

Ohio News Watch

Land trusts gain support

By TIM WHITE

DESPITE the success of the Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program, farmland in Ohio has continued to disappear at an alarming rate. The 2007 USDA census indicates Ohio lost 627,000 acres from 2002 to 2007, a dramatic increase from the prior decade.

Perhaps in response, the interest in land trusts around the state has flourished during this time. Land trusts hold easements on land that is donated or purchased to limit development and protect the property's conservation value in accordance with Internal Revenue Service regulations. Landowners can get a tax deduction for a charitable donation, and full-time farmers can get up to 100% adjusted gross annual income tax savings.

The Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at Ohio State University reports 22 land trusts in the state include farmland as part of the focus.

"There has been an explosion in land trusts in the state," says Jill Clark, center director. "And they are doing so much more than just easements."

When people think of land trusts and easements, they usually think of the coasts because those states have had a couple of decades of experience, Clark says. "Many have funding to buy development rights that we will probably never have here." However, Ohio has benefited by learning from those states, she says. "Ohio land trusts are now leading the way by taking a more holistic approach. It's not just about preserving land, it is about preserving farming."

Board members of the Fairfield Land Preservation Association would agree.



TABLE TALK: Board members of the Fairfield Land Preservation Association meet at the local soil and water conservation district office. They are: (from left) John Stitzlein, Doug Cronin, Jeff Johnson, Larry Neeley, Jonathan Ferbrache, Roger Wolf, Joe Steiger and Randy Black.

Key Points

- There are 22 trusts focused on farmland in Ohio.
- Easements are the main thrust of trusts, but they also educate.
- Trusts can protect land for more than just ag use.

Although they have written only one easement — to Tom Dixon — in their two years doing business, they are reaching out to the community in other ways. One of their missions is to supply local businesses as well as landowners with information about farming.

A recent meeting organized in conjunction with the chamber of commerce drew business leaders and local politicians for a face-to-face discussion about agriculture. Partnering with the community to increase awareness is one of the group's main missions. The group is supported by the Fairfield County Regional Planning Commission and the Fairfield Soil and Water Conservation District, who see the need for community-based

organization that is not part of local government.

"People don't know that Ohio and Texas tied for the most prime cropland converted to other uses from 1982 to 1997," reports Roger Wolf, a board member and farmer from Millersport. "We rank ninth in the amount of prime soil we have, so we really cannot afford to lose any more. We need to get that message across."

Larry Neeley, another board member, used the Licking Land Trust, which serves the area just north of his family farm, for his 127-acre easement before the FLPA was formed. "Landowners need to know that if you don't make plans to pre-

serve your land, someone else may be planning to do something else with it — whether you are willing or not. Local leaders need to be told how valuable agriculture is economically to the community."

Going through a local organization provides landowners with greater flexibility in designing an easement, says Jonathan Ferbrache, who advises the board through the Fairfield SWCD.

"Farmers want to leave a legacy to future generations," says Jeff Johnson, chairman of FLPA. "They have nurtured their land for many years, and they want to make sure it continues to be productive."

Lessons learned in 20 years

WHILE the Fairfield Land Preservation Association is one of the state's newest land trusts, the Tecumseh Land Trust will celebrate its 20th anniversary this year. The TLT protects 17,600 acres. That is 10 times the amount of land enrolled in the organization eight years ago, says Krista Magaw, executive director.

"There is such a strong sense of the importance of conservation right now," says Magaw, who has worked for the group since 2001. "It's a wonderful time to be aboard."

Magaw says the group plans to celebrate by reaching out to as many people as possible. A series of lectures and walking tours is in the works, focused on stories of people and the land.

The TLT was the first land trust in the state to be accredited by the Land Trust Alliance last year. Of the nation's 1,800 trusts, only 92 have gone through the rigorous accreditation process. While the move was demanding, Magaw felt it was necessary to provide the group with the greatest possible credibility. The standards ensure the organization is doing due diligence, and monitoring and reporting in a responsible manner.

Magaw sees a bright future for land trusts. "I see more awareness in high school students and their teachers," she says. "Young people are cognizant of the value of our natural resources, and they know now is the time to act to protect them."

Preservation economics

BRIAN Williams, farmland policy consultant for the Mid Ohio Regional Planning Commission, is on a mission to provide Ohioans with information about getting the most from farmland. In the next six months he plans to conduct about 20 workshops aimed at farmers, agricultural landowners, township trustees, county commissioners, planning commissions, legislators and others interested in farmland.

Owners of farmland will receive information about ways to conserve and protect their land for agriculture, including state and federal programs, private land trusts, and new strategies to make their farms more profitable.

Local public officials will learn about the importance of agriculture to local economies and how they might make plans to build on that economic potential. They also will receive information about ag's value in helping to keep county revenues in line with costs.

Attendees will learn what tools and programs are available around the state — such as agricultural easement purchase and donation programs, agricultural security areas, and agricultural zoning — and how those tools have been used elsewhere in Ohio.

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Find a land trust near you

INTEREST in farmland preservation has been a motivating factor in the formation of new land trusts in Ohio in the last decade. Over the past few years, the pace of development of farmland protection-oriented land trusts has increased, says Jill Clark, director of the Ohio Center for Farmland Policy Innovation. A list of Ohio's 22 farmland protection-oriented land trusts is available online. For information about which counties are served by each of these land trusts, go to cffpi.osu.edu/landtrust.htm for an interactive map.