

Land Trust Alliance Federal Policy Updates

Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition Conservation Partners Meeting
Friday, June 14

Congress

Last month, House Speaker Mike Johnson announced an ambitious timeline to pass all 12 appropriations bills for fiscal year 2025. Determined to complete the task before members of Congress head home for August recess, the appropriations process is now well underway. The first bill expected to be voted on is the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs legislation – one of the less controversial. Additional bills that are expected to be released in coming weeks include Defense, Homeland Security, Financial Services-General Government and State-Foreign Operations. Across the board cuts to nondefense funding is expected including a reduction of funding for Interior, EPA and related agencies from \$41 billion to \$36.94 billion. Funding for Agriculture is expected to be cut by \$355 million than currently enacted. In addition, we expect to see deep cuts across the board for funding related to climate change as well as a lot of bad policy riders. The Alliance plans to continue to monitor the appropriations process and keep members updated about funding for key agencies and programs for our community.

Farm Bill

On May 23, House Agriculture Committee Chair GT Thompson (R-Pa.) marked up H.R. 8464, the Farm, Food and National Security Act of 2024 in committee. The bill, which includes the vast majority of the Land Trust Alliance's recommendations, passed out of committee on a 33-21 bipartisan vote.

The House bill text makes important changes to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. It would:

- Increase annual funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program from the current funding level of \$450 million to \$600 million in FY25 and growing to \$700 million in FY29.
- Increase the federal share to 65% for most transactions.
- Increase the federal share to 90% for socially disadvantaged landowners.
- Provide flexibility for minor easement modifications.
- Exempt ACEP from the Adjusted Gross Income limitation.
- Unfortunately, it strikes all references to Buy-Protect-Sell transactions under ACEP.

In addition, the bill would:

- Establish the Forest Conservation Easement Program with mandatory annual funding starting at \$25 million in FY25 that would grow to \$65 million in FY29.
- Allow up to 10% of RCPP project agreements to cover eligible partner administrative costs.
- Recognize certified entities for RCPP easements.

One additional note: The bill would reinvest the remaining Inflation Reduction Act funds, about \$14 billion, into the conservation title without the climate sideboards. Following the House vote, Chair Thompson said he does not anticipate bringing the bill to the House floor until September to provide time for negotiations.

Over in the Senate, the Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), released a detailed summary of a Senate bill, the Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act, earlier this month. The summary also reflected most of the Alliance Farm Bill recommendations including clarifications to make

Buy-Protect-Sell work as intended; however, it did not include FCEP. Agriculture Committee Ranking Member, John Boozman (R-AR) is expected to release his “framework” sometime in the next week or so.

It is possible for Congress to pass a Farm Bill this year and there are many reasons why doing so makes sense, including the fact that a delay beyond this year will mean less IRA funding to reallocate into baseline funding. As such, we need to be sure members of Congress hear from our community.

Call to Action: : If you have not done so already, please help the Alliance in delivering a cohesive message to Congress about the importance of passing the Farm Bill this year. Upon determining [who represents you in Congress](#), [email their staff](#) and urge their office to support the Alliance’s Farm Bill recommendations and to pass the Farm Bill this year. At same time, please consider 1) urging your elected officials to include supporting the Forest Conservation Easement Program Act with mandatory funding; 2) share stories with them about the benefits of perpetual easements for their district/state and 3) invite the member of Congress to visit a conserve land trust property this summer. Once you have completed this request, please email policy@lta.org.

Current Federal Funding Opportunities

As a reminder, the Alliance has launched a site dedicated to providing a listing of all current federal funding opportunities. One of the newest funding opportunities added was the announcement by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) regarding proposals for the 2024 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). NRCS announced its highest ever funding for RCPP with \$1.5 billion available during the current sign-up period which ends July 2nd.

To access the website and obtain additional information about the RCPP opportunity and other funding opportunities, [click here](#).

Expanded Partnership with Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Alliance continues to build out services as part of its expanded partnership agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. As previously noted, we welcomed Justin Merrifield to our team as senior project manager for the NRCS Conservation Acquisitions team in January; and in March, Jeremy Lougee, our new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Program Manager came onboard.

Justin’s NRCS Conservation Acquisitions Team will be responsible for rolling out assistance for land trusts on NRCS easements. In the next month, three additional staff members will join the team and assist the Alliance in beginning to support land trusts interested in protecting farms and ranches using ACEP-ALE and RCPP. For land trust staff that are interested in these programs but have had concerns about staff capacity, knowledge and understanding or the bureaucratic lift that can come with the programs, the Conservation Acquisition Team will be able to offer one-on-one support, knowledge sharing, and document assistance to get these critical federal dollars on the ground to protect our nation’s food and fiber system. The team will roll out the services they can offer by hosting a webinar on June 24. Registration is currently open and free of charge thanks to our NRCS partnership. Reach out to Justin at jmerrifield@lta.org for more information.

In the RCPP Program Manager role, Jeremy serves as a joint resource for land trusts and NRCS personnel to strengthen participation in RCPP, deliver training opportunities, and coordinate the development of online resources to better align land trust expectations and NRCS delivery of the program. Since launching, we have already seen significant growth in land trust interest and utilization of these

resources, and we expect further engagement as the [newly announced \\$1.5 billion in USDA funding](#) finds its way to partners. Jeremy also recently hosted a webinar with NRCS on June 12 focused on writing a successful RCPP-proposal. The webinar is free and recording will be available on the Alliance Resource Center online. Jeremy is also working closely with the Alliance's Community-Centered Conservation Department to engage historically underrepresented landowners and land trusts in RCPP, ensuring it benefits all people, particularly those who have been harmed or excluded by racism and other forms of oppression. For inquiries about the Alliance RCPP services, reach out to Jeremy at jlougee@lta.org.

This summer the Alliance and NRCS are hosting the third joint in-person summit to strengthen participation in ACEP-ALE and RCPP. This facilitated invite-only event brings together NRCS national team members and land trusts to have solution-focused discussion on ways to streamline the programs and get more conservation dollars out on the ground. The summit is curated for land trusts active in both programs. Registration is open now. Reach out to Nikki Nesbary at nesbary@lta.org for more information.