

Land Trust 
Accreditation Commission
An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

**RENEWAL PROGRAM ASSESSMENT
AND IMPROVEMENT PROGRESS REPORT
September 9, 2014**

OVERVIEW: AUGUST 2014 COMMISSION MEETING

The Land Trust Alliance established the Land Trust Accreditation Commission as an independent nonprofit organization in 2006 to operate a land trust accreditation program to build strong land trusts, foster public trust in private land conservation, and help ensure the long-term protection of conservation lands. There are now 280 accredited land trusts, holding more than 75% of lands and conservation easements held by land trusts.

The Commission made decisions on the first round of renewal applications in February 2014 and issued a complete [report](#) on its findings. The Commission met in August 2014 and awarded accreditation to first-time and renewal applicants as well as analyzed findings from the second round of renewal applications. It also reviewed assessment data about the renewal process and developed a preliminary renewal program improvement plan in response to the data. The findings, data, and a progress report on improvements are discussed in more detail in this report.

The Commission wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the land trusts that participate in the accreditation program, with a special thanks to those that were part of the pilot program in 2007 and 2008. Their efforts then and during the first rounds of renewal have been invaluable in shaping and improving the program.

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RENEWAL APPLICATION FINDINGS

Background

The Commission made decisions on the first round of renewal applications and reported on its findings in February 2014. It analyzed the second round of renewal applications in August 2014; findings are below.

Renewal Application Summary

Application Volume

- 20 accredited land trusts applied for the first round of renewal in April 2013.
- 29 renewal applications were submitted for 2013 round two in November 2013.
- 29 were submitted for 2014 round 1 in April.
- 11 will submit applications in September for 2014 round 2.

- 4 have registered to apply in early 2015.
- 4 organizations to-date have chosen not to pursue renewed accreditation. These groups were in contact with the Commission, and after understanding the requirements, each group self-determined that it did not meet the requirements and would not be successful in the process.

Application Decisions

- 43 applicants for renewal have been presented to the Commission for a final decision; all were awarded renewed accreditation.
- 14% of these were awarded conditional accreditation with additional actions required early in the accredited term to remain accredited.
- The renewal process was designed with the expectation that applicants would be able to demonstrate compliance with the indicator practices and accreditation requirements; therefore, expectations for improvement (EFI) would not be needed at renewal. Based on findings from the early renewal applications, however, the Commission decided it would issue EFIs at renewal in limited instances.
 - Approximately 25% of organizations in the first two rounds of renewal received no EFIs.
 - The average number of EFIs issued at renewal was 1.4.

Application Findings

Time Invested

- Feedback from the land trust community suggests that applicants spent more time than they expected to on the renewal process.
- Data submitted to the Commission by renewal applicants to-date show that renewal applicants spend, on average, 40% less time than first-time applicants (an average of 339 hours for renewal as compared to 567 for first-time). Data reported by the first round of renewal applicants in interviews with a consultant showed only an 11% reduction in time. Improvements made by the Commission between rounds one and two may explain part of the difference as would the types of activities that land trusts report as accreditation time.
- The Commission's data show that the renewal application review process also takes less time for Commission staff reviewers (34-37% less) and commissioner reviewers (50% less).

Applicant Compliance

- Renewal helps ensure compliance with the accreditation requirements; of the organizations receiving renewal decisions in August 2014, the following areas where compliance was not demonstrated in the application were addressed during the renewal process.
 - 79% of organizations did not notify donors of all of the tax code and related requirements specified in indicator practice 10B.
 - 28% of organizations were required to provide a procedure for reviewing Forms 8283 and landowners' appraisals as the documents did not meet the requirements.
 - 41% of organizations did not have baseline documentation reports signed at or prior to closing for one or more easements completed during the accredited term.
 - 24% of organizations did not have baseline documentation reports that met the at-renewal content requirements.
 - 28% of organizations did not have signatures or documented attempts to secure signatures on all older baseline documentation reports.

- 34% of organizations either did not investigate title on one or more projects during the accredited term or did not update the title investigation prior to closing on its most recent project.
- 24% of organizations had not documented the evaluation of private inurement and/or impermissible private benefit when conducting financial transactions with insiders.

