



The Future of Landscape Conservation – Cultivating Landowner Engagement December 17, 2020

In December 2020, the Network for Landscape Conservation (NLC) hosted a virtual policy forum featuring a distinguished speaker panel of conservation leaders and policy makers. Over 700 landscape conservation enthusiasts participated from an extraordinary array of sectors and geographies across the entire US and Canada, and as far away as Pronatura Veracruz, Mexico. This was the second in a policy series and featured private landowner perspectives and innovations for landscape conservation.

Stay tuned for additional forums. www.landscapeconservation.org



Successful landscape conservation depends upon the ability to work across multiple organizations and land ownerships to manage for shared values. Private landowners are a key class of ownerships. Working farms, ranches, and forests are often the last best places of intact open land. These lands can provide interconnected permeable landscapes where nature and local communities thrive. They are the cornerstones of both human communities and the ecosystems we all depend on. Too often, landowner contributions to conservation at landscape scales are overlooked, while some collaboratives struggle with how to better engage private landowners. With the ever-changing economic, sociopolitical, and environmental pressures, innovations in public policy are needed to bridge gaps and embrace private landowner participation.

NLC recognizes its 4,000 members and 250 organizational partners, and a cross sector and cross-geography leadership team of 30 nonprofit organizations, agencies, tribes, academic institutions, private natural resource-based companies, and more. We thank our virtual policy series sponsors: USFWS Science Applications Program, Network for Landscape Conservation, and the Center for Large Landscape Conservation.

Event Participants



Shawn Johnson – NLC Co-Chair, Managing Director of the Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy, University of Montana

Moderator – Lynn Scarlett, Chief External Affairs Officer, The Nature Conservancy

Jimmy Bullock – Senior Vice President of Forest Sustainability, Resource Management Service LLC

Adam Kiel – Iowa Soybean Association and Senior Vice President, AgOutcomes, Inc.

Jim Lyons – Yale School of the Environment, past Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment

Sara Parker Pauley – Director of the Missouri Department of Conservation, and President of the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies

Keynote: Lesli Allison, Executive Director of the Western Landowners Alliance



While many wonderful things are happening across the country today in terms of collaborative conservation,” Lesli said, “we wouldn’t be having this conversation if it was all working.” She challenged the audience to dig deeper into the relationship between landowners and conservation organizations. She spoke of the need for true collaboration in which all parties come together from the outset around a shared and mutually compelling interest. “It’s important that the relationships involved are not merely transactional in nature, that we actually care about one another’s success.”

She emphasized that conservation strategies for working lands must be fundamentally different from those traditionally used in wilderness preservation. “We have an opportunity to move beyond “Conservation-as-usual.” We’re losing ground and will continue to do so until we change our fundamental approach.

For many years, conservation has been about separating and protecting nature from people. However, when it comes to working lands, the goal of conservation can no longer be to segregate people and nature but must focus instead on how we integrate. These lands, which we depend on for our sustenance, are where nature and people come together. It’s where we must learn to be in right relationship both with the land and with one another. In this context, conservation isn’t about separation, it’s about stewardship. On an increasingly crowded planet, our future depends on whether we can figure this out. This *is* the future of conservation.”

Lesli spoke of the importance of economics in conserving and stewarding working lands. “While conservation easements are one of our most powerful and important tools, they can only take us so far and they do not address the critical need to make it economically feasible to steward land for the many values landowners are asked to provide. The fact is, if land cannot generate reasonable livelihoods, only the wealthy will be able to afford land. Do we really want a conservation model that depends on the wealthy owning and controlling the best lands and resources? Let’s think about what that implies for American democracy, and equity, and economic and environmental justice. Long-term conservation cannot rely on deed restrictions, regulations, wealthy owners, or recreation. Without better economic and cultural support for conservation and stewardship, these strategies will ultimately fail. We need to make it economically feasible for people to earn a reasonable livelihood, a livelihood that produces not just food and fiber but also wildlife habitat and healthy watersheds.”

