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Applicant Handbook

Companion to the Application for Land Trust Accreditation

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

112 Spring Street, Suite 204, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

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Acknowledgments
The indicator practices for the land trust accreditation program are taken directly from *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, © 2004 Land Trust Alliance, available for purchase or download online at www.landtrustalliance.org, used here under a license agreement with the Alliance.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission would like to thank the American Association of Museums (AAM) for its invaluable experience and assistance. In compiling this *Applicant Handbook,* the Commission often referred to AAM's *A Higher Standard: The Museum Accreditation Handbook* for guidance.

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The Land Trust Accreditation Commission recognizes community institutions that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever.

The Commission is an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance.
For more information, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org.

January 2009 Update: Revised information on fees and registration.
February 2009 Update: Revised information on withdrawal and preference for electronic project documentation.

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The Commission awards the accreditation seal to land conservation organizations that meet national standards for excellence, uphold the public trust and ensure that conservation efforts are permanent.

Are You Ready?

Take our quiz to see if accreditation is right for your land trust

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission awards the accreditation seal to community institutions that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever. Applicants for accreditation must demonstrate compliance with all of the accreditation indicator practices. The following checklist is a guide to see if your organization is eligible and ready to apply for accreditation. Check all that apply to your land trust.

Part 1: Are these statements true for your land trust?

- ☐ We are committed to continuous improvement and building a strong land trust.
- ☐ We are committed to the long-term stewardship of the land and/or the conservation easements we hold.
- ☐ We are committed to upholding the credibility of the land trust community.

Part 2: Is your land trust eligible?

- ☐ Are you a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt or quasi-governmental organization?
- ☐ Have you been incorporated for at least two years?
- ☐ Are you focused on acquiring and/or stewarding conservation land or conservation easements?
- ☐ Have you completed at least two direct land or easement acquisition projects? (In a direct land or easement acquisition project the applicant organization is included in the chain of title on a fee parcel or is the grantee of a conservation easement.)

If your land trust does not meet these criteria, it is not eligible for accreditation at this time.

Part 3: Does your land trust adhere to best practices?

- ☐ Have you adopted *Land Trust Standards and Practices* (2004)?
- ☐ Have you conducted an assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices?*

Adoption of Land Trust Standards and Practices *and completion of an assessment within three years prior to applying for accreditation are required.*

Part 4: Do you think your land trust is ready to apply?

- ☐ Are you implementing the indicator practices? *Accredited land trusts must carry out each of the accreditation indicator practices. Conducting an assessment against* Land Trust Standards and Practices *and reviewing the application are helpful to evaluate implementation.*
- ☐ Do you have the necessary documentation? *Applicants must provide evidence that they are carrying out each of the indicator practices. If your organization recently adopted new policies, your application must include evidence that the policies are being implemented.*

- ☐ Can you show how your organization reviews and approves land transactions?
  Do you have evidence of how land transactions are reviewed and approved in your organization? Do you have a paper trail for land projects that shows that transactions are screened against criteria and are carefully planned and that stewardship obligations can be met? Can you provide the information your board receives before it makes a decision to acquire land or conservation easements?

- ☐ Do you have a written records policy and are duplicate copies of essential records stored in a separate location?
  Applicants must have a records policy and must keep originals of all irreplaceable documents essential to the defense of each land transaction in one location and copies in a separate location. Original documents must also be protected from daily use and be secure from fire, floods and other damage.

- ☐ Can you demonstrate how you will pay for long-term stewardship and defense costs?
  Applicants must show they have determined their stewardship and defense obligations and are securing the funds to meet them.

- ☐ If you hold conservation easements, do you have baseline documentation (or current condition) reports for all and do you monitor them annually?
  Applicants must have a baseline documentation report for every conservation easement they hold. They must demonstrate a pattern of monitoring each easement annually. The Commission will look for a minimum of two consecutive years of annual monitoring records to show compliance.

- ☐ If you own land in fee, do you have management plans or summaries for each property and do you inspect your properties regularly?
  Applicants must have a written management plan or summary for each property they hold in fee and show that these properties are inspected regularly.

Part 5: Is this the right time?

- ☐ Do you have a team of people who can dedicate the time to complete the application?

- ☐ Can you schedule a time when your land trust is not involved in a complex land transaction or other event or activity for the team to focus on the application?

Test Yourself!

Read the application for accreditation and accompanying *Applicant Handbook* thoroughly to see if your organization is ready to apply. Both publications are available online at www.landtrustaccreditation.org.

Need More Preparation?

If your land trust is not yet able to answer 'yes' to the questions above or to complete the application for accreditation, visit the Land Trust Alliance's website – www.lta.org – for resources and training that may be available to help you prepare for accreditation.

In addition to the application and *Applicant Handbook,* the Commission has other resources available on its website, including advice from applicants and *Guidance Documents* on specific practices. Visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org for these and other Commission resources.

For more information, contact the Commission at 518-587-3143 or info@landtrustaccreditation.org.

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A. Introduction

1. Why Land Trust Accreditation?

In the late nineteenth century, Charles Eliot, son of the president of Harvard University and a protégé of Frederick Law Olmsted, envisioned the formation of "an incorporated association [that] would be empowered by the state to hold small well-distributed parcels of land free of taxes, just as the public library holds books and the art museum pictures, for the use and enjoyment of the public." With a charter from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts granted in 1891, the Trustees of Reservations became the first such "association" and the nation's first regional land trust.

Museums, libraries and land trusts have all come a long way in the intervening century, and are respected institutions in their communities. Museums, libraries, zoos, universities and many other organizations serving the public interest are able to gain professional recognition for their work through accreditation programs. Land trusts can join these ranks and participate in a voluntary accreditation program designed for and by land trusts and operated by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance.

2. Benefits of Accreditation

The public is increasingly demanding accountability from government and nonprofit organizations, including land trusts. Accreditation indicates to policy makers and regulators that the land conservation community has taken calls for self-regulation seriously. Independent accreditation provides the assurance of quality and permanence of land conservation the public is looking for and is essential for building public confidence in land conservation.

Voluntary accreditation also offers land trusts another tool in their toolbox. The accreditation seal will publicly recognize an organization's ability to protect important natural places and working lands forever. This recognition will provide enhanced credibility and respect with land conservation donors, partners, members and others.

In addition, the preparation and application process gives applicants the opportunity to review and implement policies that will help streamline their operations and lead to more effective land conservation. Land trusts in the pilot program, while acknowledging the hard work that went into their applications, have said repeatedly that their organizations are stronger having gone through the process. "Completing our application package was truly a monumental task, but the benefits are already paying off, even before the Commission's decision," says Ryan Owens of the Monadnock Conservancy in New Hampshire. "Reviewing and organizing our policies, procedures, and files made us a stronger organization than ever before, and that achievement alone made our efforts worthwhile."

The public is increasingly demanding accountability from government and nonprofit organizations, including land trusts. Independent accreditation provides the assurance of quality and permanence of land conservation the public is looking for.

3. Defining Accreditation

Accreditation is a systematic and objective verification process that results in public recognition of those organizations demonstrating compliance with established quality standards. Voluntary accreditation is one of the best-known forms of self-regulation. Accreditation programs generally involve highly structured, formal review processes and reliance on established standards. The land trust accreditation program follows accepted accreditation practices.

"Completing our application package was truly a monumental task, but the benefits are already paying off, even before the Commission's decision. Reviewing and organizing our policies, procedures, and files made us a stronger organization than ever before, and that achievement alone made our efforts worthwhile."

Ryan Owens, Monadnock Conservancy (NH)

In order to operate a credible accreditation program, the Commission has designed an application that asks for a significant amount of detail. We know that the scope of information requested may initially take some readers by surprise. However, the focus on documentation is a foundation of a responsible accreditation program. Experience also shows that organizations with well-documented policies and procedures often have effective and lasting land conservation programs.

A thorough paper-based process is a cost-effective way to operate a credible accreditation program without visiting every applicant. It requires organizations applying for accreditation to make a serious commitment. It also provides the Commission with adequate documentation on how the applicant carries out each practice so that it can confidently award the accreditation seal.

The Commission is aware that one size does not fit all in land conservation. Commissioners recognize that there is a wide diversity of approaches that land trusts use to implement the practices and that this diversity is one of the strengths of the land trust community. Commissioners reflect this diversity, and their breadth of experience helps ensure that the Commission understands the many ways the practices can be met by large and small, staffed and unstaffed land trusts. For instance, a budget for one organization may look very different from the budget of another organization in length and specificity – yet both can meet the annual budget practice.

4. About the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and the Land Trust Alliance

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission was created as an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance in 2006. The Commission's charge is to operate a land trust accreditation program to build and recognize strong land trusts, foster public confidence in land conservation and help ensure the long-term protection of land by verifying land trust implementation of specific indicator practices from *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

The Commission was created in 2006 as an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance.

The Commission is a supporting organization of the Alliance. As such, it is separately incorporated and has its own board. Board members are called commissioners. Commissioners represent a broad cross-section of the land conservation community. They volunteer their expertise in land conservation and nonprofit management to provide an independent review of accreditation applications, manage disputes and disciplinary actions and govern the organization. The Alliance Board of Directors appointed the initial Commission. The majority of commissioners will be selected by accredited land trusts, once there is a sufficient pool, with the balance selected by the Alliance.

The Land Trust Alliance is a national conservation organization working to save the places people love by strengthening land conservation throughout America. The Alliance determines the accreditation indicator practices and only the Alliance can make changes to *Land Trust Standards and Practices* or the indicator practices. The Alliance also provides significant financial support to the Commission.

The Commission makes accreditation decisions independent from the Alliance. This is important for several reasons. It means that Commission decisions are not influenced by donor or political concerns. It also means the Alliance's training and technical assistance programs are separated from the accreditation program. Land trusts can continue to rely on Alliance staff to help them with problems while knowing that the information they share will not be part of their accreditation review. For more on our confidentiality policy see the next page.

5. Commission Vision

Our vision is that in the future land trusts have made dramatic gains in land conserved, membership, practices and overall effectiveness. The continuing increase in citizen leadership and professionalism in land trusts reflects the growth of the movement into a well-respected force serving the public interest. The growing pool of accredited land trusts reflects the broad diversity of organization sizes, missions and geography – united by strong ethical practices and by a commitment to sound transactions and the long-term stewardship of land and conservation easements. The land trust accreditation program is a model of self-regulation in the nonprofit sector. It is run by a Commission that reflects and responds to its diverse constituents and has earned the trust of land trusts, regulators, funders and others. As a result, land conservation is widely supported by private philanthropy and government policies, and more land is permanently conserved.

