



Why Advocacy Matters

Because shaping federal policy
is how we save local places

BY ROSE JENKINS

Stories Drive Policy

On a chilly morning, in a blooming peach orchard on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, Colorado Senator Michael Bennet came out to talk with a farm family—Roblee and Clare Talbott and their son and daughter, Donovan and Megan—about federal conservation programs. The Talbotts' farm is one of 20 properties in Colorado's East Grand Valley that Mesa Land Trust has helped to protect with funds from the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, a component of the Farm Bill.

The Talbotts and other local farmers discussed with Sen. Bennet the investments necessary to grow peaches and the resulting economic benefits: Colorado is the nation's seventh largest peach-producing state and peaches are the state's most profitable crop per acre. The farmers explained how selling their development rights allowed them to reinvest in their farm operations—by buying more land, upgrading equipment, hiring workers or planting more orchards.

“For lawmakers to hear from landowners is far more powerful than anything we could say ourselves,” says Rob Bleiberg, executive director of Mesa Land Trust, which organized the event last spring. “Stories drive legislation. As important as statistics and data may be, stories resonate.”



In attendance at the ceremony announcing the protection of Alaska's Campbell Creek Estuary were Senator Begich's chief of staff and local politicians who worked with Great Land Trust to conserve this beautiful 60-acre coastal parcel.

GREAT LAND TRUST

It was especially important that these stories reach Sen. Bennet, who had a key role in the debate over the 2014 Farm Bill as chair of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Forestry and Natural Resources of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Sen. Bennet became an active champion of conservation, and thanks in part to his leadership, the Farm Bill, which passed this winter, includes more than \$1 billion over 10 years to protect agricultural lands. The Farm Bill represents a major victory for land trusts, increasing opportunities to protect working lands across the country.

The Farm Bill was a top policy priority for the Land Trust Alliance, which worked to build bipartisan support through years of negotiation. In addition to the relationships the policy team has cultivated with members of Congress and their staffs, a key part of the Alliance's strategy was to make sure that members of Congress heard from land trusts and landowners in their home districts. Nothing makes an impression like local people who can speak about what conservation means to their communities.

In a recent survey, members of Congress and other decision-makers in D.C. were asked to name the lobbying method that works best to change outcomes. Their number one answer

was "the simple presentation of accurate information, preferably by folks back home."

Russ Shay, director of public policy for the Alliance, says, "The Alliance can educate lawmakers about the issues. But only people from home can make them care."

What Federal Policy Means for Local Land Trusts

When land trusts reach out to members of Congress, they help democracy work by giving their members—over 5 million people nationwide—a voice in the shaping of federal policies. And federal policies have a profound impact on land trusts' ability to save the places people love.

The Farm Bill is a great success story. But Congress can hurt conservation as much as it can help—such as when it let the expanded federal tax incentive for conservation easements expire at the end of 2013. With the expanded incentive in place from 2006 to 2013, land trusts increased the pace of conservation by a third, to nearly 1 million acres per year. With this incentive in limbo, many landowners are hesitating to donate easements, and the pace of conservation has slowed.

Renewing the incentive is the Alliance's top legislative priority—and it has been making progress. In April a Senate committee voted to renew the expanded incentive through

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MESA LAND TRUST

During a site visit, Senator Bennet and Roblee Talbott inspect peach blossom buds on the Talbotts' farm, one of 20 properties in Colorado protected by Mesa Land Trust with Farm Bill funding.

"It's probably impossible to overstate the importance of advocacy for the work we do as land trusts," Bleiberg says. So Mesa Land Trust makes a priority of building relationships with the region's elected officials—with great results. Their U.S. representative, Scott Tipton (CO), also supported the Farm Bill and has cosponsored legislation to make permanent the expanded incentive.

In addition to setting policies, members of Congress can play a direct role helping land trusts save special places—such as Freshwater Land Trust in Alabama, which relied on an ally in Congress to help secure funds for parks and trails, and Great Land Trust in Alaska, which enlisted two senators from each side of the political aisle to protect a spectacular estuary in Anchorage.

Building Relationships with Members of Congress

By the time Congressman Spencer Bachus (AL) put on rubber boots and waded into a swamp with the board of Freshwater Land Trust, he and Executive Director Wendy Jackson had known each other a while.

She reached out to him more than 15 years ago, back when she worked for The Nature Conservancy and he was a relatively new congressman. As they talked, Rep. Bachus speculated about potential for a national wildlife refuge in his district. Jackson pursued it, and The Nature Conservancy went on to partner with Rep. Bachus to establish the 3,500-acre Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge in 2002.

Later, with Freshwater Land Trust, Jackson maintained their connection. She and other people from the land trust regularly visit the congressman. They send him their newsletter and invite his staff on their field trips. "Now when we have a federal grant application," she says, "I can pick up the phone and ask for their help."

And help they have. Over the years Rep. Bachus has supported Freshwater Land Trust's efforts to obtain federal funding (which leveraged other funding) to create a 1,200-acre park, a 500-acre nature preserve, a greenway connecting six small towns and 29 miles of trails and greenways in the city of Birmingham.

Last August the land trust organized a tour for the congressman of three places he had helped to protect. Jackson says, "We used that tour to publicly thank him, to show him how the money's working and to explain why conservation is so important. We showed him that it's protecting our natural resources, but in a way that also has great economic benefits, education benefits, community benefits and health benefits. His constituents are getting a huge bang for the buck."