Moderator: Lynn Scarlett



Lynn moderated the conversation among forum speakers related to landowner collaboration and engagement. She recognized the deep divides in the national narrative and asked the speakers to share their thoughts on a number of these topics: how to build and sustain trust and relationships; the question of land use for recreation, conservation, and protection; how to build investment partnerships; the differing uses of the land for forestry, agriculture, and recreation; market signals; as well as legislation and policy that would foster true collaboration.



Jimmy Bullock

Landowner community: “Private landowners are a diverse community, with varying reasons for owning lands. Most must realize economic return to be able to retain their ownership. One thing all landowners have in common is the privilege of being stewards of the land. Policy and markets can intersect and keep working lands working.”

Conservation: Jimmy pointed out that shifts in land uses aren’t usually good for conservation. He went on to say, “Science-based, landscape driven actions and policy need to be aligned with private landownership objectives. It’s not always about the monetary benefits; for many private landowners, the reward is being a good steward of the land.”

Markets: “Markets, whether for traditional wood products, for conservation of important landscapes, or for carbon can help keep working lands working. Incentive programs for conservation need to be available to all private landowners. There are many opportunities for working forests to engage in landscape scale conservation – but we need to remove existing barriers for large forest landowner participation in conservation. Working landscapes and forests are part of the natural climate solution that we all believe in and a place for a lot of common ground. We need to include all forests as part of the natural climate and conservation solution.”

Trust: “Many old paradigms aren’t working. New paradigms, such as Conservation without Conflict, are the paradigm for the future. Working forests, farms and ranches protect species with non-regulatory approaches. As we build trust and work collaboratively, we are seeing real and transformational change in how private landowners, public agencies and other stakeholders are achieving conservation success across landscapes.”



Sara Parker Pauley

Protection: “From the state fish and wildlife perspective, we identified priority landscapes to start with. With 93% of our land base in private ownership, we worked across boundaries and put aside our siloed barriers to apply finite resources to strategic priorities. The Relevancy Roadmap has focused on supply and demand that provides greater long-term stability. Partnerships and cooperative agreements plus longer-term strategic planning with a lot of different partners focuses on external market-driven components for better longevity.”

Engagement: “The Relevancy Roadmap mitigates hazards and risks and offers comprehensive guidance for federal, state, and local entities to effectively convene at the regional level. This multi-jurisdictional approach requires considerable reliance on partnerships, multi-agency collaboration, and use of interdisciplinary teams. Every state is tackling this.”

Landowners and funding mechanism: “We need to focus on human populations we have not been serving. One thing we’ve done is locate some of our office branches near landowners and address the needs of private lands to build relationships. We’ve been developing cooperative arrangements with initial funding and boots-on-the-ground work. Our citizenry supported a one-cent sales tax for funding and a 1/10th of a percent for cost-share programs to protect soil and water efforts.”



Lynn Scarlett

“Nature is not just nice, it’s essential. The degree to which we manage lands is essential and intrinsic to our economic well-being. The challenges are enormous – some would say at crisis levels.” She also spoke about offsets that could ensure we don’t have steep biological losses. We could protect 30% of lands by 2030 with the 30x30 Initiative. “Conservation banking and offsets are another tool. Developers could avoid impacts as well and mitigate through offsets the remaining impacts if we can structure this appropriately for landowners.”



Adam Kiel

Conservation: “Easement programs work in some locations, but with working lands it is the quickest way to create a generation divide. How we communicate has to be spot on. We can’t start with easements which are seen by some as a taking of productive land.”

Landowners: “We have a high rate of absentee owners and tenant farmers who are doing the groundwork. Don’t forget this dynamic. This is an area of policy innovation.”

