



Nonprofit organizations have the unique ability to move between public and private sectors to build trust in innovative and meaningful ways. Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) embodies this unique element in its conservation work across the state of Texas.

With 142 million acres of privately-owned working land, agriculture makes up the second largest industry in Texas. However, rising property taxes and increased demand for development have created what TALT refers to as a land-loss crisis. Each year, Texas loses approximately 200,000 acres of agricultural land. This loss not only impacts the customs and livelihood of the families that own and work these lands, it also impacts agricultural production, natural habitats, native wildlife, water access, and water quality. TALT is fighting back against the land-loss crisis through education, advocacy, and conservation easement.

TALT's primary tool to fight this land loss is conservation easement. When landowners enter into a conservation easement with TALT, they are selling or gifting certain property rights to the land trust. Conservation easements preserve landowners' power and right to own, live on, work, and will their lands, while protecting the property against non-agricultural development and other potential harm to the natural resources in perpetuity. By choosing to protect their land through a conservation easement, landowners are making a personal choice for their families and a meaningful choice to preserve land, water, and wildlife for all Texans.

What Conservation Easements Offer Landowners...

- Ability to **protect** their land from development
- An opportunity to **preserve** family ranching or farming
- Income and estate tax **benefits**

What Conservation Easements Offer All Texans...

- Preservation of **clean water**
- Preservation of farming and ranching lands that provide **food** and resources
- Preservation of **wildlife** habitats
- Preservation of **hunting** land and

Approximately one million acres of privately-owned land are currently under conservation easement in Texas. According to a report published by the Natural Resources Institute at Texas A&M University, current conservation efforts add an economic value of \$63.1 million in agricultural commodities, \$207.4 million in water replacement, and \$5.8 million in wildlife consumptive value. This is a cumulative economic value of \$276.3 million, a quarter of which is protected by Texas Agricultural Land Trust.

Conservation easements are not the simplest real estate arrangement. Not all lands qualify and not all landowners are interested. TALT understands this complexity and common fears landowners may have, because the organization was built by landowners. It works closely with each landowner over several months to ensure the easement is in the best interest of all parties involved. In the words of CEO Blair Fitzsimons, "It's a lot of sitting at the kitchen table." The relationship between landowner and land trust is crucial because it will exist in perpetuity. Land trusts, like TALT, are responsible for monitoring to ensure the terms of the contract are being met. This means a relationship with the landowner that may pass down through multiple generations.

After an extended period of information sharing and relationship building, the technical process begins. TALT works alongside landowners to determine eligibility, draft contracts, create a baseline report, and investigate title — all of which takes time and resources. This can cost landowners up to \$50,000, which is often hard to manage on the slim margins of agricultural work. Once an easement agreement is recorded, landowners can realize an income tax deduction for their donation, but many cannot afford to cover conservation easement costs up front and wait for a return later. Another option is to sell the easement, though few funding sources exist for those interested in selling conversation easements.

● **I will know we are having the impact we strive for** ◆
when we are protecting at least as many acres as we are losing each year.

~ Blair Fitzsimons, TALT CEO

TALT is tackling this challenge through education, advocacy, and innovation. To conserve land at a rate that matches annual land loss means bringing more people and dollars to the table. For CEO Fitzsimons, it also means getting creative. Many people, including policy makers, do not fully appreciate the purpose or value of conservation easements to individuals, families, heritage, the environment, and the economy. Conservation easements are a divisive issue in Texas. TALT staff use their intimate knowledge of landownership and conservation work to create intersections that bridge this divide. TALT aims to engage decision makers at every level — individual, government, private sector — to breathe life into the easement process and save Texas lands. Conservation does not always have to look like the preservation of a family farm or ranch. Easements have been used to protect ground water and prevent development on floodplains. They can be used to create agrihoods (organic farming subdivisions) or restore water banks along the coast. Operating as a nonprofit organization gives TALT the autonomy and flexibility to act as a nexus among a range of stakeholders to maximize the collective good of all Texans.



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