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Big Gains in Voluntary Land Conservation Despite Recession

First National Census of Land Trusts in Five Years Reports Land Trusts Conserve 10 Million U.S. Acres,
Over a Quarter of a Million Acres Conserved in Wisconsin

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Madison, WI – The first national census of land trusts in five years found 10 million new acres conserved nationwide since 2005. The story was picked up by USA Today on Wednesday.

The National Land Trust Census, released by the Land Trust Alliance, shows that voluntarily protected land increased 27 percent between 2005 and 2010. The census is online at www.lta.org/census.

A total of 47 million acres—an area over twice the size of all the national parks in the contiguous United States—are now protected by land trusts. Land trusts are nonprofit organizations that work in partnership with landowners and communities to permanently conserve land. Wisconsin land protected by land trusts exceeds 280,000 acres. There are now more than 50 land trusts operating in Wisconsin.

“Wisconsinites value their land, and land trusts are conserving the best of the best at the community level,” said Michael Strigel, executive director of Gathering Waters Conservancy, the state association of Wisconsin’s land trusts. “Here in Wisconsin, we are investing in our future with land trusts that ensure clean water, prime farmland, wildlife habitat, and places to connect with nature for our children and for generations to come.”

Since 2005, Wisconsin land trusts have increased the number of statewide protected acres by 261 percent, a noteworthy figure considering that during the same time period the number of land trusts has not grown. Gathering Waters Conservancy strengthens these organizations through direct technical assistance, public policy advocacy and outreach. Wisconsin’s land trusts are supported by more than 35,000 members and 5,000 volunteers.

In Wisconsin, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program has contributed to the significant increase in land protection. This innovative state program provides \$60 million annually in funding for land purchases for outdoor recreation, protection of critical natural areas, wildlife habitat and water quality. Wisconsin land trusts are now eligible for \$12 million annually in Stewardship Program matching grants. Since land trusts match the state's investment with federal, local, and private funds, these grants are stretching state dollars in a challenging economic climate.

Other findings of the new National Land Trust Census include:

- Land trusts saw a **70 percent increase in volunteers** from the previous 5-year period.
- Since 2005, there are **19 percent more paid employees and contractors at land trusts**.
- **Operating budgets for land trusts are up 36 percent since 2005**. State and local trusts **nearly tripled operating endowments** in five years ensuring that land trust-protected land stays protected.
- **The preservation of family farms and ranchlands is now a priority for 61 percent of trusts**, up from 21 percent that listed farmland as the top priority in 2005.
- **Urban parks, gardens or open spaces is now a priority for 27 percent of trusts**, a threefold increase over respondents in 2005.

Gathering Waters Conservancy is the state association for Wisconsin's land trust community. Established in 1994, Gathering Waters Conservancy's mission is to help land trusts, landowners, and communities protect the places that make Wisconsin special. Unlike any other organization, we accomplish our mission by promoting private, voluntary conservation action and strengthening Wisconsin's 50 land trusts.

The Land Trust Alliance is a national conservation organization that works to save the places people love. We increase the pace of conservation, so more land and natural resources get protected. We enhance the quality of conservation, so the most important lands get protected using the best practices in the business. And we ensure the permanence of conservation by creating the laws and resources needed to defend protected land over time. The Land Trust Alliance is based in Washington, D.C.

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