Markets: “Farmers will produce anything if there are signals, but markets today don’t encourage the production of water quality and carbon. We need to give them true signals to produce. A shift in mindset at USDA could be used to pay for an outcomes approach rather than a pay-for-practice approach. The farmers see the price for nitrogen reduction and carbon pricing as an opportunity. Watch [Kiss the Ground](#) – a great documentary on this topic. We have an opportunity for agriculture to be one of the solutions to the climate crisis.”

Regenerative agriculture: Cargill made a commitment to support regenerative practices in North America on 10 million acres. We need to leverage their interest and do more than we are currently doing. This is an opportunity, but we don’t want to miss it. We can leverage offsets and connect to the big corporations of the world.”

Partnerships and the Farm Bill: “The Farm Bill conservation title touches less than 10% of working lands. The USDA RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program) program and the Alternative Funding Arrangement is a start down a better path. It has some ability to promote pay-for-performance. We could do more to leverage signals to meet climate goals with USDA programs. We are missing huge opportunities if we only take a government approach to create benefits for all parties. Sometimes programs are more beneficial to government partners than to landowners.”



Lesli Allison

Protection: “Nature will be the first to tell you that there is no such thing as permanent protection. We have broken every treaty when they became inconvenient. Legal protections are not worth the paper they are written on when environmental, economic, or social forces overwhelm them. And they will overwhelm them unless we better align economics and culture with conservation.”

Collaborative Conservation: “People are part of the living landscape. We are a keystone species. We need to look at land as a living community and build relationships around stewarding land for the wellbeing of everyone. Looking forward, how are we going to do this together and do it differently? Hundreds of millions of dollars are being invested in large, urban-based NGOs, yet there is almost no investment being made in local, home-grown conservation where the ground game is actually being played, where success is happening. A little investment in place-based collaborative conservation goes a long way.”

Recreation on the land: “Many people believe that turning land into public playgrounds is the answer. However, as conservationists, we first need to come to terms with the industrial scale impacts of outdoor recreation. From the carbon footprint of getting there to scaring and displacing wildlife to the waste we leave behind, most outdoor recreation is anything but regenerative. We take happily, but we do very little as recreationalists to give back. Second, we have to recognize that the resources and leisure time to travel and recreate have often been built on the backs of those in other places far less fortunate. Third, our national parks are a treasure, but they are isolated and surrounded by increasingly fractured landscapes pocked by congested tourist traps and agricultural ghost towns. The solution cannot be more of the same.”

Funding: “We need a funding mechanism that supports multi-year conservation agreements and transcends political administrations and appropriations cycles. The Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Fund is a successful example. It also effectively combines and leverages federal, state and private dollars.”



Jim Lyons

Land protection: “I see no difference in developing a strategy to use CRP to protect diversity and sequester carbon. Compensation is a helping hand and a mechanism to engage people in a cooperative way especially applied with other measures.”

Markets: “It takes market forces and a commitment to collaboration. Agencies in USDA can work with NRCS and we should be paying people to provide conservation services. We can pay farmers to produce carbon. American farmers can grow anything. Small property owners want to participate in carbon markets, but it’s challenging to do one-by-one. Coops may help that. Remove barriers to entry; upfront costs are tremendous. The most recognized carbon exchange program has restrictive regulations. Start to think outside the box.”

Offsets: “Offsets can be an extremely important tool for mitigation and can also be a tool to encourage restoration work for rural communities. As for carbon markets, companies could put money in a funding bank as an offset mechanism which can be applied to private land or even public lands.”

Farm Bill strategy: “We have a long history of using government resources to build strategies that deal with different problems. Fast forward... maybe we can adapt basic programs in the Farm Bill to address opportunities. Could the Conservation Reserve program become the Climate Reserve program in order to achieve both climate and conservation goals. There is a high correlation between high carbon value and high conservation value.”

Trust: “Trust requires we have an open mind, be willing to engage, and entertain ideas. We have to be there on the ground working with landowners and at meetings with agency officials. We all share responsibility, and when trust gets broken, we all suffer. It’s the landowners who ultimately make the decision. From the very beginning, we can frame the strategies as a collaborative effort.”

