



South Dakota Ag Land Trust

Newsletter

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SDALT Receives More Than \$22 Million in Grants

South Dakota Agricultural Land Trust (SDALT) has recently been awarded two separate grants totaling nearly \$18.5 million to protect vital grassland habitat in the Northern Great Plains while also strengthening working rangeland operations and communities. These are in addition to a \$4.2 million grant awarded a year ago to help conserve working lands in the Black Hills.

SDALT received nearly \$18.3 million from the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), as part of USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service investment in advancing partner-driven solutions to conservation on agricultural land. The RCPP grant will support the perpetual protection of 8,000 acres of working ranches around the periphery of the Black Hills with minimally restrictive conservation easements. The predominately native grasslands of these protected

properties will contribute tangible deliverables to NRCS climate-smart mitigation goals related to soil carbon sequestration while retaining these ranches as working lands.

A separate grant of \$173,200 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), as part of their Northern Great Plains Program, will provide financial assistance for costs of easement transactions and further incentivize landowner easement and partner donations in South Dakota.

"We have found that interest in conservation easements in South Dakota is high, particularly in and around the Black Hills," said SDALT Executive Director Tony Leif. "Protecting working lands from residential and commercial development with easements is an essential tool for those landowners in the path of development who want to retain their productive agricultural operations into the future."

Our Mission



SDALT is an organization founded by South Dakota farmers and ranchers for South Dakota farmers and ranchers. We work with landowners to conserve South Dakota's agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations.



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Thoughts from Tony

By Tony Leif, SDALT Executive Director

It was but a few short years ago when a small group of South Dakota farmer/ranchers saw the need for an agricultural-based land trust in our state. They sought the assistance of agriculture and conservation organizations in securing funding to conduct a feasibility study of the concept and subsequently created the South Dakota Agricultural Land Trust in 2019. The timely foresight of these founding fathers of SDALT has put our Trust in a position to take advantage of funding currently available from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service under their climate-smart conservation easement programs.

The availability of funding from NRCS aligns with the need that exists in South Dakota for those farmers/ranchers living in areas of the state where low-density residential developments are infiltrating rural landscapes. Inflated land values from potential development creates a financial challenge for these landowners who want to transition their operations to their heirs or other young farmers/ranchers who have an interest in maintaining these agricultural operations beyond the current generation of producers.

The funding that SDALT has been able to secure for conservation easements is significant and will have a meaningful impact on agricultural families. It began a year ago with an allocation of \$4.2 million from NRCS through their Regional Conservation Partnership Program. This funding was designated to pay for easements on working ranches in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Most recently, SDALT received an additional allocation of \$18.3 million to secure minimally restrictive conservation easements on over 8,000 acres of working ranches around the periphery of the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The predominately native grasslands and forests of these to-be-protected properties both in and around the Black Hills will contribute tangible deliverables to NRCS climate-smart mitigation goals related to soil carbon sequestration while retaining these ranches as working lands. Retention of conserved properties in private ownership under minimally restrictive easements will sustain the regional economic vitality in production agriculture and ultimately, place a footing on the wholesome social fabric of South Dakota's agricultural heritage.

The individual success stories that will stem from these easement transactions will be nothing less than compelling. There is a very real human side to conservation easements, and we look forward to sharing these stories upon completion of these family-enhancing ranch protection projects.



Please make plans to attend the South Dakota Grassland Summit, March 18-19, 2024, at Cedar Shores in Oacoma. This two-day event will delve into the current status of grasslands in South Dakota, with a focus on the grassland's role in our economy, ecosystem and communities. Come prepared to learn and discuss. Visit SDGrassInitiative.org/summit/ for details and to register.



Bezos Earth Fund, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation tour Oak Hills Ranch



From left: Emily Averna, Cristián Samper, Chris West, Johanna Meier Della Vecchia, Holly Bamford, Cristian Raby, Rosalie Aslesen, Mark Weber, Tony Leif

Members of the leadership teams for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Bezos Earth Fund had an opportunity to tour the Oak Hills Ranch near Spearfish in early October of 2023. SDALT accepted a donated conservation easement on the Oak Hills Ranch in March of 2022.

Managing Director of the Bezos Earth Fund, Cristián Samper, and program officer Emily Averna, as well as the foundation's chief conservation officer Holly Bamford and regional director Chris West, were among those participating in the tour hosted by ranch owner Johanna Meier Della Vecchia, ranch manager Mark Weber and SDALT Executive Director Tony Leif.

Bezos Earth Fund is emerging as a leading conservation advocate for climate and nature and is committed to supporting

conservation of grassland ecosystems. SDALT and its cooperating landowners have benefitted from the Earth Fund's financial contributions to support grants from the Foundation's Northern Great Plains Program. The successful slate of ranch tours throughout western South Dakota was hosted by the Foundation to help the Earth Fund leadership understand the importance of Great Plains grasslands and see first-hand the value of their investment in programs that support private ranch operations in this region.