6. Conflicts of Interest

The potential for conflicts of interest exists in all accreditation programs, as individuals involved in accreditation are experts and leaders in their fields. The Commission manages conflicts of interest to ensure that they are not barriers to making fair and consistent decisions and do not impact the credibility of the accreditation program. Our conflict of interest policy can be found online at www.landtrustaccreditation.org.

The Commission's policies prohibit commissioners from assisting any organization in actually preparing an application for accreditation – even

Mission Statement

The mission of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission is to recognize community institutions that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever.

organizations that they represent. Violations of this policy should be brought to the immediate attention of the Commission's executive director. Only the full Commission may make decisions on complete applications. Applicants should neither ask commissioners for assistance with their applications nor ask them to pass judgments on any part of the application.

In order to manage conflicts of interest appropriately, applicant organizations are asked to inform the Commission if they believe a Commission member or staff person has a conflict of interest with respect to their application. Commission members and staff annually disclose organizations for which they may have conflicts. This confidential information is used to ensure that the members of the review team assigned to an application do not have conflicts of interest with the applicant organization.

7. Confidentiality

The Commission keeps all data provided by applicants confidential. For details on what information is available to the public, see The Role of the Public in Accreditation on page 43. There is a confidentiality policy that prohibits the Commission from sharing individual applicant data. It also prohibits the Alliance from sharing specific technical assistance information with the Commission. Our confidentiality policy can be found online at www.landtrustaccreditation.org.

8. Accreditation Principles

The following principles guide the accreditation program.

- Accreditation is voluntary.
- All information provided by applicants is confidential.
- Accreditation requirements and procedures apply to all organizations equally.
- Organizations are accredited based on their current activities.
- Accreditation is not a one-time action; it is a tool to foster continuous improvement.
- Accredited organizations are united by strong ethical practices and a commitment to the long-term stewardship of land and conservation easements in the public interest.

9. Accreditation Indicator Practices

The land trust accreditation program is based on indicator practices from *Land Trust Standards and Practices,* the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust. *Land Trust Standards and Practices* is published and maintained by the Alliance, which licenses the reprinting of the indicator practices to the Commission.

The indicator practices were designated by the Alliance's Board of Directors and were selected to indicate a land trust's ability to operate in an ethical, legal and technically sound manner and ensure the long-term protection of land in the public interest.

Commission Values

Integrity

To be clear and honest in our communications with land trusts, the public and others; to build trust in, and respect for, the accreditation program; to respect the confidentiality of data provided to us.

Accountability

To operate an accreditation program that is fair and makes consistent decisions; to learn from and respond to the land conservation community, the public and other stakeholders.

Service

To manage an accreditation program that is efficient and makes productive use of participants' time; to work cooperatively with land trusts of all types and sizes as they go through the accreditation process.

The indicator practices were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Responsible governance of the organization
- Protection of the public interest with sound and sustainable land transactions and stewardship
- Ethical operations
- Accountability to donors and the public
- Compliance with all laws, such as IRC §170(h) and §501(c)(3)

Please note that this list refers to practices as they are numbered in *Land Trust Standards and Practices.* If a practice is not one of the accreditation indicator practices, it does not appear in this list – thus the numbering of practices in this list and in the application for accreditation is not sequential.

Standard 1: Mission
1A. Mission
1B. Planning and Evaluation
1D. Ethics

Standard 2: Compliance with Laws
2A. Compliance with Laws
2B. Nonprofit Incorporation and Bylaws
2C. Tax Exemption

Standard 3: Board Accountability
3B. Board Composition
3C. Board Governance
3F. Board Approval of Land Transactions

Standard 4: Conflicts of Interest
4A. Dealing with Conflicts of Interest
4C. Transactions with Insiders

Standard 5: Fundraising
5A. Legal and Ethical Practices

Standard 6: Financial and Asset Management
6A. Annual Budget
6B. Financial Records
6D. Financial Review or Audit
6F. Investment and Management of Financial Assets and Dedicated Funds

Standard 7: Volunteers, Staff and Consultants
7A. Capacity

Standard 8: Evaluating and Selecting Conservation Projects
8B. Project Selection and Criteria
8D. Public Benefit of Transactions
8G. Project Planning

Standard 9: Ensuring Sound Transactions
9A. Legal Review and Technical Expertise
9E. Easement Drafting
9G. Recordkeeping
9H. Title Investigation and Subordination
9J. Purchasing Land
9K. Selling Land or Easements

Standard 10: Tax Benefits
10A. Tax Code Requirements
10B. Appraisals

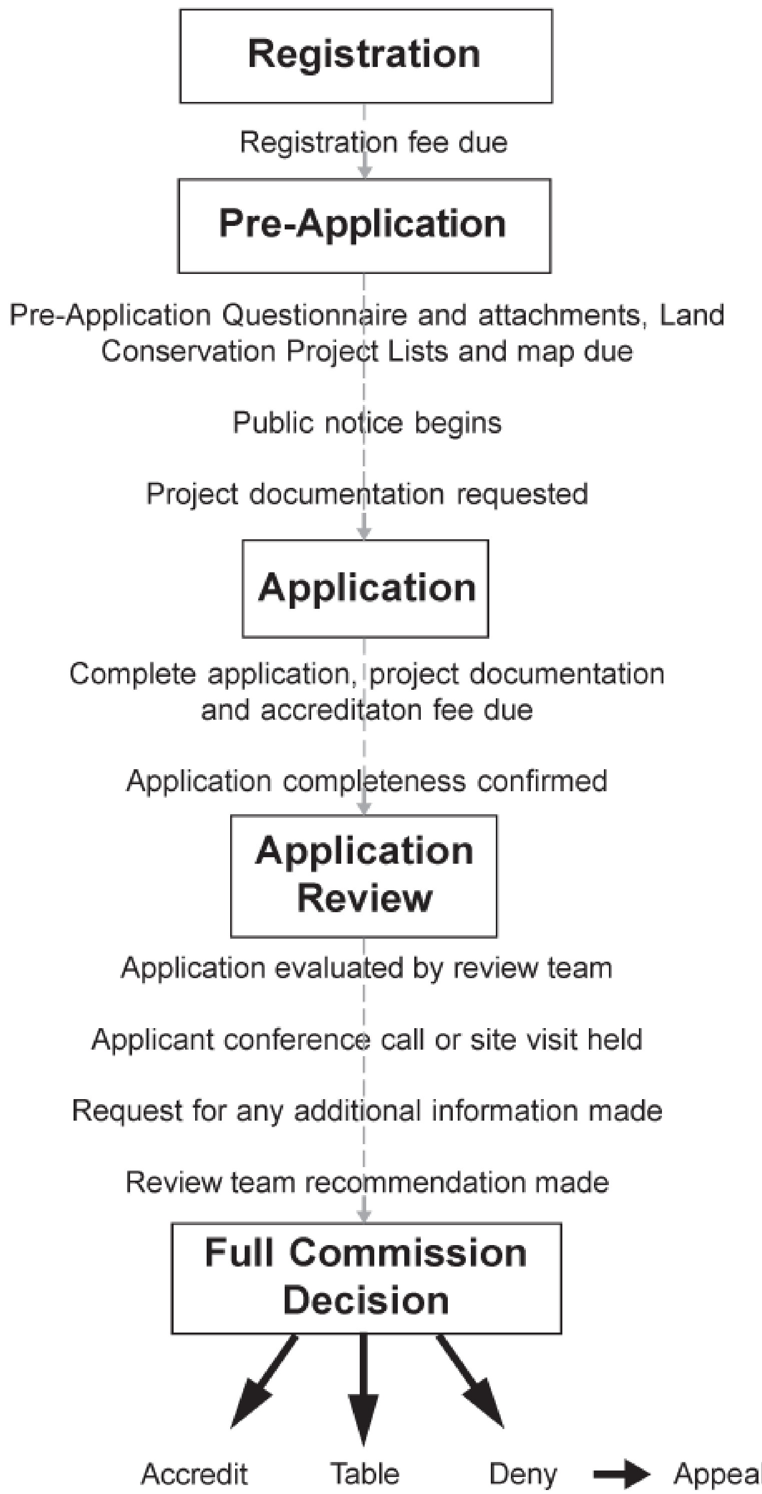
Standard 11: Conservation Easement Stewardship
11A. Funding Easement Stewardship
11B. Baseline Documentation Report
11C. Easement Monitoring
11D. Landowner Relationships
11E. Enforcement of Easements
11I. Amendments

Standard 12: Fee Land Stewardship
12A. Funding Land Stewardship
12C. Land Management
12D. Monitoring Land Trust Properties

B. Accreditation Process

1. Steps in the Accreditation Process

The following graphic illustrates the basic steps in the accreditation process that are more fully described on the following pages. Specific instructions for completing each step can be found in Chapter D.



2. Registration

Beginning in 2009, all applicants must first register their intent to apply for accreditation and secure their slot by registering online. Visit: www.landtrustaccreditation.org/getting-accredited for details and to register. The Commission will regularly update a list of registrants on its website.

3. Accreditation Application and Review Processes

Look for this icon for important tips on the application process and how to put together your application for accreditation.

The Commission will review applications to determine if an organization is meeting all of the accreditation indicator practices. As noted earlier, however, the Commission is aware that one size does not fit all in land conservation. The way that organizations implement the accreditation indicator practices varies widely depending on their location, whether or not they have staff and other factors. Commissioners have extensive experience in land conservation and nonprofit management and will use sound judgment in making decisions that take geography, size and other factors into account.

The accreditation process involves several steps that are summarized below. These steps correspond to the graphic on the previous page. Detailed instructions for completing each step can be found in Chapter D.

Pre-Application

The Pre-Application enables the Commission to verify that the applicant meets basic program requirements before it submits a complete application. Data from the pre-application is used by the Commission to select projects for which the applicant will need to submit detailed documentation and to determine the accreditation fee due at the time of application. An invoice for the fee will be sent at this time.

The Commission reviews pre-applications to determine if organizations meet the basic requirements for applying for accreditation. The Commission may decide that an application should not proceed if it determines any of the following: the applicant does not meet the eligibility requirements; the applicant is not primarily engaged in the active acquisition or stewardship of conservation land or conservation easements; the applicant would not be able to document compliance with the indicator practices and is not a strong candidate for accreditation; the pre-application documents are in unacceptable condition; or the pre-application is not otherwise able to be processed effectively. Applicants will be notified of this decision within five weeks after the pre-application due date. If the Commission determines that an application will not proceed, the organization will need to take part in whatever application selection process is in place at the time it reapplies. The registration fee is nonrefundable and nontransferable.

