



## Land Trusts: A Private Solution to Protect Michigan Farmland

by Jefferson G. Edgens

### Summary

Preserving farms and farmland is a growing concern among many Michigan policy makers, but some citizens have discovered a great way to protect the environment without relying on government. Private “land trusts” now protect tens of thousands of acres of Michigan wetlands, wildlife habitats, scenic views, forests, and farmland.

Main text word count: 705

How to save farms and farmland has been the center of public attention in Michigan over the last few years. The state Senate recently held hearings to evaluate Michigan’s farm economy, while environmental groups have urged government to purchase farmland to keep it out of the hands of developers.

But citizens around the country are working together—without government—to protect farmland, open spaces, forests, and ecologically sensitive sites. For example, Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft Corporation, recently gave a citizen’s group \$3 million to complete the purchase of the Loomis Forest in Washington state.

In Georgia, local residents feared an adjoining forested area would be developed, so they secured private financing and bought the land themselves.

In Colorado, cattle ranchers and farmers saw development encroaching near their farms and decided to create the non-profit Colorado Cattleman’s Association Land Trust (CCALT) to buy or accept land donations. They reasoned that it is more efficient to establish their own land trust than to waste resources changing their

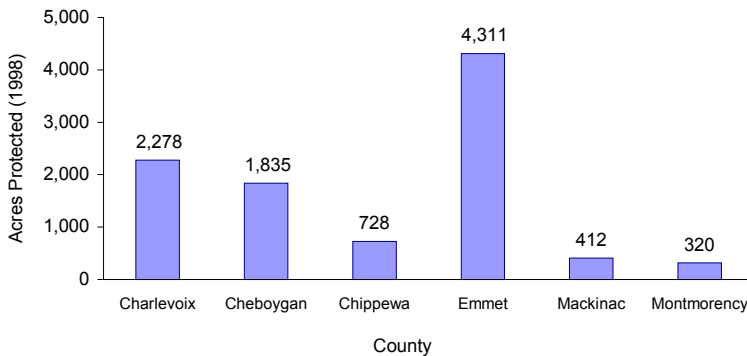
legislators’ attitudes. They figured, rightly, that agriculture’s future rested on their shoulders. Created in 1995, CCALT has protected over 30,000 acres without using taxpayer money.

Farmers can apply the lessons learned from Washington, Georgia, and Colorado to protect farmland in Michigan without “milking” the taxpayer in the form of costly regulations. Through a flexible, voluntary private land trust, farmers can control which lands are protected, in contrast to politicians deciding which farms should be protected. Government land-protection programs often have unpalatable strings attached, anyway.

Land trusts blend long-term protection of land with economic and tax advantages

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### Land Trusts Privately Protect Thousands of Acres throughout Michigan



Source: Little Traverse Conservancy

Northern Michigan’s Little Traverse Conservancy is just one of 40 organizations in the state that pursues private, voluntary ways to preserve farmland, open spaces, forests, and other ecologically sensitive areas.

already provided in the U. S. tax code. Through a conservation easement donated to a land trust, landowners can decide how much land to protect and get a tax write-off for the donation. The landowner maintains ownership of the property, but the easement places a restriction on any future development. This is a permanent solution, so a landowner must be sure he wants to do it.

Land trusts are gaining in popularity. They have grown by 63 percent in the last 10 years, from a low of 743 to 1,213 nationwide. Are land trusts having an impact? Yes. In 1998 they protected 4.7 million acres, a 135-percent increase since 1988. Land trust memberships have increased to 1 million.

What really makes the land trust concept resonate is its ability to blend services with land protection. A variety of land is suitable for inclusion in a land trust: fragile environments like wetlands, wildlife habitats, scenic views, forests, and farmland, to name a few. Most trusts also provide environmental education, land use planning, biological monitoring, and ecological restoration—all activities that rely on voluntary participation and community support.

A good example of an organization that practices the land trust idea is The Nature Conservancy, which has protected millions of acres across the country. It has local offices in many states—including Michigan—that raise funds to buy land and approach willing landowners for land donations.

Michigan land trusts include 40 organizations with over 53,000 acres in preserves (those owned by the trust) and 16,500 acres in conservation easements. Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, among the largest in the state, has protected 8,000 acres, including 23 miles of shoreline. The Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy has 538 acres in preserve with 1,344 acres under conservation easement.

Michigan land trusts also protect unique attributes and natural features like 1,000 miles of rail to trails, and over 500 acres of “karst” terrain protected by the Michigan Karst Conservancy. Karst terrain contains underground caves and sinkholes developed from underground drainage.

Farmers can also get value-added benefits from land trusts. CCALT assists Colorado farmers with estate planning to help them reduce the sting of “death taxes.” In addition, the organization can link farms with farmers and those willing to enter agriculture. This assures there will be future generations of farmers and an important role for agriculture in the region.

If Michigan farm and commodity groups had decided to go the land trust route in 1996, today they could be way down the road in protecting farmland. Land trusts show promise for protecting sensitive lands, and farmers themselves can be the solution, without leaning on the taxpayer to do it for them.

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