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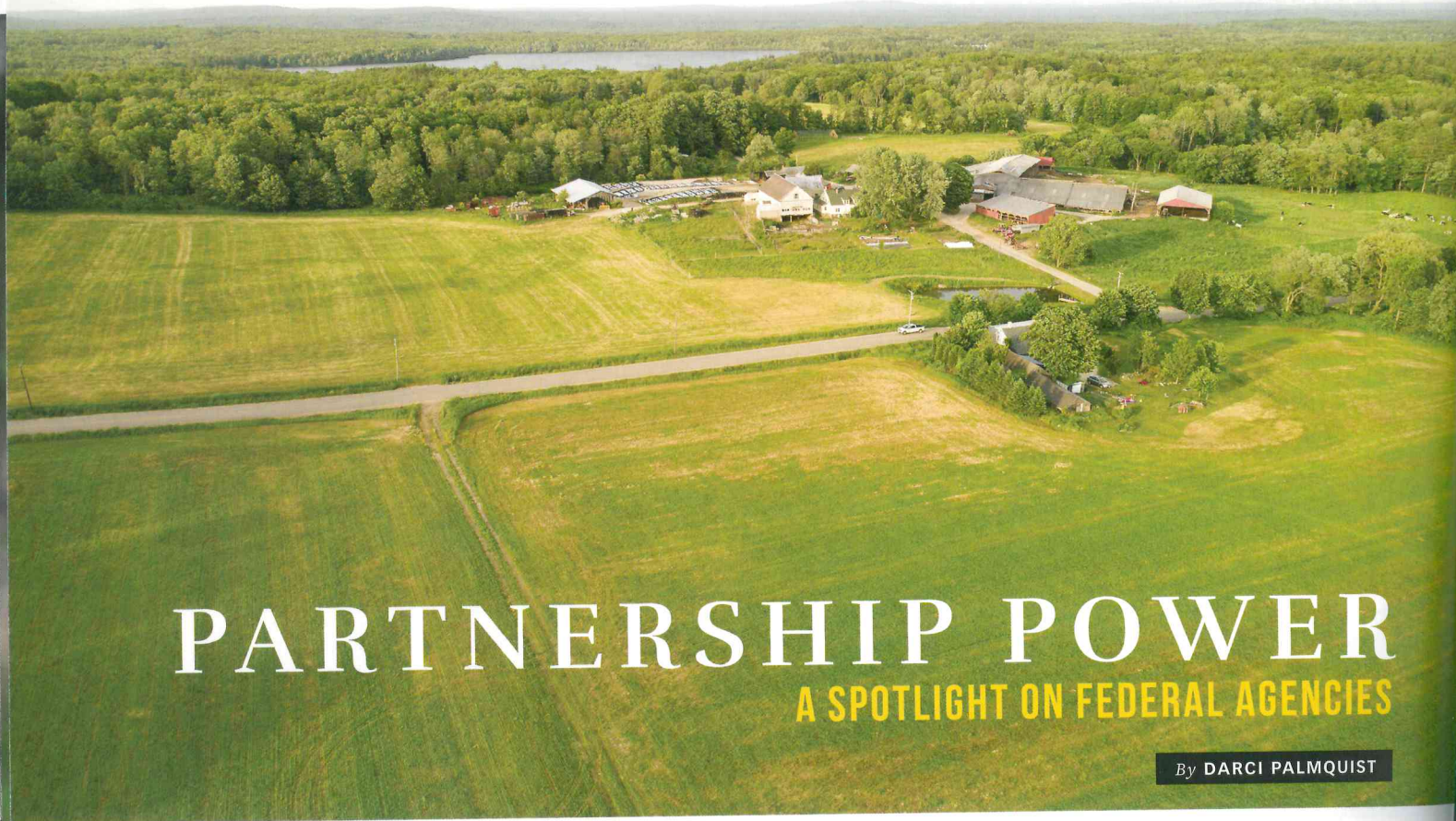


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↓ An aerial view of the fields and forests of Scruton dairy farm, protected by NRCS's ACEP-ALE program.

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PARTNERSHIP POWER

A SPOTLIGHT ON FEDERAL AGENCIES

By DARCI PALMQUIST



JERRY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY, LLC

↑ Bottle feeding young Holstein calves at the Scruton dairy farm in Farmington, New Hampshire.

At the heart of many conservation projects is a robust partnership among landowners, land trusts, governments, businesses, universities, nonprofits and other entities coming together to contribute resources and expertise toward the shared goal of conservation.

While such partnerships take many shapes and sizes, an important role is often filled by federal agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Defense and the National Park Service.

“These agencies bring a legion of resources, from financial to technical to staffing, and a history of collaboration,” says Lori Faeth, government relations director at the Land Trust Alliance. “It would be near impossible to name a land trust that hasn’t benefited from working with a federal agency.”

Considering the impressive scope of these collaborations, here we highlight just a few stories of land trusts in partnership with federal agencies.

**USDA U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**

Born of the Dust Bowl era, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been working for more than 80 years to protect and restore soil, water, air and other natural resources. Through its many voluntary programs, NRCS is the largest funder of private land conservation in the world. As of 2018, NRCS had enrolled approximately 22,000 easements on more than 4.5 million acres and invested, with partners, \$4.3 billion in financial and technical assistance.

"NRCS has long been a valuable partner to land trusts, helping them protect working farms, ranches, forests, wetlands and grasslands across the country," says Nikki Nesbary, manager for NRCS programs at the Land Trust Alliance.