Project Documentation Request

After reviewing the pre-application and determining that the application should proceed, the Commission will contact the applicant with a list of projects for which the Commission will need to see detailed documentation. The project documentation is to be submitted along with your complete application and all attachments. You will have approximately five weeks before the complete application is due to compile the project documentation.

"We would want other organizations to know that this process – time consuming though it is – is absolutely worth the time and effort to complete!"

Lara Ryan, Green River Valley Land Trust (WY)

Public Notice

As part of a complete application, applicants must notify key stakeholders – via their newsletter or other outreach tools – that they are applying for accreditation and provide copies of the notice(s) to the Commission. For more details on the role of the public in accreditation, see page 43.

Application

Applicants must submit their complete application by their assigned due date. The Commission will confirm receipt with the applicant. The next step is to determine whether or not the application is complete. If an organization submits an application that is inadvertently missing an attachment, the Commission may provide the land trust a limited opportunity to complete the application by a specific date or forfeit the registration fee.

As with the pre-application, the Commission may decide that an application will not be accepted if it determines any of the following: the applicant does not meet the eligibility requirements; the applicant is not primarily engaged in the active acquisition or stewardship of conservation land or conservation easements; the applicant would not be able to document compliance with the indicator practices and is not a strong candidate for accreditation; the application documents are in unacceptable condition; or the application is not otherwise able to be effectively processed.

Applications from organizations that do not have a baseline documentation report for every easement or a management plan or summary for every fee property, and/or are not able to demonstrate annual monitoring of easements, will not be accepted. The following section outlines the general steps in the review process after an application is accepted, and unless an organization is counseled to withdraw (see page 16).

Due dates are dates materials must be received by the Commission. Plan ahead to ensure your materials get in on time!

Application Review

A review team of one or more commissioners and a Commission staff member will review each complete application in detail. Relying on multiple sources of information helps ensure credible decisions that maintain the integrity of the accreditation program. The majority of the information evaluated by the review team will be provided by the applicant or accredited land trust, some information may be provided by the public and still other information may be the result of research conducted by the Commission.

Commission Research

The review team may also engage in research relative to an applicant or accredited land trust. This research may include Web or print searches, documented interviews with individuals knowledgeable about the land trust's activities, informal visits to conservation properties and/or review of other data. The Commission is well aware that not all news accounts, websites or other reports are accurate or complete. Affirmative disclosure and explanation will assist the Commission in its work.

Conference Call
The review team will hold at least one phone call with the applicant to help answer questions the review team may have about the application and to provide for an opportunity to discuss the application. Applicants will receive an agenda prior to the call detailing the questions the review team would like to discuss. While the review team may have questions related to a particular practice, it does not mean that the applicant has done something wrong. In many cases, all that is needed is clarification of information submitted. Applicants should plan to have people on the call who can respond to the questions; participation from board members is strongly encouraged.

Site Visit
Some organizations may be selected to receive a site visit. The Commission uses site visits as a check on the paper-based process and to verify organizational practices or land conservation work on the ground.

Request for Additional Information
After the conference call or site visit, the review team may follow up with the applicant. At this time it will request any additional documentation or written clarification of the land trust's activities it needs to complete its review of the application.

Once the review team has completed its review, it will make a final recommendation on the application to the full Commission.

<u>Full Commission Decision</u>
The full Commission makes final decisions on each complete application based on the review team's evaluation of the applicant's compliance with each of the indicator practices. The Commission can decide to grant or deny accreditation, or it can make a decision to table an application pending additional information.

Accredit
Organizations that demonstrate acceptable compliance with all of the indicator practices are awarded accreditation for a period of five years. Decisions to grant accreditation may be accompanied by expectations for improvement for practices where the Commission believes the land trust must take action over time to improve

"As a busy executive director of a small land trust, it's gratifying to see the hard work being done by other individual groups across the country…and it motivates me even more knowing that all of our work will truly be permanent with the assistance of the accreditation process."

Jennifer Lorenz, commissioner and executive director of Legacy Land Trust (TX) compliance. If an accredited land trust submits an application for renewal, the Commission will evaluate the land trust's progress toward meeting these expectations at that time.

Table

The Commission may decide to table an application until its next meeting, or for a period of no longer than 12 months, pending additional information from the applicant. If an application is tabled, an organization must provide information and/or demonstrate acceptable compliance with the indicator practices within the timeframe set by the Commission.

Deny

Organizations that do not demonstrate acceptable compliance with all of the indicator practices will be denied accreditation. Applicants that are not awarded accreditation will be provided with information on the reason(s) for denial. If an application is denied, the Commission may establish a waiting period before the applicant can reapply.

Applicant Notification

Each applicant will be notified of the Commission's decision. Accredited organizations will be granted a license to use the accreditation seal. Commission staff will work with accredited organizations to promote their accredited status.

4. Withdrawal from the Program

Land trust accreditation is a voluntary program. A land trust may withdraw from the accreditation process at any time during the application process for any reason. An accredited land trust may also withdraw from the program, unless it is facing disciplinary action. A land trust may also withdraw from accreditation by allowing its accreditation to lapse by not participating in the renewal process.

How does this work for small land trusts?

The accreditation program is designed to be achievable by any land trust committed to putting the policies and systems in place to help ensure the long-term protection of land. We know that smaller organizations implement the indicator practices differently than larger organizations. For example, a small organization with limited funds will have a simple annual budget with only a few income and expense categories. A larger organization will have a detailed budget that breaks out management, fundraising and program costs. Thus, small and large organizations will be held to the same practice – having a budget – and the accreditation program is able to recognize that implementation varies by the scale of the organization under review.

A land trust in the accreditation application or review process may withdraw by notifying the Commission in writing of its decision to withdraw from the program.

The Commission may recommend withdrawal when it believes the applicant is not a strong candidate for accreditation or the applicant has not provided the requisite evidence that it is meeting the accreditation indicator practices at the time of application and would need substantial additional time or resources to correct areas of noncompliance identified during the accreditation process.

An applicant may accept or decline the Commission's recommendation to withdraw. If the applicant chooses not to withdraw, the Commission may stop the review process and make a final decision on the applicant based on the information it had at the time the recommendation to withdraw was made.

Withdrawal will result in the forfeiture of all fees. The Commission is unable to return application material if an organization's application is terminated or withdrawn, or in any other instance.

If a land trust withdraws from accreditation during its accredited period or by not renewing its accreditation, it must discontinue use of the accreditation seal and all advertising material that references accreditation and return any accreditation documents requested by the Commission.

Organizations that withdraw their application for accreditation or withdraw from the program must complete the entire accreditation application and review process again and pay the full fee if, at a later time, they wish to apply for accreditation or rejoin the program.

5. Failure to Respond to Commission Requests for Additional Data

The Commission may request that applicants submit additional data at any time during the accreditation process. The Commission may terminate the application review process at any time if a land trust fails to submit information requested by the Commission and/or misses assigned due dates. All fees will be forfeited. Application materials will not be returned if the application review process is terminated.

1. Are You Ready?

Applying for accreditation is a decision your land trust should not make lightly. Accreditation is an investment in your land trust's operations and is also a commitment to the entire land trust community that you will do your part to uphold national quality standards and foster public confidence in land conservation.

Each organization that applies for accreditation will take different steps to prepare. If your organization has not already completed an assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices,* doing so is an important first step to help determine what policies or procedures are needed before applying for accreditation and is a requirement for accreditation. Reviewing the Pre-Application and Application Questionnaires and the Master Attachment Checklist will also help you assess whether your organization has the evidence of practice implementation it needs to apply for accreditation, or if new policies need to be adopted or new procedures implemented. See *Are You Ready?* at the front of the *Applicant Handbook* for a quiz your land trust can take to help determine whether or not it is ready to apply for accreditation.

Each land trust should consider if it will apply for accreditation and, if so, when would be the best time, balancing accreditation with its other program activities. In many cases, this may mean incorporating accreditation into a long-term strategic plan and/or planning to apply after more immediate organizational or program needs are met.

Organizations should not apply until they are able to complete the entire application and assemble all documents. Incomplete applications will be returned and the fees forfeited. Most organizations should expect that it will take several months of internal review and discussion before the application is complete and ready to submit. Applicant land trusts should plan accordingly.

2. Eligibility Requirements

The Commission accredits institutions, not individuals. Accreditation is available to all U.S.-based 501(c)(3) and quasi-governmental organizations that actively acquire and/or steward conservation land or conservation easements, that have been incorporated for at least two years, and that have completed at least two direct land or easement acquisition projects. In a direct land or easement acquisition project, the applicant organization was included in the chain of title on a fee parcel or was the grantee of a conservation easement.

Applicant organizations must also have adopted *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and must have completed an assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices* within three years prior to applying for

Is My Organization Eligible?

- ☑ U.S.-based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt or quasi-governmental organization
- ☑ Incorporated at least two years ago
- ☑ Focused on acquiring and/or stewarding conservation land or conservation easements
- ☑ Completed two direct land or easement acquisition projects
- ☑ Adopted *Land Trust Standards and Practices*
- ☑ Completed a self-assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices* within last three years

accreditation. Lastly, organizations that apply must be able to complete the pre-application and application and compile all attachments. Applicants must meet the eligibility requirements at the time of pre-application.

The eligibility requirements clarify for applicants, funders and the public that it takes time for new organizations to create the systems needed to carry out the indicator practices and that there is no expectation that new organizations will earn accreditation right away.

3. Adopting *Land Trust Standards and Practices*

Land Trust Standards and Practices are the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust. While the land trust accreditation program will only verify implementation of the indicator practices, all of the practices are important for land trusts and for strengthening public support for land conservation.

Adoption, using the resolution included in *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, indicates that the organization has reviewed *Land Trust Standards and Practices,* that it agrees that *Land Trust Standards and Practices* are the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust, that it will use *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as guidelines for the organization, and that it commits to making continual progress toward implementation of the standards and practices.

4. Completing an Organizational Assessment

The land trust accreditation program verifies that applicants are implementing indicator practices drawn from *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and relies on documentation of how the land trust carries out the practices. Once a land trust has adopted *Land Trust Standards and Practices,* it should be conscious of how it can demonstrate that it is implementing the practices.

One way to assess implementation is by undertaking an organizational assessment against the full set of *Land Trust Standards and Practices.* As part of its application, an organization seeking accreditation must show that it has undertaken such an assessment within the past three years. While the Commission will only verify implementation of the accreditation indicator practices, it is important for land trusts to think of their work in the context of the entire set of practices. Assessments conducted in advance of applying for accreditation can help organizations identify areas they may need to work on before submitting their accreditation application. Completing periodic assessments against the full set of practices helps organizations set benchmarks for continuous improvement. If your organization's assessment is more than three years old, a new assessment will help measure progress against your past benchmarks and meet the application requirements for accreditation.