Traditional knowledge: “It’s also critical we develop a willingness to listen and learn from generational ways of knowing. In particular, we can learn better to address carbon and biodiversity issues.”



Shawn Johnson

Shawn closed the session by applauding the rich, optimistic, and informative conversation. He emphasized that these connections could inform policy for the benefit of all lands. “These conversations are part of the bigger picture. When everyone stays engaged and works together, it creates an optimism for the success of our work.”

Ideas and Opportunities for Moving Forward

During the forum, our speakers referenced some of the best ideas today which showcase ways to move forward with federal action, landowner relationship building and engagement, market forces, funding mechanisms, conservation organizations and partnerships, and innovations that are currently doing more to encourage private landowners to engage in conservation at landscape scales. Ideas that hold the most promise for early action:

Relationship Building

- Pursue a shared and mutual compelling interest that is not transactional, but relationship based.
- Work across boundaries and put aside our siloed barriers to apply finite resources to strategic priorities.
- Focus engagement on human populations we have not been serving.
- Create governance structures that facilitate coordination and empower collaborative decision making.
- Include absentee owners and tenant farmers who are doing the groundwork.

Market-Based Approaches and Funding Opportunities

- Encourage innovation around policy tools and public/private funding that shape and motivate action among diverse partners.
- We need a mid-term funding mechanism to balance long- and short-term funding needs.
- Conservation banking and offsets are another tool if we can structure this appropriately for landowners.
- Offsets can be used to protect against steep biological losses.
- Pay farmers to produce carbon. The most recognized carbon exchange program has restrictive regulations. Innovate.
- Companies could create a funding bank as an offset mechanism for private land or even public lands.
- We need to give farmers true market signals to encourage production of water quality and carbon.
- Pay for an outcomes approach rather than a pay-for-practice approach.

Landscape Conservation

- Respect land as a living community that includes both people and wildlife on a finite planet.
- Few investments are being made in local, homegrown conservation. This needs to change.
- Explore opportunities to expand conservation programs to include working forests.
- Conservation without conflict works where working lands protect species with a non-regulatory approach.
- Science-based, landscape-driven actions and policy need to be implemented on a community level.

Science and Knowledge Transfer

- Generate and apply trans-disciplinary knowledge and recognize and utilize local knowledge and experience.
- Develop a willingness to listen and learn from generational ways of knowing.
- Leverage Cargill's interest in supporting regenerative practices in North America.

Governance

- Explore options for providing regulatory assurance over a 20-to-30-year time frame.
- Use CRP to protect diversity and sequester carbon on environmentally sensitive land.

Programs Noted in the Virtual Forum

National Programs

- ✦ [USDA RCPP](#) – Program promotes coordination of [NRCS](#) conservation activities with partners with contributions to expand collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns.
- ✦ [National Alliance of Forest Owners](#) – Committed to advancing federal policies that ensure working forests provide clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat and jobs through sustainable practices and strong markets.
- ✦ [The National Heritage Areas Program](#) – Unlike national parks, NHAs are large, lived-in landscapes and entities collaborate with communities to determine how to make heritage relevant to local interests and needs.
- ✦ [Relevancy Road Map](#) – A practical guide to help fish and wildlife agencies engage broader constituencies.
- ✦ [Acres for America](#) – A Walmart supported public-private land conservation partnership program in the U.S.

Relationship Building

- ✦ [The Stewardship Network](#) – As a nationally and internationally recognized organization in this field, the Stewardship Network is committed to practicing collaborative conservation in pursuit of collective impact.
- ✦ [Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy \(SECAS\)](#) – A collaborative approach to prioritizing conservation action across 15 states in the Southeast.
- ✦ [Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program \(NPS\)](#) – A program that provides planning and technical assistance for community-led collaborative efforts (by invitation).
- ✦ [Western Collaborative Conservation Network \(WCCN\)](#) – WCCN promotes community-based collaborative conservation efforts to strengthen and sustain healthy landscapes and vibrant, thriving communities.