Self-Attestations

- The renewal application was designed to require less documentation than first-time accreditation. This is accomplished, in part, through self-attestations of compliance, some of which are verified during the process. This “trust-but-verify” approach was requested by the land trust community during the renewal design process. The data show that the attestation system is not yielding accurate results.
 - About 33% of the 2013 round 1 applicants did not accurately respond to the two attestations verified for all applicants in the round.
 - About 65% of the 2013 round 2 applicants had one or more areas where they attested that the contents of documents met the requirements that, upon review by the Commission, was not shown to be accurate.
 - Inaccurate attestations result in corrective action needing to be taken during the accreditation process and lead to more extensive additional information requests.

Additional Information Requests (AIR)

- There is a wide range of compliance with the requirements demonstrated in the renewal application. Applicants that do not demonstrate compliance at the time of application have an opportunity to do so during the additional information request (AIR) period. The number of documents requested from renewal applicants in the AIR ranged from 2 to 27 with an average of 12.
- Three groups requested and received an extension of the AIR deadline in the first round of renewals; two requested and received extensions in the second round.

Recommendations for Applicants

- To help create a culture of continuous improvement and compliance with the indicator practices in the land trust community, accredited land trusts should be familiar with the *Requirements Manual* and start implementing EFIs immediately after accreditation is awarded.
- Renewal applicants should plan ahead by reviewing the materials on the Commission’s website, conducting an assessment, and including time for the application in their workplan. (Data reported to the Commission show the average renewal applicant spends 339 hours on the application process.)
- When completing the renewal application, a land trust should accurately complete the attestations and should only attest “yes” if it can demonstrate complete compliance. If the land trust cannot demonstrate compliance, it should check “no” and provide statements that explain the circumstances for the exceptions. This will save time during the AIR period.
- If there are questions, the Commission encourages applicants to contact Commission staff. There is a “help-desk” staffed each day during business hours.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT DATA SUMMARY

Background

In the summer of 2014 the Commission analyzed a wide variety of data gleaned from renewal applications, correspondence received by the Commission and interviews with each of the organizations awarded renewed accreditation in February 2014. This analysis made it clear that there are many opportunities for the Commission to make program improvements to address land trust concerns about the costs of accreditation while at the same time meeting the goals of the accreditation program and maintaining the program's integrity. A brief summary of the data evaluated is presented below. More detailed information [is available](#) upon request.

Program Successes

- In less than eight years, the program has reached more than 40% of eligible participants.
 - Approximately 900 land trust members of the Alliance are eligible to participate in accreditation as they have been in existence for at least two years and have completed at least two conservation transactions.
 - Nearly 400 organizations have submitted applications or are registered to do so.
 - As of August 2014 there are 280 accredited land trusts representing 75% of land and conservation easements held by land trusts.
- There is an 87% success rate for first-time applicants and a 98% rate for renewal applicants.
- Accreditation is achieving its goal of building strong land trusts and providing a process for continual improvement of land trust practices; past surveys show the following.
 - 96% of applicants report the process strengthened their organization.
 - 63% report it being easier to meet agency/funder requirements.
 - 51% of those with staff report the sense of teamwork among staff is stronger.
- There is strong support for the program from the land trust community engaged in the accreditation process; it is recognized by participants as setting a common standard of practice and for its potential to boost public confidence in land trusts. Accredited land trusts want the program to remain strong and credible.
- Renewal is essential for the Commission to confirm that accredited land trusts continue to meet the requirements. It also identifies and corrects weaknesses that may impact a land trust's ability to uphold the public trust and ensure the permanent protection of land.
- Data from renewal applications show trends that help inform Alliance training programs for the land trust community.
- The renewal application process takes less time for applicants as compared to the first-time process and less time for Commission reviewers.
- A majority of individuals providing comments in the interviews with the consultant and in correspondence to the Commission support the five-year accredited term, at least for the first term of accreditation.
- Actuarial data from TerraFirma participants show that unaccredited land trusts are over 20% more likely to have a legal challenge per parcel and pay over 50% more in external costs per challenge than accredited land trusts.
- Commission staff receive positive reviews for responsiveness. Commissioners, who also serve as peer reviewers of applications, are recognized for their volunteer commitment and passion for excellence.

