



April 16, 2012

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Western Ranchland Trusts Top in the Nation in Conservation

*Groups have partnered with more than 1,000 farm and ranch families
to protect over 1.8 million acres*

According to a recent Land Trust Alliance (LTA) survey, agricultural land trusts are the top performers in the nation. The most successful of these land trusts belong to the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts (PORT). PORT is an alliance of seven state-wide ranching land trusts that have close and strong affiliations with their state livestock associations.

America's ranchers and farmers are taking the lead in permanently protecting the country's best working lands, the places that not only provide incredible scenery, water quality and wildlife habitat, but also produce the safest and most reliable source of food in the world. The PORT members have accomplished never before seen levels of land conservation. The next several years will be critical in securing the future of our nations' working farms and ranches. The landowner led, private land efforts of the rangeland trust are an exciting new way for our country to accomplish meaningful national conservation goals.

Rangeland trusts in California, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Oregon, Texas, and Wyoming collectively hold more than 1,150 permanent conservation easements on more than 1.8 million acres. These efforts are only possible with the incredible partnership the land trusts have formed with landowners who have had the foresight to protect their land for future generations.

PORT was formed to increase the impact that its members could have on national land conservation policy, represent the needs of working ranch lands within America's broader land conservation and agricultural communities, and enhance the sharing of information and expertise. The LTA survey revealed the top land trusts in the nation, including four PORT members which were listed in the top 15 in acres protected with conservation easements. Montana is second in the nation, Colorado sixth, Wyoming ninth and Texas thirteenth. This is extraordinary and shows that agricultural land trusts are on the cutting edge of conservation.

Privately owned and managed farms and ranches are essential to America's great landscapes and the people, economies and wildlife that depend on them. These are the watersheds that store drinking water for America's cities; these are the essential winter ranges and migratory habitats for game species from ducks to deer; these are the meadows and fields that grow food and offer

national food security; these are the open lands that buffer streams and rivers carrying water and nutrients for commerce, recreation and agriculture; that raise beef, sheep and wildlife; that are the majestic views; the rolling hills and temperate bottomlands that support the natural and economic health of our nation.

In a time when economics and efficiency matter more than ever, PORT member organizations and our private landowner partners offer a conservation approach that does more with less. The private lands of America -- particularly in the West and High Plains -- link the blocks of public land into iconic, productive landscapes. They are the necessary pieces of the puzzle that matter economically, culturally, aesthetically and scientifically to America's future. Development of critically situated, privately owned lands will irreversibly fragment and impact the American landscape and compromise its collective resources.

PORT has many federal policy priorities which have the opportunity to greatly benefit working family farmers and ranchers and advance private land conservation across the country. These initiatives include:

1. Reauthorize and fully fund the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, both of which are sound investments with a successful track record. They represent the only programs that will exclusively protect America's working landscapes. Reform the Wetlands Reserve Program to utilize grazing and allow third parties to hold the easements.
2. Legislation making the federal conservation easement income tax incentive permanent. This tax deduction has helped PORT members work with farmers, ranchers and other modest-income landowners to increase the pace of conservation, but it expired on December 31, 2011. Bills to make the incentive permanent have been introduced.
3. Finally, another important policy priority is reforming the Estate Tax. Because farm and ranch assets consist mainly of land, buildings, and specialized equipment, these estates may look wealthy on paper, but they include few saleable assets and little liquidity to pay estate taxes. Completely abolishing the estate tax would eliminate one of the leading causes of the breakup of multi-generational family farms and ranches.

"PORT has an important and effective voice at the national level, championing the cause of agricultural land conservation in a way that promotes maximum impact of these programs. Their collective success represents an ongoing win for all of society through the protection of these iconic landscapes at the hands of the landowners who steward them," said Lynne Sherrod, Western Policy Manager for the Land Trust Alliance.

With almost 170,000 acres under conservation easement, the WY Stock Growers Ag Land Trust was founded by the WY Stock Growers Association almost 12 years ago works and works exclusively on the conservation of private agricultural lands.