Market-Based Approaches and Funding Opportunities

- ✦ [Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program](#) – An Audubon certification seal brings broad market appeal that enhances demand by consumers that want options for sustainably raised beef and benefits wildlife habitat.
- ✦ [Alternative Funding Arrangement](#) – The USDA's NRCS invested \$50 million in fiscal year 2020 to fund a unique, partner-led approach to addressing natural resource concerns at local, regional, and landscape scales.
- ✦ [Restore Colorado](#) – This funding model is a relatively new partnership program from [NFWF](#).
- ✦ [Catalyst Fund](#) (NLC) – The fund invests in collaborative capacity of community-grounded landscape conservation partnerships, collaboratives, and initiatives.
- ✦ [Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\)](#) – CRP is a land conservation program administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA-USDA). In exchange for a yearly rent payment, farmer enrollees agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from ag production and plant species that improve environmental health and quality.
- ✦ [Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Fund](#) – Works with 120+ partners funding 700 projects since 2005.

- ✦ [Wildlife Conservation Strategies](#) – Through Working Lands for Wildlife, NRCS strategically invests and uses conservation strategies to guide conservation efforts for its target species.
- ✦ [Natural Resources Conservation Service – Working Lands for Wildlife](#) – NRCS strategically invests where the conservation returns are highest using strategies to guide conservation efforts for its target species.
- ✦ [Paulson Institute](#) – Closing the global biodiversity financing gap with conservation banks, offsets, and more.

Landscape Conservation

- ✦ [Silos to Smokestacks](#) – An early example of people-based landscapes at NHA which preserves and tells the story of American agriculture and its global significance.
- ✦ [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) – Inclusive public policy working hand-in-hand with science to inform working lands.
- ✦ [Midwest Landscape Initiative](#) – The Initiative identifies shared conservation and management priorities and develops scalable collaborative solutions to achieve healthy, functioning ecosystems in the Midwest.
- ✦ [30x30 Toolkit](#) – Saving nature to fight the climate crisis.

Future Innovation

- ✦ [Cargill to Advance Regenerative Agriculture](#) – This initiative will advance progress against Cargill’s climate commitment and water ambition across 10 million acres of North American farmland by 2030.
- ✦ [Missouri Department of Conservation Bird-friendly Beef](#) – This Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program helps ranchers implement grazing and haying practices with benefits for birds and cattle producers.
- ✦ [Bayer Carbon Initiative](#) – This is helping farmers manage changes in weather using climate-smart solutions.
- ✦ [Bayer Crop Science](#) – Tailored ag solutions in biology, biotechnology, crop protection, and data science.

Additional Resources

- ✦ [BioScience](#) – This journal features the next frontier in nature conservation with articles about research findings and techniques, advances in biology education, and the latest frontiers in biology.
- ✦ [Evaluating Partnership Challenges, Successes, and Opportunities in the West - November 2020](#)
- ✦ [Lessons Learned from the Greater Sage-Grouse Collaboration - 2010-2015](#)
- ✦ [NRCS and Sage Grouse](#)
- ✦ [Working Lands Are the Future of Conservation](#) – Western Landowners Alliance, Lesli Allison
- ✦ [Conservation Economics on Western Working Lands](#) – Western Landowners Alliance, Cole Mannix, Lesli Allison

Community Response to the Virtual Forum

Of the hundreds of people who attended the forum, we thank those who took the time to fill out our survey. This input helps the Network for Landscape Conservation and our partners to plan high-quality, relevant, and timely events and enables us to be responsive to suggestions for improvement.

Many thanks to the sponsors whose generous support makes our work possible!

A recording of the forum can be found [here](#).

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