Previous applicants stress the value of completing a self-assessment and doing it well before applying for accreditation. The self-assessment gives the

Readiness Checklist

- ☑ Adopt and implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*
- ☑ Assess implementation with a self-assessment. Be sure to keep your documentation!
- ☑ Address issues raised by the self-assessment.
- ☑ Review eligibility requirements.
- ☑ Review application and *Guidance Documents* and determine if documentation is available.
- ☑ Take the quiz! (See front of the *Applicant Handbook.)*

organization a good sense of its readiness for accreditation and helps identify areas that need improvement.

The two-volume *Land Trust Standards and Practices Guidebook: An Operating Manual for Land Trusts* has information land trusts need to implement the standards and practices, including sample documents. The *Guidebook* is available through the Land Trust Alliance's publications catalog at www.landtrustalliance.org/resources/publications.

One tool available to land trusts is *Assessing Your Organization,* a workbook published by the Land Trust Alliance. A download of *Assessing Your Organization* is available free of charge from The Learning Center (http://learningcenter.lta.org) to Land Trust Members, Partner organizations, and to Individual Members at the $250+ giving level. Nonmembers can order a copy online at http://www.landtrustalliance.org/resources/publications, or by calling the Alliance at 202-638-4725.

There are a number of ways to approach the assessment process. Most likely, no one person in the organization will know everything needed to respond independently to all of the assessment items. Your organization can complete a self-assessment or use a trained facilitator. If your land trust has staff, they might complete the assessment first and then share the results with the board in a facilitated discussion.

If your organization used *Assessing Your Organization* (AYO) as the basis for its assessment, evidence that the assessment was completed may be one of the following: minutes from the board meeting recording the discussion, the agenda from the retreat where AYO was discussed, the AYO summary pages 18 and 37, or if other documentation is not available, a board resolution indicating when and how the AYO assessment was conducted.

Applicants are not restricted to conducting their assessment with AYO. Organizations may use any assessment that includes an assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices.* If your organization did not use AYO, the Commission will need to see a copy of the completed assessment tool (including an indication of the date it was completed and who was involved) along with a cover page that identifies how the assessment addressed each of the practices in *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

While the process for reaccreditation has not yet been developed, accredited land trusts that apply to renew their accredited status will be required to provide proof that they have completed a self-assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices* within three years prior to applying for renewal. Accreditation is a process of continuous improvement and periodic assessments support this process.

Top 3 Pieces of Advice from Previous Applicants

1. Take the self-assessment seriously.

2. Do not apply until you are fully compliant and have implemented your policies and set up your files accordingly.

3. Make sure you have the time, money and right people to tackle the application.

5. Where to Go for Help with Implementing the Practices

Land trusts with questions about particular practices from *Land Trust Standards and Practices* or those looking for sample policies should turn to the Land Trust Alliance or land trust service providers in their region. Many service providers hold training workshops and conferences for land trusts in their region. Several also offer technical assistance programs to help land trusts implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Training courses

The Land Trust Alliance's Standards and Practices Curriculum consists of 15 courses to help land trusts prepare for accreditation. Go to http://www.landtrustalliance.org/learning/curriculum for more information. Also, the two-volume *Land Trust Standards and Practices Guidebook* provides land trusts with the information they need to implement each practice. Land Trust Alliance member land trusts and partners can access these materials and sample documents in the searchable digital library at The Learning Center. For more information, see http://learningcenter.lta.org.

Training courses, as well as working with experienced technical assistance providers, will help organizations understand the theory behind the practices and provide useful tools land trust representatives can use to implement them. However, simply completing a course or working with a consultant does not in itself mean that an organization is carrying out the practices. The Commission will look for evidence that shows a land trust is putting the theory into practice.

6. Where to Go for Help with the Accreditation Program

Commission staff can help organizations understand the accreditation process and answer questions on how to submit a complete application. See contact information on the inside cover.

Guidance Documents

The Commission occasionally publishes *Guidance Documents* to help applicants interpret specific indicator practices. These documents may be amended from time to time. *Guidance Documents* are intended as just that – guidance for applicants. They are not intended to replace information provided by the Land Trust Alliance on how to implement the practices. *Guidance Documents* are available on the Commission's website. Practices with *Guidance Documents* are followed by a ✦ in the application.

7. Where to Get the Application Materials

The pre-application and application may be downloaded from the Commission's website at any time. Though it is submitted on paper, the application is set up as an Adobe PDF form that you may save to your computer to work on over time. The application does not need to be printed in color; color is used in the application simply for applicants' benefit. Organizations may also request a paper copy of the application by contacting the Commission office.

8. Forming an Accreditation Team

Accreditation is both an independent verification process and a way for your organization to engage in continuous improvement. Improvement will occur through broad-based participation that fosters dialogue, planning and cooperative decision-making that continues after the accreditation application is completed. To gain these long-term benefits, we recommend that your organization establish an Accreditation Team.

Quick Clicks

Land Trust Accreditation Commission
www.landtrustaccreditation.org

Land Trust Alliance
www.landtrustalliance.org

Standards and Practices Curriculum
www.landtrustalliance.org/learning/curriculum

The Learning Center
http://learningcenter.lta.org

State and Regional Service Centers
www.landtrustalliance.org/community/service-centers

The Accreditation Team is responsible for overseeing the completion of the application, talking with the Commission review team, participating in a site visit, if necessary, and conducting any required follow-up. The Accreditation Team can have as many individuals as is appropriate for your organization. It must have one primary contact to work with Commission staff throughout the application, review and decision process.

The primary contact is the person designated to receive information and inquiries from the Commission and is not necessarily the board chair or president or the executive director. This person should be able to route information and inquiries to the appropriate person in the organization. Because e-mail is a key component of Commission communications, the primary contact should have an e-mail account that is checked regularly. It helps if the primary contact is a very organized person!

Who should be on the Accreditation Team?

- People knowledgeable about how things work in your organization.
- People who are able to recommend new policies or procedures as a result of answering the questions in the application.
- People who can implement changes resulting from the accreditation review.

Board members, staff and active volunteers are logical choices for the team. For example, an all-volunteer land trust might create a team of the chair, treasurer and a volunteer involved in conservation easement monitoring. Another organization might involve one or two board members and critical staff. A large, staffed organization might involve staff from several departments with a board member advisor.

Long-lasting results are achieved when a commitment is made by the entire organization. We strongly suggest that the Accreditation Team frequently update the full board of directors on the status of the accreditation process.

The Accreditation Coordinator and the Accreditation Primary Contact

The accreditation coordinator is the team's point-person, the person who coordinates the application process for the organization. This should be someone able to delegate and meet deadlines.

The accreditation primary contact is the person the Commission will send key communications to throughout the accreditation process. This person should have a reliable e-mail address that is checked regularly.

Each role is important. They do not necessarily need to be the same person, though in many organizations it makes sense for one person to fill both roles.

9. Designating an Accreditation Coordinator

Pilot program participants stress the need for one point-person to coordinate the application process for the organization. This may or may not be the primary contact. Each land trust should consider who best fills this role, but pilots emphasize the need for someone extremely organized and able to delegate and meet deadlines – a real taskmaster! Once you designate a person to manage the entire project, the accreditation coordinator should:

- Get board (or management) recognition that applying for accreditation is a priority for this person.
- Delegate components of the application to other members of the Accreditation Team.
- Set up a schedule for completing the application and gathering documents and set deadlines.
- Order supplies (paper, binders, tabs, etc.).
- Coordinate the compilation and review of the complete set of application materials.

10. Accreditation Team First Steps

Read the *Applicant Handbook* and the Application

The Accreditation Team should start by reading this *Applicant Handbook* and the entire application. It should be familiar with each of the parts of the application and identify areas where team discussion will be needed.

Establish Roles and Make Assignments

Your accreditation coordinator should work with the team to establish roles for each member, make assignments and establish a timeline to complete the application. You may have one person drafting answers to the questions based on the team's discussion, or you may divide up the questions based on each person's area of expertise or organizational knowledge. Several people may be involved in gathering the attachments. You may want to consider creating a dedicated space where all collected materials can be organized. Again, your accreditation coordinator can help track progress and keep track of deadlines.

11. Accreditation Fees and Costs

There are application fees for the land trust accreditation program. Current fee schedules can be found on the Commission's website. Land trusts considering accreditation should be familiar with the fees and budget accordingly.

In addition to the accreditation fee, applicants can expect to incur additional costs in preparing their application. These costs varied greatly among the pilot program applicants. In preparing your budget for accreditation you should consider at least the following additional items:

- Printing and copying
- Binders, tabs and other supplies
- Postage and shipping costs

Some organizations also budget for contractors, additional staff time, temporary office help, or legal review and/or late-night pizza parties when putting together the application!

12. Time Tracking and Feedback

The Commission asks applicants to keep track of the time spent on preparing their applications for accreditation. This information will help us give better guidance to future applicants and improve our program. In particular, we are interested in knowing how much time was spent gathering documents, filling out the application, preparing project documentation and preparing public notice. An Excel spreadsheet for reporting this is available on the Commission's website.

In addition, the Commission will periodically ask applicants to complete an online survey to share their experiences with the accreditation process. We appreciate this important feedback.

Accreditation Fees

Information on accreditation fees, including how much is due and when, is available on the Commission's website, www.landtrustaccreditation.org. Checks should be made out to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

D. Instructions for Completing the Application

1. Introduction

Applying for accreditation can be a valuable learning experience for an organization. The information in this section will help you make the most of the application process.

The application for accreditation has several parts, each of which is briefly described below and more fully detailed in this chapter.

- Registration
- The Pre-Application
- The Land Conservation Project Lists
- Public Notice
- The Application Questionnaire
- The Master Attachment Checklist
- The Project Documentation Checklist

2. Registration

The registration process secures an applicant's slot and formalizes their intent to apply for accreditation, ensuring that the applicant receives timely and relevant correspondence for their application round. A registration fee is required. For more on registration and fees visit http://www.landtrustaccreditation.org/getting-accredited.

3. Pre-Application Questionnaire and Attachments

The pre-application consists of three parts, described below.

Part 1: Pre-Application Questionnaire

The Pre-Application Questionnaire asks basic questions about your organization. The questionnaire is available from the Commission's website, www.landtrustaccreditation.org. The questionnaire is a fill-in-the-blank form with three required attachments.

