

Land Trust Accreditation



The Land Trust Accreditation Commission offers outside verification that a land trust conforms with a key set of practices within Land Trust Standards and Practices. Accreditation is voluntary. A land trust should weigh the advantages of rigorous, external review against the opportunity costs of obtaining and maintaining accredited status.

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INTRODUCTION

Accreditation awarded by the [Land Trust Accreditation Commission](#) publicly recognizes a land trust’s ability to operate in an ethically and technically sound manner as measured by compliance with a set of indicator practices selected from [Land Trust Standards and Practices](#). Accreditation is voluntary.

Land trusts seeking accreditation apply to the Commission, which conducts an extensive review process. Once a land trust is awarded accreditation, it must initially apply for renewal every five years to maintain its accreditation. The renewal process ensures that a land trust continues striving for maximum conformance with [Standards and Practices](#). As of 2024, there are over 460 accredited land trusts nationwide, including 25 based in Pennsylvania.

This guide introduces users to the basic features of land trust accreditation. For land trusts interested in researching accreditation further, the guide includes links to additional resources that offer more detailed information.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE PURSUING ACCREDITATION

Not a Prerequisite for Excellence but Greatly Focuses Attention

Accreditation is by no means necessary for responsible land trust work. Many unaccredited land trusts achieve excellence in their operations and conservation projects.

However, many organizations benefit greatly from the attention that they must focus on their organizational systems, policies, and practices to prepare for a successful accreditation application. This focused attention can be difficult to achieve in the absence of a plan to seek accreditation. That said, a land trust may reasonably decide to prepare itself for accreditation but not actually go through the accreditation process, thereby saving the additional time and resources the process would require.

Organization Readiness

Accreditation is available for all United States–based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charities and quasi-governmental organizations that actively acquire or steward land or conservation easements, have been incorporated (or formed as a trust) for at least two years, and have completed a minimum of two direct land or conservation easement acquisition projects. Land trusts seeking accreditation should be committed to building a strong land trust, to the long-term stewardship of land, and to upholding the credibility of the land trust community.

Accreditation is an intense process that requires substantial resources. Besides having the financial means to cover the registration and application fees, land trusts must have people who can dedicate the time to complete and submit the necessary forms and documentation. (According to data from recent application rounds, the process took land trusts an average of 545 total staff hours.) Land trusts may also be required to change internal policies and implementation strategies, and to formalize and document previously informal policies and practices.

For more detailed information, see the Commission’s [“Are You Ready for Land Trust Accreditation?”](#) fact sheet.

Balancing Benefits and Costs

Accreditation is a mark of demonstrated excellence and helps organizations ensure that they operate at the highest standards, but it also has opportunity costs—the use of limited time and money that otherwise could go directly

into conservation projects. When considering accreditation, a land trust must balance the benefits of accreditation (e.g., ensuring appropriate policies and practices are in place and being able to market the organization’s demonstration of excellence) against the costs.

APPLICATION PROCESS

The application process involves completing the pre-application and application, providing the necessary project documentation, and paying a nonrefundable registration fee. Both the paperwork and payment may be submitted online.

The pre-application and application process require land trusts to provide documentation of their compliance with indicator practices in regard to real estate transactions, monitoring and inspections, record-keeping, adequate conservation easement defense and stewardship funding, and other elements of their operations.

The process takes up to 10 months from the time the application is submitted. A team of commissioners and Commission staff members review the applications. In its evaluation, the review team uses information provided by the land trust as well as information provided by the public or found during its own research. Based on the review team’s evaluation, the full Commission makes a final decision. It may grant or deny accreditation, or table the application pending additional information.

A land trust may withdraw from the application process at any time. Accredited land trusts may also withdraw from the program, either by actively withdrawing or by not seeking renewal.

COMMENTS BY ACCREDITED LAND TRUSTS

Staff and officers of Pennsylvania land trusts offered the following comments *when their organizations first achieved accreditation*. (The individuals quoted may or

may not be presently associated with the organizations.) Following each land trust's name is the year the organization was first accredited.

Allegheny Land Trust (2016)

“The process resulted in new policies and procedures that will substantially reduce the chances of an error or omission that could be a problem for us now or in the future. We now feel empowered to advance ALT’s mission with confidence knowing that we are meeting national standards.”

–Roy Kraynyk, *Vice President of Land Protection & Capital Projects*

Berks Nature (2024)

“It is such a privilege to work with landowners to protect the special habitats and conservation areas we call home in Berks County. Being an accredited land trust demonstrates we are a professional organization using the best practices in our field to insure long lasting land protection.”

–Kim Murphy, *President*

Brandywine Conservancy (2008)

“Accreditation brings credibility and accountability to the land trust community through national recognition of our commitment to excellence and the highest professional standards. The process is a great team-building effort and creates an opportunity for young and old organizations to step back, evaluate land trust policies and procedures, and make improvements.”