Program Challenges

- Accredited land trusts provided feedback that they are challenged to quantify the return on investment provided by accreditation.
 - Many accredited land trusts do not feel that the external benefits of accreditation have fully materialized.
 - While there is support for the online renewal system (Civicore), renewal applicants found challenges with the technology that take an unnecessary amount of administrative time.
 - Early renewal applicants report that the amount of documentation required is seen as onerous and sometimes redundant.
 - The renewal application and renewal process take longer and are more cumbersome than applicants expected.
- The Commission's instructional information for renewal applicants is seen as overwhelming and, with four primary reference documents, unnecessary time is spent finding information.
- Applicants report not knowing what to expect during the renewal process.
- Data from the applications show applicants are less able to demonstrate compliance with the requirements at renewal than the Commission expected.
- The data show that, while there is appreciation for the transparency of the *Requirements Manual*, there is little understanding of how the accreditation requirements are created and revised and how they are related to *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. Land trusts find frequent changes to requirements and materials confusing.
- The Commission is perceived by some applicants as inflexible. Land trusts do not understand how the Commission takes unique facts and circumstances into account and applies a fair but flexible approach to address land trust diversity.

Summary

The accreditation program was established to build strong land trusts, foster public trust in private land conservation, and help ensure the long-term protection of conservation lands. By all accounts the program is meeting its goals. To sustain the program for the long-term, land trusts will need to perceive the benefits of the program are merited by the costs of participation. The Commission, therefore, is engaged in making program improvements to address land trust concerns about the costs of accreditation while at the same time meeting the goals of the accreditation program and maintaining the program's integrity.

PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT PROGRESS REPORT

Improvement Plan Phases

From its inception, the Commission has invited suggestions from land trusts and has made regular improvements to the application process, including asking the Alliance board to reduce the number of indicator practices on two occasions and adapting the first-time application four times in eight years. Recent data show there is general support for the accreditation program and its goals but there is significant room for improvement in the accreditation renewal process and materials. The Commission is committed to addressing this in two phases. The phases are dictated by the next revision of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* (S&P), the timing of which will be determined by the Alliance.

Phase 1: Short-Term Program Assessment and Improvements (July 2014 – Dec 2015)

Revisions to S&P will require extensive adaptation of the accreditation materials. In phase 1 the Commission will evaluate the data and make improvements to materials and processes that have the most impact for applicants but do not require changes to S&P; this will allow the Commission to use resources efficiently and reduce the number of changes for applicants. Improvements in phase 1 are being made through the lens of the renewal application; however, these changes will also improve some materials for first-time applicants.

Phase 2: Longer-Term Program Improvements (after S&P revisions)

In this phase the Commission will provide input on the S&P revision process and revise and align the accreditation application and related materials to correspond to changes made to S&P and the indicator practices. The Commission and Alliance may also consider changes in the length of the term of future renewal cycles after S&P is revised.

Program Improvement Phase 1 Progress Report

The progress summary below describes how the Commission has or plans to address each of the challenges identified on the previous page during the first phase of the improvement process.

Issue 1: Online Application System and Documentation Required

Challenges to Address

- While there is support for the online renewal system (Civicore), renewal applicants found challenges with the technology that take an unnecessary amount of administrative time.
- Early renewal applicants report that the amount of documentation required is seen as onerous and sometimes redundant.

Actions Completed

- Increased maximum file size for Civicore uploads from 8MB to 16MB in May 2014.
- Published the fourth edition of the Civicore User Manual, including the following information.
 - More information on how to manage large files.
 - Instructions on how to print and work with draft documents.
 - Instructions for deleting documents from the screen reviewers see (“unreferencing”).
- Revised project documentation checklist to reduce redundancy in early September 2014.

Actions to be Completed

- Continue to work with Civicore to address any remaining technical challenges.
- Refine the number of projects selected at renewal.
- Review project documentation checklist again after the 2015 edition of the *Requirements Manual* is published.
- Take additional actions as feasible.

Issue 2: Instructional Materials and Communications

Challenges to Address

- The Commission's instructional information for renewal applicants is seen as overwhelming and, with four primary reference documents, unnecessary time is spent finding information.
- Applicants report not knowing what to expect during the renewal process.

Actions Completed

- Improved staffing of the Commission "help desk." Applicants can call or email for assistance during business hours every weekday.
- Improved the additional information requests sent to applicants at renewal by adding more context about the issue that needs to be addressed and what is required.
- Improved website links to the online renewal application.
- Implemented a new process for Commission staff to call renewal applicants when the project documentation request is sent to ask if there are questions and to foster increased communication between applicants and Commission staff.
- Hosted conference calls with service centers in late 2013 and in spring 2014; will continue to hold at least twice a year to help communicate programmatic changes.

