (as authorized under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act [ESA]) for conservation of habitat and federally listed species on non-federal lands. The Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and Recovery Land Acquisition (RLA) grants under CESCF are funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) with state, local, and private contributions. Both programs fund the acquisition of habitat from willing sellers. HCP grants support habitat protection

while allowing development to proceed in other areas. RLA grants fund habitat acquisition in support of approved species recovery plans.

- **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)**

<https://www.doi.gov/lwcf>

LWCF funds conservation of privately owned inholdings within federal public lands managed by the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, USFWS, and Forest Service. These agencies and their partners, such as land trusts, work together to identify opportunities for the acquisition of property or conservation easements.

- **National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grants Program (NCWCG)**

<https://www.fws.gov/coastal/CoastalGrants>

The USFWS NCWCG program funds acquisition and restoration of coastal wetland ecosystems and associated uplands in coastal and Great Lakes states and U.S. territories.

- **Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA) grant program**

<https://www.fws.gov/birds/grants/neotropical-migratory-bird-conservation-act/how-to-apply.php>

The USFWS NMBCA grant program funds projects in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada that benefit neotropical birds, such as management and protection of habitat.

- **North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant program**

<https://www.fws.gov/birds/grants/north-american-wetland-conservation-act/how-to-apply-for-a-nawca-grant.php>

The USFWS NAWCA grant program funds projects to acquire, restore, or enhance habitat for the benefit of migratory birds associated with wetlands.

Conservation easements. A conservation easement is a private, voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust, government agency, or other entity that limits uses of land in order to protect, manage, and/or restore its conservation values. Landowners retain property rights on the land, including the right to own and use the land, sell it, and transfer it to their heirs. Easement holders are responsible for ensuring that the terms of the easement are upheld. Conservation easements can allow for continued land use such as agriculture while also providing for wildlife needs.

- **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/acep/>

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) ACEP provides matching funds that land trusts can use to purchase conservation easements on agricultural lands, grasslands, and wetlands at risk of development.

- **Forest Legacy Program (FLP)**

<https://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/private-land/forest-legacy/program>

The Forest Service FLP is funded by LWCF to permanently protect private working forests that are threatened by development through state acquisition or conservation easements from willing landowners. FLP projects typically restrict development, require sustainable forestry practices, and protect public values like habitat.

- **Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/easements/forests/>

The Forest Service HFRP funds the protection and restoration of private forest lands to benefit at-risk species, improve biodiversity, or enhance carbon sequestration through habitat restoration and permanent or 30-year conservation easements.

- **Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) and Sentinel Landscapes**

https://www.repi.mil/Portals/44/Documents/Primers/Primer_LandTrusts.pdf

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) REPI provides funds to enter into agreements with partners such as land trusts to acquire property or property interests such as conservation easements from willing sellers that preserve critical buffers and habitat areas near military installations. Sentinel Landscapes is a program to align DOD priorities with conservation in partnership with the U.S. Department of Interior, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and conservation organizations.

Conservation partnerships. Federal and state programs are available to leverage resources through partnerships for wildlife conservation.

- **Coastal Program (CP)**

<https://www.fws.gov/coastal/about.html>

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) CP provides financial assistance for habitat protection and restoration projects on public and privately-owned land and technical assistance for habitat conservation design.

- **Land Trust Bird Conservation Collaboratives**

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/landtrust/category/grant-directory/>

These collaboratives, hosted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and involving local bird conservation organizations, encourage partnerships among land trusts and others to focus conservation efforts on high priority bird species. Working in these collaboratives, land trusts can more effectively secure resources to contribute to bird conservation.

- **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFWP)**

<https://www.fws.gov/partners>

The USFWS PFWP provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners interested in improving habitat for federal trust species, including migratory birds, and endangered, threatened, and at-risk species, on their land. These ten-year contracts allow landowners to continue to own and manage their land to serve their needs while also improving conditions for wildlife. The PFWP has worked in partnership with land trusts all over the country to strategically conserve habitat in geographical areas of mutual importance. Examples of partnerships can include enrolling existing easements into the PFWP; the PFWP implementing a project on land owned by a land trust; and, landowners who are participating in the PFWP work with land trusts to put their land under an easement if they become interested in permanently protecting their land.

- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/rcpp/>

The NRCS RCPP brings together partners such as land trusts, state and local agencies, tribal governments, conservation organizations, conservation districts, academic institutions, and private landowners to collaborate on locally led conservation strategies. These include activities that improve water, soil, wildlife habitat, or other natural resources, such as easement acquisitions held by NRCS or entities such as land trusts.

- **State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (STWG) Program**

<https://wsfrprograms.fws.gov/Subpages/GrantPrograms/SWG/SWG.htm>

The USFWS STWG program funds states, U.S. territories, and tribes that work with partners like land trusts to implement projects identified in State Wildlife Action Plans. Land trusts can partner with state fish and wildlife agencies to develop and implement these grants.

- **Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/?cid=stelprdb1046975>

WLFW supports farmers, ranchers, and landowners to conserve “project” and “target” wildlife species on private lands. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to participants who voluntarily make improvements to their working lands, while USFWS provides participants with regulatory predictability regarding the ESA.

Conservation practices. Land trusts can help landowners apply for resources from Farm Bill working lands programs administered through NRCS to support “conservation practices” that benefit wildlife.

- **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig>

The NRCS CIG program funds innovative conservation approaches and technologies, such as the development of conservation and mitigation markets. For example, CIG has been used to help producers and landowners participate in carbon markets and make their lands more resilient to climate change.

- **Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/programs/financial/csp>

The NRCS CSP provides financial assistance to landowners to maintain and improve existing conservation activities across their entire agricultural operation, as well as undertake new conservation activities, such as developing wildlife habitat or planting cover crops to support conservation objectives.

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip>

The NRCS EQIP provides financial assistance to landowners to implement conservation actions on their land. Payments support 1-10 year contracts to implement conservation practices that can benefit wildlife, such as prescribed burning and stream habitat improvement.