

A Sharp Conservation Focus

Montana Association of Land Trusts

by Gavin Ricklefs

Montana land trusts generate a portfolio of incredible conservation projects, creating an array of dynamic outdoor recreation opportunities and demonstrating a remarkable commitment to the people of Montana. Every single day, our state land trust community makes Montana a better place to live, work and recreate.

Montana's 12 land trusts unite around two shared values: Our passion for private land conservation and outdoor recreation, and our strong and unanimous dedication to the Montana Association of Land Trusts (MALT).

Created in 2005, MALT has emerged as one of the most effective state land trust associations in the country. All of MALT's individual projects, activities and programs align with one of three strategic goals, which were adopted in 2006 and continue to guide MALT.

1. Conservation Policy: Enhancing and defending private land conservation statutes and policies in Montana.
2. Conservation Funding: Creating, supporting, and expanding private and public funding sources for land trusts and land conservation.
3. Outreach/Coalition Building: Pursuing outreach and coalition building, with an emphasis on nontraditional groups and partnerships.

Montana's state land trusts created MALT to ensure that the state's statutes and policies allow private land conservation to flourish. By any measurement, Montana private land conservation is flourishing.

Montana is a national leader in private land conservation with over 2.6 million acres conserved. Montana has protected more acres through conservation easements than Idaho, Wyoming, and the Dakotas combined.



Skalkaho Bend Park on the Bitterroot River near Hamilton, Montana.

Photo: Courtesy of Bitter Root Land Trust



Falls Creek, a previously inaccessible 422 acres of prime wildlife and riparian habitat along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front now permanently protected through a partnership made possible by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, in coordination with Lewis and Clark County, the Dan Barrett family, Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and many other partners.

Photo: Courtesy of Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Montana has protected more acreage through conservation easements held by accredited land trusts than any other state. Montana is the top Agricultural Land Easement Program state in the U.S. Montana is a regional leader in sage grouse and grasslands conservation.

MALT itself does not do conservation projects. Land trusts do. Land trusts generate landscape conservation projects; work closely with landowners to create voluntary conservation easements; plan, build and maintain community trails and parks; and more. But behind the scenes, MALT plays a steady and positive role.

MALT engages at the state policy level and is an active lobbying influence at the Montana legislature. At the federal policy level, MALT is recognized for leading concerted efforts to improve Farm Bill conservation titles and to obtain full, dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

While Montana's land trusts have greatly expanded their project diversity in recent years, MALT has retained its focus, actively helping land trusts increase their value to their communities. More than ever before, Montana's land trusts—while retaining voluntary, incentive-based conservation projects as a priority—are building partnerships to create community parks, walking and riding trails, access for hunting and fishing, and expanding the services they provide to a wider range of community members.

Virtually every MALT member is expanding its service in Montana. The **Five Valleys Land Trust's** Mount Dean Stone project is a tremendous example of an effort that provides a wealth of natural resource and recreational benefits to Missoula. **The Trust for Public Land** and **The Nature Conservancy** are leaders in forest health and landscape conservation efforts that improve forest resiliency and benefit local economies. **Prickly Pear Land**

Trust is winning national awards and receiving national accolades for its Tenmile Creek Park project. Montanans everywhere are applauding the **Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's** work to expand and improve recreational access to public and private lands. Sage grouse conservation projects led by the **Montana Land Reliance** and **Montana Nature Conservancy** are producing results essential to state sage grouse policy goals. **Gallatin Valley Land Trust** has produced a community dream—a Main Street to the Mountains trail system for Bozeman. The **Vital Ground Foundation** is reducing grizzly bear conflicts and conserving prime wildlife habitat. **Flathead Land Trust** is working to protect vital wetlands and riverbanks with educational components added for area schoolchildren. **Kaniksu Land Trust** in Sandpoint, Idaho, has donated an incredible gift to its community called the Pine Street Woods. **The Conservation Fund** is working to conserve priority lands along the Rocky Mountain Front as well as to protect and restore Montana's grasslands. **Bitter Root Land Trust** has worked with communities on collaborative riverfront park projects and, thanks to area landowners, has produced some amazing agricultural stewardship and conservation.

Added up, the collective work of Montana's land trusts represents an amazing success story and an impressive accomplishment.

As I said in the beginning: Every single day, our state land trust community makes Montana a better place to live, work and recreate. And every single day, MALT helps its membership accomplish those results.

Gavin Ricklefs is the executive director of the Bitter Root Land Trust and board president of the Montana Association of Land Trusts.