Part 2: Attachments

In addition to the Land Conservation Project List described below, the pre-application also requires the following attachments:

- Most recent Form 990 (or Form 990-EZ) and, if applicable, most recent Form 990T. This will allow us to determine the accreditation fee.
- Audited financial statement (if no audit or audit not yet complete, Statement of Financial Position [Balance Sheet] and Statement of Activities) for the financial period covered by the most recent Form 990 and the year prior.
- Documentation of the completion of an assessment against the full *Land Trust Standards and Practices* within the last three years.
- Map.

A paper map showing approximate locations of your organization's permanent conservation holdings is required as part of your application. The map and project lists provide us with an overview of your land conservation work. The map should show approximate locations of both fee lands and conservation easements. It should have been updated within the last year, and you may note if there are any recent parcels that are not yet on the map. The map can be in the format that is most convenient for your organization.

Part 3: Land Conservation Project Lists
An applicant must also provide information on the lands it has protected. This information should be in the form of Land Conservation Project Lists which are described in more detail below.

Submitting Your Pre-Application
Your pre-application **must be received by the Commission on the date that it is due.** This is not a postmark deadline – please plan ahead to make sure your submission arrives in the Commission's office by the due date. Applicants may provide the Pre-Application Questionnaire, attachments and Land Conservation Project Lists on a clearly labeled CD or on paper (CD is preferred). Applicants should submit a paper copy of the map along with the other information. **All pre-application material should be sent at the same time.** Failure to submit by the assigned due date will result in forfeiture of the opportunity to apply until the next application cycle is announced.

Send your material to the Commission's office so that it arrives by your assigned due date. When submitting your pre-application, please include the following.

- ☑ Pre-Application Questionnaire [CD (preferred) or paper copy]
- ☑ Attachments [CD (preferred) or paper copy]
- ☑ Land Conservation Project Lists [CD (preferred) or paper copy]
- ☑ Map of conserved properties (paper)

4. Land Conservation Project Lists

Land Conservation Project Lists must be included for all conservation easements and all fee properties held for conservation by your organization. These will be used by the Commission to select projects for which it will request project documentation as part of the complete application.

Instructions for Completing the Project Lists
Please compile the lists using the Microsoft Excel template spreadsheet that you may download from the Commission's website and fill in the appropriate columns for each project. If your organization keeps the information the spreadsheet calls for in a database, you can submit the list in the report format most convenient for you, provided that you include the information required for each column of the spreadsheet.

Due Dates

Throughout the application and review process, your land trust will be asked to meet various deadlines (i.e. submit additional documents, etc.). As with the pre-application and application due dates, the due date is the date the information is due in our office, not the date it is postmarked.

Short and Sweet

If you are submitting your pre-application or project documentation data electronically on CD, please note that we may not be able to open electronic files that have long file names. CD files can have path names of no more than 64 characters, whereas files on hard drives and networks can have path names exceeding 200 characters!

Date of Data in Application Answers

Review team members will assume applicants are giving current data unless it is noted otherwise. If you are using close-of-fiscal-year data or some other data point for some answers, please make it clear to reviewers what the date of the data is. For example, if you answer that you have 5,000 acres protected, we will assume that this is an up-to-date number. If it is not, your answer should say something like, "5,000 acres as of the end of the fiscal year 12/31/06." Applicants may mix dates, for instance giving us the current number for acres in one place and an end-of-year number for their operating reserve in another place, with an accompanying note in the answer.

If a landowner has asked for anonymity you may list the project name as 'anonymous' on the land conservation project list. If you have several anonymous landowners please make sure that we can distinguish among them by the name of the town, date of acquisition, etc. The Commission may request documentation for projects even if they are listed as anonymous.

If using the template spreadsheet, note that it contains two worksheets accessible via tabs at the bottom of the page. One tab is for conservation easements, the other is for fee ownerships.

The columns marked with a double line need only be completed with data from the last five years. They ask whether the land trust signed a Form 8283 for the project, if the property has changed ownership, if the transaction involved a board or staff member or other insider, and if there has been an amendment to, or violation of, the conservation easement. They are included so that we may better understand the applicant's conservation work and how the indicator practices are being implemented. The template spreadsheet has checkboxes built in for this section; if you use your own spreadsheets, you can simply mark an "X" in the column. Checking these boxes is not a sign of a problem, nor does it affect the review of your application.

Conservation Easement Worksheet Detailed Instructions

Column A:	Date conservation easement was acquired
Column B:	Name of conservation easement project
Column C:	Grantor from whom the conservation easement was acquired
Column D:	Town (and state if operating in more than one state) where the property is located
Column E:	Total acreage of the conservation easement-restricted area
Column F:	Type indicates how the conservation easement was acquired, using the following letters: donation (D), purchase (P), bargain sale (B), mitigation/regulatory requirement (M) or other (O). For (O), provide details in Column N. Use multiple letters if the project involved multiple types of transactions.
Column G:	Date baseline documentation report was completed
Column H:	Monitoring inspection dates for the last 36 months (month and year)
Column I:	Check if a Form 8283 was signed by the land trust for this project in the last five years
Column J:	Check if the property was transferred to a new owner in the last five years
Column K:	Check if the conservation easement was amended in the last five years
Column L	Check if the conservation easement experienced a major violation in the last five years

Column M:	Check if the conservation easement transaction involved a potentially conflicted party (such as a board or staff member or other insider) in the last five years
Column N:	Explanatory notes, if any

Fee Ownership Worksheet Detailed Instructions

Column A:	Date(s) property was acquired
Column B:	Name of property*
Column C:	Grantor from whom the property was acquired
Column D:	Town (and state if operating in more than one state) where the property is located
Column E:	Total acreage of the property
Column F:	Type indicates how the property was acquired, using the letters below: donation (D), purchase (P), bargain sale (B), mitigation/regulatory requirement (M) or other (O). For (O), provide details in Column K. Use multiple letters if project involved multiple types of transactions.
Column G:	Inspection dates for the last 36 months (month and year)
Column H:	Date most recent management plan was finished
Column I:	Check if a Form 8283 was signed by the land trust for this project in the last five years
Column J:	Check if the acquisition involved a potentially conflicted party (such as a board or staff member or other insider) in the last five years
Column K:	Explanatory notes, if any

If using the template spreadsheet to develop your Land Conservation Project Lists, note that it contains two worksheets accessible via tabs at the bottom of the page. One tab is for conservation easements, the other is for fee ownerships.

*Note: For properties comprised of multiple parcels, you may list the project or preserve name, years of acquisition and total acreage of the entire property – rather than listing each parcel – and explain the details in the notes column. See Example 1 below.

5. Public Notice

As part of a complete application, applicants for accreditation are required to provide evidence that they have notified key stakeholders that the organization is applying for accreditation. The notice to stakeholders must include information on how interested parties can comment, when comments are due and the requirement that comments must relate to the indicator practices.

Example 1

How to List Projects or Preserves Made Up of Multiple Parcels

Column A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
								Last 5 years		
Date Acquired	Property or Preserve Name	Grantor	Town/State	Acres	Type	Last 2 Inspection Dates mm/yy - mm/yy	Date of Management Plan	Form 8283	Con-flicted Party	Notes
85-present	*Smith Lot*	*John Smith*	*Towns of Greenacre and Brownacre*	*1200*	*P, B, D*	*09/06 - 09/07*	*12/21/05*	☐	☐	*The Smith Lot has more than 10 parcels acquired over 10 years.*

The Commission will post applicants' names on its website and include a listing in its eNewsletter. The Commission will accept signed, written comments from the public on pending applications. Members of the review team may also reach out to potentially interested parties for documented comments during the review process.

While comments received by the Commission must be attributed, the name of the commentator may be withheld from the applicant upon request if releasing the name would have adverse consequences for the person making the comment.

"Becoming accredited may be the single best thing you can do to keep your properties preserved for future generations."

Paul Gallay, Westchester Land Trust (NY)

Comments will be shared with the review team. If a comment indicates that a land trust may not be in compliance with the indicator practices, it will be forwarded to the applicant with an opportunity to respond. Public comments will not be the sole determining factor in an accreditation decision but may lead to a request for additional information and follow-up.

Applicant Requirement for Notifying Stakeholders

Applicants for accreditation are required to notify key stakeholders that they are applying for accreditation and to include copies of the notices with their complete applications. Applicants may wait to issue the notice until their pre-application is accepted, but notice must be completed by the time the complete application is submitted. The notices sent by applicants must include information on how interested parties can comment, a reminder that comments must relate to the indicator practices and a target due date – 45 days after the application due date. A sample is provided on the next page.

The complete application must include copies of the notices along with a short summary of who was notified and when. The Commission will review the notices to see that both internal and external stakeholders were notified. The application will not be complete without copies of the notices.

Who Must Be Notified and How

Land trusts interact with a wide array of groups and individuals, and there is no one-size-fits-all list of stakeholders. Each land trust must determine who its most important internal and external stakeholders are and the best way to reach them. Consider people knowledgeable about your organization or its work who might have comments relevant to accreditation. See Example 2 for a list of stakeholders and possible ways to reach them.

Below are some specific examples your land trust might consider.

- *Newsletter*
  If you run an article in your newsletter, send us a copy of the newsletter along with general information on the size and type of list it was sent to, not the actual list (i.e. 750 dues-paying members and local town council members).
- *Targeted letter to knowledgeable colleagues*
  If you send a more targeted letter to a small group of stakeholders, we

Example 2
Internal and External Stakeholders and Possible Outreach Methods

Internal Stakeholders	**Outreach Methods**
Board and advisory committee members	Broadcast email, printed newsletters, meetings, webpage item coupled with outreach directing readers to website, other methods that achieve the same outcome
Staff	
Key volunteers	
General members and/or donors	

External Stakeholders	**Outreach Methods**
Elected officials	Press release to area newspapers, printed newsletters, postings on appropriate listserves, webpage item coupled with outreach directing readers to website, personal letters or meetings, public notices, other methods that achieve the same outcome
Public agencies	
Area residents	
Community organizations	
Conservation groups	
Land trust networks or coalitions	
Abutters to actively managed or highly used land trust properties	

would like to see a copy of the letter and the list of names and/or affiliations of the people it was sent to.

- *Press releases, letters to the editor and legal notices*
  You may also consider sending a press release or letter to the editor to local or regional newspapers. Some groups have also printed a legal notice. You may send us a copy of the release, letter or notice submitted and a list of newspapers it was sent to.
- *Website*
  Many organizations have posted information on how to submit a public comment on their websites. You may simply indicate in a cover note to us that information was posted on your website and include the specific link or you can submit a printed copy of the page. Also let us know how you let people know it was posted.