Actions to be Completed

- Overhaul the framework of the Commission's website.
 - More clearly illustrate the steps in the renewal process.
 - Have materials related to each process step easily accessible (instructions, *Applicant Handbook* chapter, mini-webinar tutorial, etc.).
 - Revise and replace Frequently Asked Questions.
 - Revise how material in the *Applicant Handbook* is made accessible.
- Review and refine the instructions for the Land Conservation Project List.
- Provide applicants with clearer examples of how to write statements to explain attestation responses at renewal and/or unique facts and circumstances.
- Work with the Alliance to have easier-to-access template policies and key documents so that applicants can easily find examples of documents that meet the accreditation requirements.
- Create a new webinar for renewal that focuses on common application challenges based on lessons learned from the first rounds of renewal applicants.
- Present at regional and statewide land trust conferences as requested.
- Take additional actions as feasible.

Issue 3: Accreditation Process

Challenges to Address

- The renewal application and renewal process take longer and are more cumbersome than applicants expected.
- Applicants are less able to demonstrate compliance with the requirements at renewal than the Commission expected.

Actions Completed

- Added ability for the Commission to award conditional accreditation at renewal to allow organizations to be recognized as accredited while ensuring that all accredited land trusts meet the same requirements.
- Added the ability to issue expectations for improvement at renewal in limited circumstances.
- Changed the timing of the attestation documentation verification request so that it happens with the project documentation request rather than making it a separate step.
- Included information in the additional information request about the timing of the Commission's decision so that the process is clearer.
- Confirmed that the term of first accreditation will remain at five years. (The length of the term of future renewal cycles will be reviewed in phase 2 after S&P is revised. At that time there will be more data about applicant compliance at renewal and whether program improvements addressed the issues that prompted some to request an extended term.)

Actions to be Completed

- Review the registration and pre-application steps for opportunities to shorten the renewal timeline.
- Familiarize Alliance field staff with the renewal process and the online renewal application so that they can serve as a resource in their regions.
- Take additional actions as feasible.

Issue 4: Accreditation Requirements

Challenges to Address

- The data show that, while there is appreciation for the transparency of the *Requirements Manual*, there is little understanding of how the accreditation requirements are created and revised and how they are related to *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. Land trusts find frequent changes to requirements and materials confusing.
- The Commission is perceived by some applicants as inflexible. Land trusts do not understand how the Commission takes unique facts and circumstances into account and applies a fair but flexible approach to address land trust diversity.

Actions Completed

- Simplified and clarified some requirements in the 2014 edition of the *Requirements Manual*, such as the following.
 - Combined at-first-time and at-renewal requirements for several required policies.
 - Eliminated and simplified some elements required in baseline documentation reports at the time of renewal.
 - Eliminated and simplified some elements required in conservation easement monitoring reports at the time of renewal.

- Clarified that, for purposes of renewal, title investigation needs to be updated only within 30 days of closing.
- Provided additional examples of acceptable valuation documentation for purchases of land and conservation easements.

Actions to be Completed

- Identify opportunities to eliminate requirements that do not clearly advance the goals of the program and are low risk to land trusts or the land trust community, and/or that reduce redundancy, in advance of the April 2015 edition of the *Requirements Manual*.
- Evaluate whether there are additional areas where the Commission can increase flexibility by considering alternate wording or demonstrated intent to meet specific requirements.
- Strengthen communications about how the requirements are established and how the Commission uses them to provide for a fair but flexible review. Clearly communicate the changes made in the 2015 edition.
- Depending on the extent and nature of the 2015 *Requirements Manual* revisions, consider modifying the application for renewal and making corresponding changes to the first-time application.
- Take additional actions as feasible.

Issue 5: Benefits of Accreditation

Challenges to Address

- Accredited land trusts are challenged to quantify the return on investment provided by accreditation.
- Many accredited land trusts do not feel that the external benefits of accreditation have fully materialized.

Actions Completed

- Created a renewal award packet to help celebrate renewed accreditation and added recognition of renewal awards at Rally.
- Revised the [“Benefits of Accreditation”](#) Fact Sheet.

Actions to be Completed

- Increase visibility of accreditation on the Alliance website.
- Continue to provide funders and public agencies with the list of accredited land trusts and information about the program.
- Add more case studies and stories about accredited land trusts in Alliance communications.
- Create new tools to help land trusts promote their accredited status.
- Take additional actions as feasible.

Next Steps

The Commission will continue to advance the program improvements outlined above in phase 1, with a goal of completing them as soon as possible and no later than the end of 2015. It will continue to listen to feedback from the land trust community and gather data from renewal applications. If you have questions, comments or suggestions please submit your feedback using this link: <https://accreditationcommission.wufoo.com/forms/suggestionscomments-and-feedback-on-accreditation/>.