–Sherri-Evans Stanton, *Director of Environmental Management Center*

Central Pennsylvania Conservancy (2018)

“The Central Pennsylvania Conservancy Board of Directors pursued accreditation in an effort to strengthen and standardize CPC’s organizational and land protection practices. We want our landowners; organizational donors

and members; and partners to be assured that the lands under our responsibility will, in fact, be protected in perpetuity in adherence with national best practices in the land trust field.”

–Anna Yelk, *Executive Director*

Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society (2011)

“The [Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society] is honored to join the ranks of nationally accredited land trusts. Along with the honor, the process itself was the key in enabling the Conservancy to grow as an organization. Moving forward with this achievement will strengthen the ability of the Conservancy to assure generous property owners that their land will be appropriately protected for generations to come.”

–Frank Niepold, *Board President*

ClearWater Conservancy (2012)

“Accreditation is an important milestone in ClearWater Conservancy’s evolution. Working through the Land Trust Accreditation Commission’s intensive application process strengthened our organization and focused the work of our board and staff. To apply for accreditation we submitted extensive organizational and project documentation and made a significant commitment of time and money. We are so pleased to share this significant accomplishment with our members and partners and the community that we serve.”

–Deb Nardone, *Executive Director*

Countryside Conservancy (2008)

“Applying for accreditation was demanding and time-consuming, especially for the staff, but it began paying off even before we submitted our application in terms of making us improve our professional practices. After going through the accreditation process, we really have thought through the big questions in land conservation.”

–Mary Felley, *Executive Director*

Delaware Highlands Conservancy (2011)

“Going through the accreditation process has helped the Delaware Highlands Conservancy prepare itself to grow and to become more effective in protecting land in the region. We can now say with confidence that we comply with the highest standards in the land trust community.”

–Greg Belcamino, *Board President*

French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust (2016)

“Accreditation demonstrates French and Pickering’s commitment to permanent land conservation in northern Chester County. We’re a stronger organization for having gone through the rigorous accreditation program and this strength will help make our community an even better place for present and future generations.”

–Andy Pitz, *Executive Director*

French Creek Valley Conservancy (2014)

“Achieving land trust accreditation is an organizational milestone for the French Creek Valley Conservancy. As a cornerstone of our strategic plan, this achievement positions FCVC to continue its growth as a land trust and ensure that it adheres to the highest ethical, legal, technical, and professional standards for land acquisition and stewardship. Adoption of these standards goes a long way towards ensuring that we can be entrusted with property owners’ visions for protecting their land in perpetuity.”

–Jim Lang, *President*

Heritage Conservancy (2008)

“The accreditation process was challenging at times, but it’s very gratifying to have participated in the pilot program and achieve the milestone of being a part of the first group of land trusts to be accredited. Heritage Conservancy is proud to have received this national recognition from the Land Trust Alliance and will display the accreditation seal with great honor.”

–Cliff David, *President*

Hollow Oak Land Trust (2017)

“Our accreditation was extremely rewarding because it clearly strengthened Hollow Oak Land Trust in the process. The Accreditation Commission staff were very kind and helpful...more nurturing than knuckle-rapping, for which our staff and volunteers were very appreciative.”

–Sean Brady, *Executive Director*

Lancaster Conservancy (2009)

“Going through the accreditation process was a way for us to fine-tune our operations and to publicly demonstrate how seriously we take our mission to permanently protect our lands and natural resources. It both increases our accountability and transparency, and further instills a sense of confidence with our partners, members, friends, and the public in our ability to fulfill this mission. Achieving the status of an accredited land trust is truly a distinction.”

–Ralph Goodno, *Executive Director*

Lancaster Farmland Trust (2009)

“Lancaster Farmland Trust is proud to display the accreditation seal. It is a visible illustration of our commitment to excellence in permanently protecting Lancaster County’s precious farmland.”

–Karen Martynick, *Executive Director*

The Land Conservancy for Southern Chester County

[In 2022, merged into the Brandywine Red Clay Alliance, which is pursuing accreditation as of 2023]

“As a small grassroots land trust, accreditation gives us and our constituents the confidence and the reassurance that we’re on the right path. It also provides our organization with the guidance to consistently streamline our operations going forward. We’re in it for the long haul—perpetuity on our books is forever and a day.”

–Gwendolyn M. Lacy, Esq., *Executive Director*

Land Conservancy of Adams County (2013)

“The Land Conservancy’s accredited status demonstrates our commitment to permanent land conservation. Our organization is stronger today having gone through the rigorous accreditation program.”

–Norma Calhoun, *President*

Manada Conservancy (2024)

“Accreditation demonstrates Manada Conservancy’s continuing commitment to permanent land conservation in Dauphin County. We are a stronger organization for having gone through the rigorous accreditation program. Our strength means special places will be protected forever, making Central PA an even greater place for us and our children.”