<u>Sample Public Notification Text</u>
Below is sample text your organization can use to announce its application for accreditation and the opportunity for the public to submit comments. You may edit the language, but the key components – how to comment, that comments must relate to national quality standards, and a target due date – must be included. Contact Commission staff if you have questions about drafting the notices.

> The land trust accreditation program recognizes land conservation organizations that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever. [LAND TRUST NAME] is pleased to announce it is applying for accreditation. A public comment period is now open.
>
> The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, conducts an extensive review of each applicant's policies and programs. [CONSIDER INCLUDING A

QUOTE HERE ON WHAT ACCREDITATION MEANS TO YOUR ORGANIZATION OR WHY IT IS IMPORTANT.]

The Commission invites public input and accepts signed, written comments on pending applications. Comments must relate to how [LAND TRUST NAME] complies with national quality standards. These standards address the ethical and technical operation of a land trust. For the full list of standards see www.landtrustaccreditation.org/getting-accredited/2008-indicator-practices.

To learn more about the accreditation program and to submit a comment, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org. Comments may also be faxed or mailed to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, Attn: Public Comments: (fax) 518-587-3183; (mail) 112 Spring Street, Suite 204, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866. Comments on [LAND TRUST NAME]'s application will be most useful by [45 DAYS FROM COMPLETE APPLICATION DUE DATE]. (For example, if your application is due May 1, this date would be June 14.)

Plan Ahead

If there are required documents you need to get from the state or federal government (i.e. Certificate of Good Standing, final tax determination letter), don't wait to request copies as it may take a while to get what you need.

A signed Accreditation Agreement and a Board Resolution are required as part of a complete application. Plan now to have those items on a board agenda in advance of your application due date.

6. Completing the Application Questionnaire

The application is available electronically as an Adobe PDF form. We encourage you to complete your final version of the application electronically, answering the questions right in the Adobe PDF form.

Application questions requiring a response are preceded by a ? icon. Detailed information and tips on using the Adobe PDF form are available on the Commission's website. The information below will help guide you as you prepare your responses to the application questions.

How Long an Answer?

Your answers to the questions in the application should be concise and candid. We want you to briefly describe your organization's operations, not to provide exhaustive detail. However, you do need to answer the entire question or reference a previous answer. You should do what you can to help a reader who does not know about your organization understand the work you are doing.

A land trust may have substantially changed its practices in the last few years. If this is the case you may want to note when substantial changes were made so that reviewers can understand differences between application answers and project documentation. It helps to be candid; if you have past projects that would not be done the same way today, just explain what would be different.

In many cases, the organization may have a written policy or procedure that fully describes the process. If so, there is no need to repeat what is in the written document; you may simply refer to the attachment and how you use it in your application response.

Do not be concerned about getting the "right" answer. The Commission recognizes that there is a diversity of approaches in how each land trust implements the indicator practices. The key is that they are being implemented and you can show us how it is done in your land trust.

New Policies

If your organization recently adopted new policies, your application must include evidence that the policies are being implemented. You may either provide documentation that your practices were in place before being formalized in a policy or show documentation of how the new policy is implemented.

Your application answers should help readers who do not know your organization understand the work you are doing.

What if a Practice Does Not Apply to My Organization?

Each organization is expected to comply with each indicator practice. Answers in the application should provide a clear explanation of how your land trust approaches the practice.

Organizations that hold only conservation easements or only fee lands are only expected to comply with those practices that relate to the work they are engaged in at the time the application is submitted. The application notes which questions apply to which types of holding. Land trusts should be familiar with the practices that apply to projects they take on in the future.

If an applicant subsequently engages in activities for which it was not required to demonstrate compliance in its application, it must notify the Commission of its additional activities. Depending on the project, the applicant may be asked by the Commission to submit documentation of compliance once the project is complete. For example, if your organization currently holds only conservation easements, in the application you would only answer questions relative to holding conservation easements. If, in the future, your organization were to start holding lands in fee, you would notify the Commission of the change and let us know when the project is complete. Depending on the project and how close the organization is to renewal, we might ask for project documentation and other data to demonstrate compliance with the indicator practices relative to holding fee land.

Save paper!

Double side your copies.

7. The Master Attachment Checklist and Attachments

About the Attachments

The attachments provided as part of your application are a key part of demonstrating how your organization complies with the indicator practices. When an attachment is called for in the application, it is preceded by a icon (refer to the Master Attachment Checklist in the application for the full set of attachments).

In many places, the application provides you with the flexibility to choose the evidence that you think best shows how your organization implements a practice. That is because we know that each organization implements the practices differently. As with answering the questions in the application, do

As part of a complete application, applicants for accreditation must submit their most recent **Form 990** and the Form 990 from three years ago. The Commission expects to receive the unredacted copies of these forms that include the names of substantial contributors to the land trust as we use this information to evaluate several practices. We understand that many land trusts keep this information confidential. The Commission is committed to maintaining the confidentiality of Forms 990 – like all other material submitted by applicants. Please see the Commission's Confidentiality Policy for more information.

Date of Documents

As you prepare your attachments please make sure that the documents have a date on them. Our reviewers need to know when the documents were created, revised and/or adopted.

your best to show someone who is not familiar with your organization what it is doing to implement the practice.

Your organization should make sure that all documents are provided with the application as they are a critical part of the review process and incomplete applications will not be reviewed. All documents on the checklist are required, unless noted as *if applicable* or *if available* or unless it would be clear to a reviewer that they do not apply to your organization.

<u>About the Checklist</u>

The Master Attachment Checklist is a guide for accreditation applicants. Like the application, the checklist is an Adobe PDF form and is available as a stand-alone document on the Commission's website. The checklist should be the first document in the binders you submit, and it will serve as the Table of Contents for your application. It is organized as your application binders should be organized, including tabs for the following:

- Tab: Application Questionnaires
  This section has your completed questionnaires. Reviewers will repeatedly go back and forth between this section and the attachments. Being able to easily find the questionnaires helps the reviewer.
- Tab: Preliminary Attachments
  These attachments provide introductory information about your land trust and its conservation work.
- Tab: Core Documents
  This section has core documents that the reviewers may refer to several times. It helps reviewers to know that every applicant will have its bylaws included as core document 3. If you have master policy documents that you think reviewers will need to refer to regularly, you should give them a number, starting with number 9, and include them here.
- Numbered tabs 1–12 for Attachments for Standards 1–12
  These sections contain all of the material required to document compliance with the specific indicator practices, organized by standard.

<u>Completing the Checklist</u>

In the column labeled "Check," applicants should check off those items that are included in their application. In the column labeled "Location," applicants should note the tab where the attachment is located. If the title of the actual document is different from the one on the checklist, there is space for you to indicate the proper title on the checklist under "Document Name."

<u>Numbering Attachments</u>

Each attachment has been assigned a standard number by the Commission. Please do not change the numbering system! The document number on the Master Attachment Checklist should appear on your corresponding attachment. For example, the attachments listed under Core Documents are numbered 1-9. Your organization's Articles of Incorporation should have a number 2 clearly visible. Attachment number 3C2 would be the package of material provided to the board in advance of its last meeting, 3C3 the minutes from the last two meetings, and so on.

Naming Attachments and Dates

We know that there is great variability in how organizations document policies and procedures and organize documents. We know that land trusts do not all use the same names for their policies or procedures, and many have policies that combine several elements of the indicator practices. In order for us to clearly understand what attachment is being submitted as documentation for what practice, please indicate the title of your documents on the Master Attachment Checklist (see Example 3).

Every attachment should include the name of your organization, a title and a date of creation, approval or last revision, as appropriate. With respect to formal policies adopted by the board, please indicate on the policy if it was adopted by the full board and when it was approved. If it is not clear from looking at the policy that it was adopted by the board, then also attach the minutes of the board meeting when the policy was adopted. Other attachments should include an indication of whether they were formally adopted or not, as applicable.

Documents That Apply to More than One Practice

Your organization may have some policies, procedures or checklists that contain information that applies to more than one question in the application or indicator practice. **There is no need to attach it twice.** For subsequent references to the same document, simply note the tab location and title of the document in the appropriate location of the checklist. This is helpful, for instance, if a document in Tab 1 is also used by your organization to demonstrate implementation of standards 8 and 11. You only need to attach

Direct the reader!

When you attach documents that include a small reference to the item requested in the application (i.e. board meeting minutes, amended easements, etc.), please help the reviewers more quickly find the referenced information by highlighting the relevant text in some way (an arrow, highlighted text, stickers, etc.).

Example 3
How to List Documents in Master Attachment Checklist

Tab 11: Standard 11 *(for organizations that hold easements)*			
Check	**Location**	**Number**	**Document Name** *(include actual document title)*
☒	Tab 11	11A1	Stewardship fund calculation worksheet or formula used by your organization, or a written explanation of how your organization determines the appropriate amount needed to steward its easements Title: *Green Acres Land Trust Easement Stewardship Cost Estimate*
☒	Tab 6	11A2	Policies or procedures with respect to securing funds for easement stewardship, *if available* Title: *Green Acres Stewardship Fund Contribution and Investment Policy*

it once in Tab 1; in standards 8 and 11 you would refer back to Tab 1. (See Example 3 for an example of a document with a different name than given on the checklist, and an example of a document requested in Standard 11 that was already provided as an attachment in tab 6.)

Please note that all policies must be dated and must indicate if they were adopted by the full board (either on the policy itself or, if not noted on the policy, then attach the minutes of the board meeting when the policy was adopted). Other attachments should have dates and an indication of whether they were formally adopted or not, as applicable.

If your organization has a large policy manual, such as a board manual or land protection manual, that you refer to often throughout the application, it will help reviewers if this is included as part of the Core Documents tab and given a document number. This will make it easier for reviewers who will need to refer to it often. It will also make it easier for you to refer back to the document's specific number and location in your written answers.

<u>Selecting Which Attachments to Include</u>

The Commission needs enough information to see evidence that the practice is carried out. If you have several different items that show implementation you should include all that apply. This will be helpful for practices like 8G, Project Planning. In other cases, you might provide an example of a typical document rather than every document of that type. For example, you might include a copy of a signed conflict of interest disclosure for one board member rather than all of them.

You may also have additional documents that are not specifically requested in the application but are relevant. You should feel free to include these as long as they are clearly labeled and noted in your final checklist.

<u>"Not Applicable" or "Not Available"</u>

There may be attachments on the checklist that are not applicable to your organization. In those cases, simply write NA in the "Location" column to indicate "not applicable."