At one stop the entire board of the land trust donned galoshes and walked with the congressman into a wetland preserve.



FRESHWATER LAND TRUST

Rep. Bachus wades next to Wendy Jackson of Freshwater Land Trust (in pink). The site visit gave the land trust a chance to publicly thank the congressman for all that he has done for conservation.

2015. This vote took place immediately following the Alliance's third annual Land Trust Advocacy Day, in which 75 participants from 24 states traveled to D.C. to have nearly 200 meetings with their members of Congress and senior officials from USDA and the White House—demonstrating the political power and influence of land trusts when we all act together.

Outreach by Alliance member land trusts has helped to build broad bipartisan support for the incentive, with more than 200 senators and representatives cosponsoring legislation to make it permanent. The president's budget and House Ways & Means Chair Dave Camp's tax reform package both included the incentive in early 2014, and after Advocacy Day the incentive gained several new co-sponsors over the next few days.

There they presented Rep. Bachus with an award and asked him to renew his support for the legislation to make permanent the expanded tax incentive—which he went on to do.

Site visits with members of Congress can be a great way to strengthen lawmakers' support. A firsthand experience with land conservation—for example, a celebration of a new easement, a tour of protected lands, the opening of a preserve, a workday or a nature walk—could be what it takes to turn a skeptic into a supporter or a supporter into a champion.

Speaking of champions...

Turning Supporters into Champions

Alaska's Great Land Trust is a small organization that jumped on a big opportunity: to save an estuary within the municipality of Anchorage that would connect a 500,000-acre state park in the Chugach Mountains with a 34,000-acre game refuge on the coast. The estuary would link a 7-mile greenbelt from the mountains to the sea.

The 60-acre tract of estuary follows Campbell Creek as it flows out of the foothills to wind through grassy wetlands. It provides habitat for many thousands of birds on their spring and fall migrations—sandhill cranes, snow geese, goshawks, peregrines, shore birds and more. It offers significant educational opportunities for nearby schools. It also offers amazing views from Anchorage, where 60% of Alaskans live or work. However, it offered lucrative development potential, too, and it appeared that the landowners would probably convert it to condos. But an opportunity arose for Great Land Trust to buy the property for a city park.

The price was \$7 million—an ambitious sum. But over six years the land trust pulled the funds together from multiple federal sources, the municipality and over \$1 million in private donations.

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Then trouble struck. One source of federal funds suddenly dried up. And Anchorage got a new mayor, who had other priorities.

The former mayor, Mark Begich, had partnered with Great Land Trust several times and was an active supporter of the park. But when Begich won a Senate seat, his successor, Mayor Dan Sullivan, argued that development on the site would bring in needed tax revenue, and he withdrew the municipality's support.

The land trust responded in several ways. It produced an economic analysis showing that the park would bring the municipality more net revenue than condos. It mobilized a grassroots campaign. And it got both of Alaska's senators on board.

Sen. Begich had supported the park from the beginning. Alaska's senior senator, Lisa Murkowski heard about the project from a friend who served on Great Land Trust's board, and she agreed to come see the property. The visit was impressive, says Phil Shephard, executive director of the land

Land Trusts and Politics: What's Allowed?

People at land trusts sometimes question whether it's legal to get involved in politics. The answer is YES, you can advocate on issues, legislation and ballot measures.

Here's the law in a nutshell: To spend more than an "insubstantial" amount on lobbying, you need to file a simple form with the IRS (Form 5768). There are limits to how much you can spend on lobbying, but, for most land trusts, the allowed amount is more than adequate (and volunteer time doesn't count).

It's important to remember that you CANNOT endorse or oppose any candidate. But you CAN build political support on your issues, and you CAN advocate on legislation and ballot measures. So there's no reason you can't start today!

For more information, see www.lta.org/policy.

trust. “You're driving through these urban neighborhoods in Anchorage, and then you walk for five minutes and can see coastal forests, you can see the estuary, you can see 10,000-foot volcanoes.” He says, “It feels like you're not in the city anymore. You think, *wow, this is amazing*. It sells itself.”

Sen. Murkowski noted that the park had widespread local support, that it would provide a public resource and that it would be an asset to city schools. So she threw her weight behind it.

The two senators' support was pivotal in the successful campaign to change the mayor's mind, renew the municipality's support and bring in funds to buy the land. The senators collaborated with the federal agency that had withdrawn funding and got it restored. They helped persuade the mayor that the park would be good for the city. They held a fundraiser cohosted by two senators from opposite parties—a rare event—to obtain private donations for the park. And they even went on to cohost a general fundraiser for the land trust.

A Call to Action

Clearly when land trusts advocate for conservation, they can find great support and allies among their members of Congress. Want to join others who have taken the plunge? The Alliance can help.

Earlier this year the Alliance launched its new Advocacy Ambassadors initiative to connect people from land trusts with members of Congress. Ambassadors will build strong, one-to-one relationships with their lawmakers and advance pro-conservation policies. The goal is to have at least one Ambassador connected with each of the 535 members of Congress. Find full information, enrollment forms and training opportunities at www.lta.org/ambassadors. 🌱

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