–Will Dingman, *Executive Director*

Montgomery County Lands Trust (2009)

[subsequently merged into Natural Lands]

“The Land Trust Accreditation process motivated Montgomery County Lands Trust to dedicate the time and resources needed to focus with intensity on activities that strengthen and professionalize our organization. Knowing that we have done the critical work of reviewing, updating, and developing state-of-the-art policies confirms that we are operating in the most ethical and responsible manner. We are honored to join the ranks of top-rated land trusts.”

–Dulcie F. Flaharty, *Executive Director*

Natural Lands (2009)

“Imagine reviewing and documenting 55 years-worth of an organization’s work. It was well worth the effort, though. Applying for accreditation gave us the opportunity to reflect on our current management and ensure that we were operating at the very highest level.”

–Andy Pitz, *Vice President, Policy & Planning*

North Branch Land Trust (2009)

“When the prospect of accreditation appeared on the horizon, the staff and board at the North Branch Land Trust were intrigued. When the pilot rounds opened, we immediately formed an accreditation committee, submitted our paperwork, and were accepted into Pilot Round Two. The application process was daunting, and often tedious; however, our organization, clients, and supporters are so much better off for our experience.”

–Linda Thoma, *Director of Operations*

Tinicum Conservancy (2009)

“I am very proud of our trustees and staff, who have made this designation possible. Supporters, and those considering support for the Conservancy, can feel confident that their generous contributions of money and time will be well-invested in Tinicum’s future.”

–Jim Vaseleck, *President*

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (2012)

“The accreditation process was an excellent experience for the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy because it allowed us to examine and update our policies and processes. The accreditation confirms that the Conservancy is protecting western Pennsylvania’s landscapes at the highest standards required by the Land Trust Alliance.”

–Tom Saunders, *President & CEO*

Westmoreland Conservancy (2013)

“Westmoreland Conservancy’s accredited status demonstrates our commitment to permanent land protection and conservation. Our land trust is a stronger organization for the experience, better equipped to navigate the various challenges that present themselves in the face of environmental preservation. We are proud to display the accreditation seal in conjunction with our name. It underlines our slogan: ‘Protecting Nature’s home, enriching ours.’”

–Shelly Tichy, *President*

Wildlands Conservancy (2019)

“Wildlands Conservancy is proud to be an accredited land trust. The process made us a stronger organization, demonstrates our commitment to conduct our conservation work at the highest standards, and ensures our mission will be alive in our community for generations to come.”

–Chris Kocher, *President*

Willistown Conservation Trust (2008)

“We did not make the decision to apply for accreditation lightly, and it took a great deal of staff and board time and resources to complete. But there is no doubt that it was worth the effort, and that we now are a stronger and more efficient organization. The process helped us refine our systems and rethink some of our internal procedures. With this accreditation, our supporters should feel confident that we have the resources in place to ensure the permanence of our conservation efforts.”

–Jeannie B. Van Alen, *Executive Director*

RESOURCES

Preparing for and completing the accreditation process is demanding. Land trusts should consider a variety of factors when considering whether to pursue accreditation; this guide is merely an introduction. The following resources provide more in-depth information.

Accreditation Commission Website

In 2006, the Land Trust Alliance incorporated the [Land Trust Accreditation Commission](#) as a program of the Alliance. The [Commission’s website](#) is the starting point for any land trust considering accreditation. It features a wide array of resources and support for organizations considering first time accreditation or renewal of existing accreditation, as well as detailed instructions for beginning

the application process and copies of all the necessary paperwork.

Land Trust Alliance Curriculum

The Land Trust Alliance offers curriculum related to [Land Trust Standards and Practices](#) with special focus on the accreditation indicator practices. Curriculum is available online, on paper, or in person at conferences and other events. The online courses are free for Land Trust Alliance members.

Find more information about the curriculum in the [“Land Trust Standards and Practices” section](#) of the Land Trust Alliance [website](#).

Guided Organizational Assessments

Before applying for accreditation, an organization must complete an assessment of itself vis-à-vis [Standards and Practices](#). WeConservePA has assisted many Pennsylvania land trusts in completing guided organizational assessments. A guided organizational assessment provides:

- An on-site assessment with a qualified professional of the organization’s choice.
- An objective tool to identify a land trust’s strengths and areas for improvement.
- A cooperative process to guide an organization towards full implementation of [Standards and Practices](#).
- A plan to assist a land trust in making improvements (including recommendations, sample documents, and references to technical assistance).

For more information, [contact WeConservePA at info@WeConservePA.org](#).



[Nate Lotze](#) prepared the 2017 and 2019 editions of this guide and [Andy Loza](#) edited them.

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