Your organization may or may not have all of the items marked *if available* on the checklist. As noted earlier, each organization approaches implementation in different ways. The *if available* attachments are common in many organizations but, if your organization does not have the document, you can provide a detailed written response in the application to describe how your organization approaches the practice.

When in doubt, call or email the Commission! Commission staff members are available to answer questions.

8. Project Documentation

<u>Introduction</u>

The Commission will select conservation projects for which the applicant will submit documentation as part of its complete application, as outlined on page 13. The project documentation is an important part of the accreditation review process. The documentation provides evidence that your organization implements its policies and the indicator practices in your land conservation program. In some accreditation systems, this type of program verification is accomplished with costly site visits of every applicant. In order to streamline the land trust accreditation program and contain costs, the project-documentation review fills this essential program-verification function.

A icon in the application indicates practices for which the Commission will review project documentation as part of its process to verify implementation of the practice.

Project Selection

We will generally select at least one newer project from both your fee and easement project lists (if applicable). We expect that newer projects will show how your organization implements each of the appropriate indicator practices. We will also select at least one older project. We know that older projects might not contain all of the documentation that newer projects do. At a minimum we will look at the older projects to see how prepared your organization is to meet its stewardship obligations. In reviewing this range of files, we will be able to see how your organization's practices have evolved over time.

The number of projects selected depends on how many projects in each category – conservation easements or fee properties – you have completed. Generally, we will not select more than six projects (see below for exceptions) and will use the following to guide the number of projects selected.

≤ 25 projects in a category	=	up to two projects for the category
≤ 50 projects in a category	=	up to three projects in the category
≤ 100 projects in a category	=	up to four projects in the category
≤ 200 projects in a category	=	up to five projects in the category
> 200 projects in a category	=	as determined by the Commission

The Commission may select more than six projects for a variety of reasons, such as when organizations have completed a large number of projects, have a variety of very unique projects or have multiple interlocking corporations holding land. The review team may also request documentation for more projects if it believes this information is needed to make an accreditation decision.

Organizing Project Documentation

The documents requested for each project are listed in the Project Documentation Checklist, available as a stand-alone form on the Commission's website. We realize that not every project will have every document, particularly the older ones. We want to see what documents exist for the property at the time of your application. Knowing how your projects have changed over time is helpful. Your organization should not create new documents for the purposes of augmenting the application! Falsification of documents will result in the denial of accreditation.

The Project Documentation Checklist serves as the table of contents for each set of project documentation. The checklist, available on the Commission's website, should be duplicated for each project. To compile your project documentation, check off the documents on the checklist that

Project Documentation Tips

The Commission prefers to receive project documentation electronically on 3 well-organized CDs or DVDs Organize the disc contents just as you would a binder: by project, standard, and practice. See Example 5 on next page.

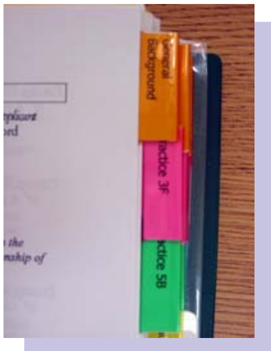
Your project documents may include color photos and maps. Black and white copies of color documents are acceptable as long as the images are discernible.

With respect to photographs in baseline documentation reports, rather than include all of the photos in the baseline, you may provide a copy of the photo point map along with representative photos.

If you are submitting photographs taken during subsequent monitoring visits, try to include those taken from the same photo points you included with your baseline.

you do have. Mark each document with the corresponding indicator practice number. There is space on the form to indicate if additional documents are included or to provide comments to help reviewers understand the project.

Example 4
Organizing
Project Documentation



Assembling the Project Documentation

The Commission strongly encourages applicants to submit project documentation electronically on three well-organized CDs or DVDs (see Example 5).

Assemble three sets of the documents in the order in which they appear on the checklist and place the checklist at the front of the set of documents.

The first document requested is a summary of the project to orient reviewers to the project. Include the project name, location, size, type of transaction, date and other information that will help the reader understand the project. This does not have to be more than a few paragraphs.

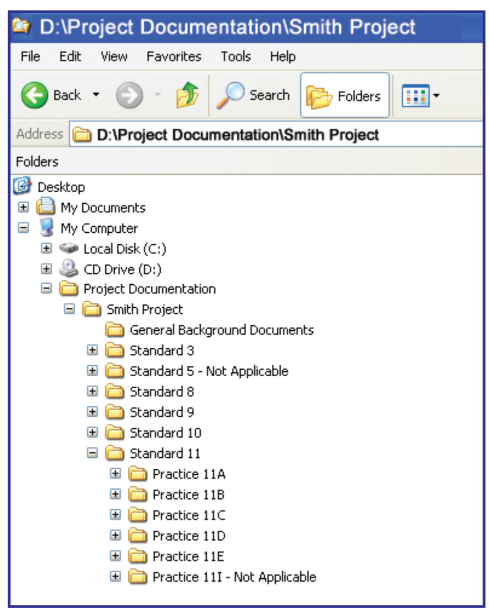
You may use your discretion in selecting the method for compiling/binding paper documents if you do not submit on CD/DVD, as long as the presentation is professional and will allow review team members to look at the documents efficiently. Files with limited contents might be suited for a plain manila file folder, while others may be organized more logically in an accordion folder with separate manila folders for each standard and/or

Did You Check?

Did you copy all the pages of your attachments? For example, make sure you don't submit just the odd-numbered pages of your bylaws!

Example 5
How to Organize Project Documentation on CD or DVD

Organize your CD or DVD just as you would organize a binder: by project, then by standard number, then by practice number (i.e. Smith Project/Standard 11/Practice 11C/SmithMonitoring08.doc). All your projects should fit on one disc, but the Commission needs three copies.



Please save files in formats that are easily opened by different users, such as text and PDF. Be sure to keep filenames to a reasonable length as reviewers may not be able to open files with long names.

Please contact the Commission if you need further guidance.

practice or groups of practices. You might also use a binder with tabs for each standard and/or practice (see Example 4). It helps readers if you use the same labeling or tabbing system for every set of project documents. Clearly label each file with your organization's name, state, and the name of the project.

9. Accreditation Agreement and Board Resolution

Applicants must sign an Accreditation Agreement and pass a Board Resolution endorsing the application and agreeing to the terms of accreditation. Both documents are found in the application.

The Accreditation Agreement obligates the organization to abide by the terms and conditions of the accreditation program. It should be signed by an individual with the authority to enter into contracts on behalf of the organization.

The Board Resolution must be adopted by the board of directors of the applicant organization. This step ensures that the entire board understands the commitment the organization is making to the accreditation program.

10. Assembling and Submitting Your Application

Check to make sure your application is complete! Previous applicants recommend having a non-team member review the entire application and all attachments once it is ready for submission to the Commission.

Please use the following guidelines when assembling your completed applications.

- Submit three copies of the complete application and all attachments, assembled in three clearly tabbed, three-ring binders. If it is easier, you may include the application questionnaires, preliminary attachments and core documents in one binder and all other application attachments in another. Project documents should be in their own folders or binders (if not submitted on CD/DVD). A complete application includes the following:
  - ☑ Complete application
  - ☑ All attachments
  - ☑ Project documentation

- Label the cover and spine of each binder with the organization's name and state, and date of submission (month and year). See Example 6.

- Use tabs labeled as described in Example 7 to separate the major parts of your application. Use tabs numbered 1-12 to organize the attachments required for each standard (e.g., Tab 1: documents required under Standard 1; Tab 2: documents required under Standard 2; etc.). Please separate the attachments under each tab with mini-tabs (as shown in Example 5) or color-paper dividers.

Complete applications should be delivered to the following address:

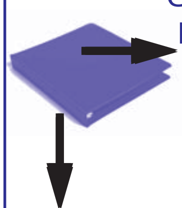
Land Trust Accreditation Commission
112 Spring Street, Suite 204
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

You may send your application using whichever method of shipping is most economical and convenient for your organization. **Plan ahead to ensure that your application arrives at the Commission office by the application due date.** It is strongly recommended that you select a method that is sturdy and secure and allows you to track the package. You should keep a copy of the entire application for your reference.

The balance of the accreditation fee is also due at this time but will be invoiced separately. See the Commission's website for details.

For more tips on putting together your application, see Appendix B: Top 5 Tips for Preparing Your Application.

Example 6
How to Label Your Application Binder



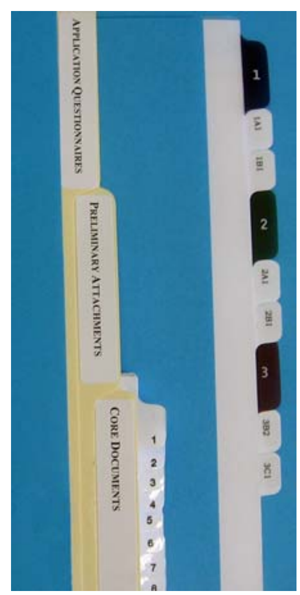
GreenAcres
Land Trust
(State)
May 2008

GreenAcres Land Trust
(State)
May 2008

Submitting the Application

- ☑ Check to see if everything is complete.
- ☑ Make four copies of materials.
- ☑ Keep one copy.
- ☑ Send three sets of complete materials to the Commission.
- ☑ Submit required fees.

Example 7
How to Organize Your Binder



Before the Tabs
✓Master Attachment Checklist
Tab: Application Questionnaires
✓Pre-Application Questionnaire
✓Application Questionnaire
✓Accreditation Agreement
✓Board Resolution
Tab: Preliminary Attachments
✓ Land Conservation Project Lists
✓ Map
✓ Documentation of stakeholder notification of public comment period
✓ Most recent newsletter
✓ Applicant photo(s)
✓ Applicant time-tracking chart
Tab: Core Documents
(see application for accreditation for full list)
Numbered Tabs 1 – 12 for Attachments for Standards 1-12

E. Once Your Organization Is Accredited

1. Length of Accreditation/Renewal

Accreditation is awarded for a five-year period, after which organizations may apply for renewal. The Commission will determine how the program will be adapted for renewals once there is more experience in offering accreditation.

2. Accreditation Seal

Organizations that are accredited are licensed to use the accreditation seal. This enables members, donors, regulators and others to know that your organization is accredited. The license agreement spells out the terms and conditions for using the seal and provides the style guide for reproducing and displaying it.

