



Wisconsin Land Trusts

What is a Land Trust? Conservation land is essential to the health and beauty of Wisconsin. Land trusts are non-profit organizations that help protect land for public benefit. There is no legal definition of “land trust”: it’s a term used to describe organizations that, in pursuit of conservation missions, own land, hold conservation easements or both. These organizations permanently protect important natural, recreational, scenic, historic and working lands in their communities. Among the great strengths of land trusts is their community focus: local swimming holes, scenic features and open parkland may never attract state or national resources for protection. But land trusts, whose missions are determined by their volunteers and members, work to protect the special places that make Wisconsin home.

How do land trusts work?

Land trusts use a variety of tools to help private landowners who opt to protect the conservation values of their property. Most commonly, land trusts accept donations of or purchase property or conservation easements. (See our other fact sheets for more information about different conservation transactions).

Once a conservation deal has closed, land trusts hold the perpetual responsibility to manage the lands they own and make sure future land owners and land uses uphold the terms of any conservation easements they hold.

In addition, many land trusts work cooperatively with government agencies by acquiring or managing land, participating in comprehensive planning endeavors or holding conservation easements on public properties. As private non-profit partners, land trusts can access resources that agencies could not otherwise use to help protect important places.

Wisconsin’s Land Trusts

The land trust movement is the fastest growing conservation movement in the country and Wisconsin’s land trust community is no exception. In 1994 there were 12 land trusts working in the state. Formed by citizens and neighbors concerned about the future of their communities, today there are more than 50 local and regional land trusts preserving places with special ecological scenic, recreational and cultural value. Collectively they have protected more than 200,000 acres of land.

Wisconsin land trusts are a diverse group. Some are all-volunteer organizations, others have several paid staff. There are a number of land trusts working regionally across many counties. Others work more locally, focused on a particular resource. Wisconsin land trusts have accomplished lasting protection of forestlands, working farms, long stretches of undeveloped shorelines, acres of native prairie and much more .

To find a land trust in your community, refer to the Land Trust Map and Directory on our website: www.gatheringwaters.org. For more information about land trusts and the conservation options they offer, contact us at (608) 251-9131.

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