Shortly following the South Dakota tour, Bezos Earth Fund announced a commitment of an additional \$13 million to bolster conservation funding for the next round of Northern Great Plains Program grants from NFWF. "The Bezos Earth Fund is thrilled to continue our partnership with NFWF and coalitions of local partners working to protect and restore these precious ecosystems," said Samper. "Not only are these ecosystems vital for the economic and cultural wellbeing of local communities, but they are also places that can have globally significant impact in terms of nature protection and carbon sequestration."



Your contribution makes it possible for SDALT to preserve working landscapes, protect water quality, and provide wildlife habitat throughout South Dakota. Donations may be made online at sdaglandtrust.org. You can also download and complete our contribution form and mail it to the SDALT office. If you sign up for Amazon Smile and select SDALT as your charity of choice, a percentage of your purchases will be donated to SDALT at no additional cost.

The South Dakota Agricultural Land Trust is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. The IRS considers a contribution to SDALT as a tax-deductible, charitable contribution.



Application Deadline: March 6, 2024

The Leopold Conservation Award is given annually to a private landowner to recognize extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation, inspire other landowners, and help the general public understand the vital role private landowners play in conservation success.

Nominations are being accepted until March 6, 2024, for this year's award. For further information, please see the award website: www.leopoldconservationaward.org

What Exactly is a Land Trust?

Forty years ago, the South Dakota Legislature enacted a law, found in SDCL 1-19B-56 through 1-19B-60, to govern conservation easements in our state. Under this law, landowners have the right to transfer specified development and land use rights to a qualified nonprofit organization (such as a land trust) or a government agency. The nonprofit or government agency accepts the rights specified in the easement; the landowner retains all other property rights and responsibilities.

The South Dakota Ag Land Trust (SDALT) is recognized under both state and federal law as a qualified nonprofit organization capable of accepting and holding conservation easements.

State law lists the purposes of a conservation easement to include retaining or protecting natural or open-space values of real property, assuring its availability for agricultural, forest, recreational, or open-space use, protecting natural resources, maintaining or enhancing air or water quality, or preserving the historical, architectural, archaeological, paleontological or cultural aspects of real property.

Conservation easements are tailored to the landowner's goals. In the case of SDALT, the easement transfers development rights to the trust; the landowner retains ownership of the property.

While some easements offer federal income tax or estate tax benefits, it is important to note that the landowner continues to pay property taxes on the land. South Dakota taxes agricultural land based on its productivity formula; a conservation easement does not affect taxable valuation.

SDALT does not actively pursue conservation easements. When an interested landowner contacts us, we encourage them to consult with their family, professional legal and tax advisors, financial advisors, and accountants to determine whether a conservation easement is appropriate for their long-term goals.

Conveying a conservation easement can take anywhere from several months to several years, depending on the complexity of the easement.

Our guiding principles focus on private land stewardship by farm and ranch families, conserving South Dakota's agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations.

You can find out more about SDALT and about how land trusts work on our website: sdaglandtrust.org.

Together we can help preserve South Dakota's working lands for future generations.

SDALT Founding Organizations:
SD Farm Bureau
SD Grassland Coalition
SD Cattlemen's Association
SD Association of Conservation Districts

Partnership of Rangeland Trusts (PORT)

SDALT is a member of the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts (PORT), an alliance of agricultural-focused conservation organizations dedicated to preserving America's working farms and ranches and conserving productive agricultural lands.

Differentiating PORT members from other conservation organizations is the close affiliations that PORT members have with their state livestock associations and other agriculture industry groups.

PORT works to conserve un-fragmented agricultural landscapes and economically viable farms and ranches through voluntary, incentive-based methods. To support this conservation approach, PORT members agree to adhere to the following operating principles:

- Pursuit of conservation mechanisms that support the long-term protection of agricultural land, but have minimal impact on the landowner's day-to-day management decisions.
- Rejection of conservation efforts that result in a net long-term increase in public lands or employ any type of condemnation action.
- Recognition of the role of sustainable land uses as a means of maintaining open and productive landscapes.
- Rejection of the acquisition of conservation easements with the intent to transfer to governmental ownership.
- Respect the rights of individual landowners to make decisions regarding public access issues on private lands.
- In principal and except under special circumstances, avoid long term fee title ownership as a means of land conservation.
- Acceptance of conservation easements on properties which represent a significant positive contribution to agriculture by themselves, as part of a working landscape, or to the surrounding agricultural community.

You can find out more about PORT at <https://rangelandtrusts.org>.

