

BY Kirsten Ferguson

# *Leading* **THROUGH ADVOCACY**

Land trust board members can be powerful allies for change



KIMBERLY SEESE



Top: **Darrell Wood**  
Bottom: **Michael Delbar**

## **Cowboys on Capitol Hill**

The nation's Capitol is filled with men and women in staid business suits. So a few ranchers walking the halls in Stetson hats and sharp-toed cowboy boots can make quite an impression. At least that's been the experience of board members at the California Rangeland Trust when they've visited the Capitol to advocate on behalf of conservation issues.

Founded by a group of cattlemen and women to conserve Golden State ranchland, the organization's board is made up entirely of working ranchers. The trust's board members have visited the California State Capitol in Sacramento and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on multiple occasions to meet with legislators and staff on a range of issues—from making conservation programs more landowner-friendly to extending the enhanced tax incentive for conservation easement donations.

"Legislators want to see examples of how conservation works, and ranchers like myself have all kinds of real-life examples we can give them," says Darrell Wood, an emeritus board member of the California Rangeland Trust who also serves on the Land Trust Alliance's board of directors. A sixth-generation California cattleman, Wood and his children operate Leavitt Lake Ranches on approximately 50,000+ acres of owned and leased ground. "Our ranchers are so important for clear air, clean water and other environmental benefits. I think nobody delivers that message better than we do ourselves," he says.

Partnerships—including membership in the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition, a diverse group of environmental, agricultural and conservation allies—have been a powerful tool to boost the California Rangeland Trust's advocacy efforts, says Chief Operating Officer Michael Delbar.

"When we walk into a congressperson's office with our board members who have their [Western] hats on, and we've got representatives from Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy and the California Cattlemen's Association with us, the Congress member looks across the table and says, 'Wait a minute. You're all here on the same page about an issue? Sign me up,'" says Delbar.

# FIVE TIPS

## for Board Member Advocacy

**1** *Face-to-face meetings, either in your home district or in D.C., are the best way to convey how legislation impacts your land trust's work as well as the conservation goals of landowners you work with.* "As a board member, you have intimate knowledge of how best your organization does its work for conservation," says Darrell Wood of the California Rangeland Trust. "Nobody tells that story better than you do. You can send them all the written material in the world, but a face-to-face visit can't be beat."

**2** *It's helpful to have a land trust staff member or someone familiar with lobbying attend the first visit.* "It's so important to have someone with experience show you the template for how these visits should go," says Wood. "You want to make sure you get to the point that you want to make." In Wisconsin, Gathering Waters Conservancy, a statewide service center, played an important role in initiating and arranging the visits.

**3** *While it's good to have land trust staff members attend, don't underestimate the value of visits from board members and landowners.* "These folks want to see somebody who's actually on the land," says Wood. In addition, as Jeff Harris of Tall Pines Conservancy found, the diverse backgrounds of board members can be a bonus when making your case. Harris' business experience, for instance, helped him make a stronger economic argument for land conservation.

**4** *Plan in advance which members of your team will lead the discussion and what they will say.* "We discussed at a number of board meetings our advocacy strategy and who would be the most appropriate people to attend the meetings," says Harris. "We decided ahead of time how we would do the presentation. I led the conversation and a landowner chimed in with examples or, in many instances, took over the lead, which worked well."

**5** *Make the meeting part of a larger strategy.* Plan other opportunities to engage your representatives and their staffs, such as field visits. And keep in touch. "It's so important to follow up with the meeting, for instance, if the legislator requests more information or a field visit," says Wood. "If you don't do that, you lose credibility. Also send a note or email that summarizes the visit and says thank you." Find other methods to publicize the legislator's support—such as traditional or social media, the website or newsletter or a press release—and make sure the legislator's office is aware of your endeavors.



Jeff Harris with Tall Pines Conservancy

Delbar spent 12 years as a supervisor in Mendocino County, California, which reinforced his belief in the importance of land trusts and their boards getting involved in lobbying for issues they care about.

"When you see the benefit of advocacy and how well it works, it really becomes something you continue to focus on. The relationships you form are invaluable," Delbar says, explaining that by building relationships with public officials, land trusts can become valued resources. "It's pretty cool to get a phone call from a Congress member asking for your thoughts on an issue."

If land trust board members take the time to engage and communicate with their legislators, it helps the whole movement of conservation, Delbar believes. "Let them know how issues affect you," he advises. "If [legislators] don't hear from the small land trusts, the big land trusts and everyone in between, they're not

## Resources for Board Members

Do you have questions about lobbying laws? How to start advocating? How to host a field visit? The Land Trust Alliance has answers at [www.lta.org/policy/advocacy-tips](http://www.lta.org/policy/advocacy-tips).

The Alliance also presents online trainings on advocacy strategy and skills: [www.lta.org/policy/advocacy-tips/webinars](http://www.lta.org/policy/advocacy-tips/webinars).

Sign up for the monthly *Advocates* email about conservation policy: [www.lta.org/policy/advocates/sign-up](http://www.lta.org/policy/advocates/sign-up).

Read more stories about your board peers in the land trust community in *Field Guide*, the publication tailored for land trust board members. Sign up to receive it at [www.lta.org/boardservices](http://www.lta.org/boardservices).

going to pay attention [to land trust issues]. It's amazing that little voices can be just as powerful as some of the louder ones."

### A Stronger Sense of Purpose

In Wisconsin, land trusts and farm advocates achieved a crucial victory several years ago after Governor Scott Walker—on a mission to slash the state's \$3.6 million deficit—cut the state's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement Program entirely from the budget. Jeff Harris, then a board member and now an advisory board member for Tall Pines Conservancy, knew how important the program was to the land trust's mission to save farmland and open space in Wisconsin's northwestern Waukesha County—a beautiful area west of Milwaukee filled with lakes and farms.

Harris and fellow board members from Tall Pines Conservancy traveled to the state's capital of Madison to make the case for the importance of protecting farmland, a critical economic driver in Wisconsin. "Over the years I've gotten to visit

a lot of farmers and their families," says Harris. "I wanted to make sure we had a program to protect their land base and make sure we have enough farmland to keep farmers in business."

Partnering with Gathering Waters Conservancy—an umbrella group for Wisconsin land trusts—Harris, other Tall Pines Conservancy board members and local farmers attended meetings with the governor's office and state legislators. "We went in to try to preserve the farmland protection funding, and we were [ultimately] successful," says Harris. "The face-to-face meetings were really effective. I thought they were really listening to us and asked a lot of good questions."

Harris' experience as both a business investor in his career and as a land trust board member helped him make the convincing argument that farms are businesses that generate a lot of revenue for the state. "We all had pretty hefty résumés related to what we were talking about," he says of the land trust board members and farmers

who attended the legislative visits. "I think they viewed us credibly. In order to advocate, you have to have people who absolutely know what they are talking about."

The collective efforts of Wisconsin's land trust community achieved an important outcome, with half of the funding for the state's farmland protection program eventually reinstated. For Tall Pines Conservancy—which was relatively new to advocacy work—the legislative visits also had a positive impact on the organization itself, says Harris. The preparation for the policy meetings gave board members greater confidence when speaking with funders and farmers.

"You know how you don't really understand something until you do it? Now when we're talking to donors and landowners we feel so much more confident. [The advocacy] gave the organization a stronger sense of purpose, especially when it comes to fundraising activities. You can't overestimate the importance of that." 

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