It's a symbiotic relationship, to be sure. "Land trusts all across this country play a pivotal role in extending the reach of NRCS to be able to put conservation practices on the ground," said Jimmy Bramblett, NRCS's deputy chief for programs, in videoed remarks.

One of those land trusts making use of NRCS's many programs is the accredited Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire (SELT). "We utilize almost every program NRCS has to offer—it's an alphabet soup of acronyms," says Jeremy Lougee, SELT's conservation project manager and farmland coordinator.

Lougee cites the former Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)—which were streamlined into the current Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) with its Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP)—the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

While this may sound like a rundown of obscure government acronyms, for Lougee these programs represent something signif-

icant. "With support from our ACEP programs, we've completed 65 projects on almost 6,000 acres of farmland and wetlands," he says. "In some parts of the country, these may not be big numbers, but for us in southeastern New Hampshire, this represents a huge partnership. And all in roughly 15 years."

In 2020, SELT helped Jason and Kerry Scruton—fourth-generation dairy farmers—enroll their 135-acre farm into NRCS's ACEP-ALE program, protecting it with a conservation easement. The Scruton's dairy farm is a valuable asset to the local community and helps maintain a critical agricultural legacy in New Hampshire, where farmland has been disappearing at high rates due to the region's proximity to the metro Boston area.

Such projects benefit from Lougee's participation in the ACEP-ALE working group—a product of an ALE Summit convened by the Alliance and NRCS—that brings together Alliance staff, land trust representatives and NRCS personnel to help practitioners interpret and apply the program to their local projects.

"The ACEP-ALE working group has been a great way to have my questions answered directly by NRCS easement staff. It also allows us in the field to learn how other land trusts are evolving their procedures to fit new rules, as they're rolled out every four to five years with a new Farm Bill," explains Lougee.

"The benefits cut both ways," NRCS Easement Programs Specialist Lisa McCauley adds. "The working group is a terrific forum for NRCS and our partners to work collaboratively to identify opportunities for program improvement."



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)—a bureau of the Department of the Interior (DOI)—conserves and manages natural resources for fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats. FWS oversees more than 565 national wildlife refuges, implements

← Cindy Becker of Driftless Area Land Conservancy, which partners with FWS, leads a group at a pollinator workshop.

↓ Regal fritillary butterflies depend on prairie grasses and are a state-listed endangered species in Wisconsin.





ARNIE BROKING

← Loomis Park Ranch, near Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

↑ A mule deer and fawn. Jackson Hole Land Trust works with the Forest Service to protect wildlife corridors.

critical environmental laws for wildlife and habitat protection, and distributes funds from fishing and hunting excise taxes to state fish and wildlife agencies.

Within FWS are many programs that land trusts and local communities rely on, such as the Coastal Program, Migratory Bird Program and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The latter provides technical and financial assistance to landowners interested in restoring or enhancing wildlife habitat. Since the program began in 1987, some 50,000 landowners have worked with Partners for Fish and Wildlife staff to complete 60,000 habitat restoration projects on 6 million acres.

An enthusiastic fan of these programs, Cindy Becker coordinates the Southern Driftless Grasslands Network, a partnership facilitated by the accredited Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC) and funded through FWS, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and nonprofit grant programs.

In 2019, Becker and her team helped the network secure \$44,000 through state Pheasant Stamp funds, landowner commitments and additional matching funds from the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program for a project to benefit grassland habitat for birds. This goal is especially critical as ecologists grapple with dramatic declines in bird populations across North America. Approximately 3 billion birds have been lost since 1970, including 53% of grassland birds, according to a comprehensive 2019 study.

“About 94% of the Driftless landscape is in private ownership, so our wildlife needs have to be met on those private lands,” says Becker. “With this project, we wanted to engage landowners who were new to voluntary conservation work. It helped to have funding already in hand from the Pheasant Stamp and Partners programs.”

Alongside FWS staff from both the Migratory Bird Program and Partners Program, Becker and her team established relationships with landowners located within two nationally recognized Important Bird Conservation Areas.

“We couldn’t do this without the help of people from FWS—they bring so much time, knowledge and expertise,” says Becker. “At the same time, many landowners prefer working with a nonprofit

or land trust, because they see groups like us as neutral.”

In less than two years, the project far exceeded its original goal of 350 acres. To date, it has secured 780 acres for restoration or improvement efforts, and almost all are with new landowners. There was so much interest, Becker had to turn away applicants, but she’s saving them for the future when more funds are available. The team’s efforts to align projects with FWS criteria will help ensure that new projects are ready to go.



U.S. FOREST SERVICE

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is one of the oldest federal land protection agencies. Established in 1905 under the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service manages 193 million acres across 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands. Its mission is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of forests and grasslands for present and future generations.

Sometimes even federal agencies with seniority need help to get the job done. That’s what happened in 2016, when Loomis Park Ranch went up for sale near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. For more than 20 years, the Forest Service had been hoping to secure the 240-acre ranch. Almost entirely surrounded by Bridger-Teton National Forest, the ranch is located on the 150-mile Red Desert-to-Hoback corridor, the largest ungulate migration corridor in the lower 48 states, and adjacent to the Path of the Pronghorn migration corridor.

“One of the reasons these migrations of elk, mule deer and pronghorn still exist is because there’s so much open land here: private and public protected lands as well as working ranch lands,” says Erica Hansen, land protection specialist and staff biologist at the accredited Jackson Hole Land Trust (JHLT).

But the Forest Service wasn’t able to purchase Loomis Park Ranch at the time it went on the market. So, like-minded partners stepped in. The Conservation Fund (accredited) purchased the ranch while JHLT assisted them in holding and ultimately transferring the land to the Forest Service in 2020.