3. Celebrating Your Accreditation

Your organization worked hard to earn its accredited status. Once you are accredited, it will be time to celebrate and publicize your success. If accredited, and once your organization returns the license agreement, an accreditation award kit will be mailed to you. Organizations are encouraged to use the tools in the kit to help publicize this achievement. The award kit contains things like a sample press release, copies of the seal and suggestions on how to use it, a brochure, and information on how to access a password-protected section of the Commission's website just for accredited land trusts. This section of our website contains electronic versions of the seal, a sample press release, and other tools to help your organization make the most of its newly earned status as an accredited land trust.

F. Conditions for Maintaining Accreditation, Discipline and Appeals

1. Conditions for Maintaining Accreditation

Land trusts applying for accreditation are required to sign a formal agreement accepting the following conditions for maintaining accreditation.

Terms

The maximum period of accreditation is five years. In order to maintain accreditation, once granted, the land trust must continually comply with the following:

- The accreditation indicator practices and accreditation program requirements that were in place at the time accreditation was granted.
- The license agreement and the terms and conditions that govern the use of the accreditation seal and the representation of the land trust's accredited status.

Notification

The land trust must notify the Commission in writing of any major change in its structure or operation that could potentially affect its intent and ability to comply with accreditation indicator practices and program requirements. Changes that require written notification include the following:

- Change of scope of activities (such as when an organization that only accepted fee properties at the time of accreditation takes on conservation easements).
- Transformation of governance structure (such as mergers, changes in a parent organization, etc.).
- Significant changes in mission (such as taking on activities that are counter to land conservation or eliminating the organization's land conservation program).
- Legal actions taken against the land trust or settlement of actions pending at the time of accreditation.
- Change of tax-exempt or charitable status.
- Other changes that may result in the land trust's no longer meeting the indicator practices.

We also request that accredited land trusts notify the Commission of any changes to the land trust's contact information.

Continuous Improvement

Accredited institutions are expected to use *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as a guide for their organizations and to be aware of any changes to them. Accredited organizations are also expected to stay current in the field of land conservation and to continually learn and refine their programs to implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Requests for Information

An accredited land trust must provide the Commission with information that it requests regarding a land trust's compliance with the accreditation indicator practices and program requirements. The Commission may revisit accreditation decisions as described in more detail below in order to be assured that the land trust continues to meet all indicator practices and program requirements during the term of accreditation and to uphold the credibility of the accreditation program.

2. Compliance Confirmation

The Commission requires that accredited land trusts continually conform to the accreditation indicator practices and program requirements. The Commission may receive information about an accredited land trust's compliance with the indicator practices and program requirements in several ways.

- Accredited land trusts are required to notify the Commission in writing of any major changes in their structure or operation that could potentially affect their intent and ability to comply with the accreditation indicator practices or program requirements (see Notification section above).
- The public may have information regarding this important issue and the Commission will evaluate signed, written complaints that document an accredited land trust may not be in compliance with the accreditation indicator practices or program requirements.
- The Commission may ask land trusts for additional data on their activities at any time during the term of their accredited status and may also receive information from other sources.

A copy of the detailed procedures for how the Commission will respond to and evaluate information regarding an accredited land trust's compliance with the accreditation indicator practices and program requirements can be found on the Commission's website at www.landtrustaccreditation.org/about-the-commission/commission-policies/48-commission-policies/131-compliance-confirmation-policy-and-procedures. Decisions made in accordance with this policy are made solely at the discretion of the Commission.

3. Disciplinary Action: Probation and Termination of Accreditation

In order to maintain the integrity of the accreditation program the Commission may take disciplinary action against an accredited land trust when there is evidence that the land trust no longer conforms to the accreditation indicator practices or program requirements. As indicated in the Commission's Compliance Confirmation Policy and Procedures, an accredited land trust will have the opportunity to respond to information regarding its compliance with the accreditation indicator practices or program requirements. If the Commission makes a determination to move forward with probation or revocation of accredited status after following its Compliance Confirmation Policy and Procedures it will then follow its Disciplinary Action Policy and Procedures, available on the Commission's website.

Probation requires an accredited organization to take specific actions within a specified timeframe to remain accredited. Probation may be used when the area of noncompliance is readily resolvable and specific steps can be taken to allow an accredited land trust to fix a problem before revocation is considered.

Revocation is the termination of accreditation. Revocation without a probationary period may occur if the Commission has determined that situations such as, but not limited to, the following exist: liquidation of the land trust; federal or legal action against the land trust that results in loss of tax status or conviction of a crime or felony; willful misuse of the accreditation seal; revelation that the information contained in the original application for accreditation or a subsequent report is fraudulent; or an activity, omission or fabrication that shows willful disregard for the integrity of the accreditation program or flagrant noncompliance with the accreditation indicator practices or program requirements.

Revocation and termination are made public via the notice of decision process described in Chapter G. The land trust has the right to appeal a decision to place the organization on probation or revoke its accredited status according to the Commission's Appeals Policy and Procedures. Once disciplinary actions begin, a land trust no longer has the automatic right to voluntarily withdraw from accreditation. The Commission's Disciplinary Action Policy and Procedures can be found at www.landtrustaccreditation.org/about-the-commission/commission-policies/48-commission-policies/132-disciplinary-action-policy-and-procedures.

4. Appealing a Decision of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission uses multiple sources of information in making decisions on accreditation and taking actions to ensure the credibility of the accreditation program. However, there may be instances when an applicant or accredited land trust disagrees with a decision to deny or revoke accreditation or assign probationary status. Accordingly, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission provides applicants for accreditation and accredited land trusts the opportunity to appeal decisions to deny accreditation, assign probationary status or revoke accreditation.

Grounds for appeal are limited to allegations that the Commission made an erroneous decision by arbitrarily failing to follow its stated procedures and/or failing to consider all the evidence and documentation presented on behalf of the applicant. Appeals are limited to the time and circumstances that triggered the Commission action and to a review of facts available at that time. Descriptions of changes made by the appellant since the Commission action will not be considered as part of the appeal.

The complete set of procedures to follow in the event of an appeal are found in the Appeals Policy and Procedures on the Commission's website at www.landtrustaccreditation.org/about-the-commission/commission-policies/48-commission-policies/133-appeals-policy-and-procedures.

G. The Role of the Public in Accreditation

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations across the nation, including land trusts, are increasingly asked to demonstrate their accountability to the public. The Commission recognizes the need for public accountability for accredited land trusts and the need to rely on multiple data sources when making accreditation decisions, and we have designed the role of the public in the accreditation process accordingly.

2. Public Comments on Applications

As part of the application process, the Commission accepts signed, written comments from the public. There are several guidelines for the public comment process.

- Only written comments will be accepted.
- All comments must be attributed, but the name of the commentator will be kept confidential upon request.
- Comments must relate to the applicant's compliance with national quality standards from *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. Accreditation applicants are evaluated against specific indicator practices within these standards that address the ethical and technical operation of a land trust.

A simple form for submitting comments is on the Commission's website, www.landtrustaccreditation.org. Comments may also be sent to the Commission's office. See page 27 for more on the public comment process.

3. Notice of Decisions

The Commission maintains and publishes a list of accredited land trusts (beginning in September 2008).

The Commission will post a notice of its accreditation decisions on its website after each meeting with the names of applicants that were accredited (including their date of renewal), tabled (including when a decision is expected), denied accreditation or are subject to disciplinary action (after the appeal period has expired or a final decision has been reached). The Commission's website will contain a list of archived notices of decisions (to accredit, table, deny or take disciplinary action) for the preceding five years.

4. Requests for Information from the Public

The list of accredited land trusts and their anticipated dates of renewal is available on the Commission's website. Upon request, the Commission will also make the following status information public or will direct inquiries to the appropriate notice of decision on the website.

- Current applicant
- Accredited and date of anticipated renewal
- Application tabled until a specific date
- Application denied
- Disciplinary action taken

The Commission retains the right to withhold public disclosure of this information if legal action involving the Commission or applicants is pending.

No other information about a specific applicant, such as where the organization is in the review process, who is on the review team, if the applicant has withdrawn, or reasons for tabling, denial or disciplinary action, will be made public. If appropriate, the Commission may direct inquiries to the publicly posted contact information for the land trust. Commissioners and Commission staff will keep the details of decisions in strictest confidence. Any and all data submitted by the applicant during the accreditation process will be strictly maintained according to the Commission's confidentiality policy available at www.landtrustaccreditation.org.

5. Complaints Regarding the Land Trust Accreditation Commission

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission's values include integrity, accountability and service. In keeping with these values the Commission is committed to operating a credible accreditation program that fosters public accountability for accredited land trusts and the Commission. In order to continually improve its programs, the Commission values feedback on its operations. Comments about Commission operations can be sent to the Commission's office or submitted using a simple form on the Commission's website. Appeals of Commission decisions are managed according to the Commission's Appeals Policy and Procedures.

Appendix A: Definitions

Words in italics mark definitions from *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Accreditation: a systematic and objective verification process utilized by an authoritative body that results in public recognition of those organizations demonstrating compliance with established quality standards.

Accredited Land Trust: a land trust that has been granted accreditation by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission after the Commission has verified that the organization complies with the accreditation indicator practices from *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Accreditation Seal: a registered trademark of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, licensed by the Commission to accredited land trusts to indicate their accredited status.

Annual Budget: summarizes the organization's plan for both raising and spending money in a given fiscal year. A small organization may have a simple income and expense budget, a larger organization will likely have a budget that shows fundraising, management and program expenses. [Also see Operating Budget.]

Capacity: the ability to perform all the actions required to acquire and manage conservation land and easements and manage other programs by having adequate human and financial resources and organizational systems in place.

Certificate of Good Standing: (also known as a "Certificate of Existence" or "Certificate of Status") a certificate issued by a state official as conclusive evidence that a corporation or limited liability company (LLC) is in existence and is authorized to transact business within that state. A Certificate of Good Standing demonstrates that all fees, taxes and penalties owed to that state have been paid, that a corporation's or LLC's most recent annual report has been filed, and that it has not yet filed Articles of Dissolution. Note this is not the same as a "Certificate of Registration."

Commission-based Fundraising: a contractual agreement with a hired professional fundraiser where the compensation is based on a percentage of funds raised.

Commissioner: a volunteer board member of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

Conflict of Interest: a conflict of interest arises when "insiders" are in a position, or perceived to be in a position, to benefit financially (or create a benefit to a family member or other organization with which they are associated) by virtue of their position within the nonprofit organization.

Conservation Easement Monitoring: annual documented visual inspection of a conservation easement-protected property to ensure that the terms of the easement are being upheld, with on-the-ground physical inspections as the site warrants.

Conservation Easement Stewardship Fund: the amount of funding the land trust has set aside, in either an endowment or an internally designated fund, to cover the costs of administering, managing and monitoring its conservation easements. In some organizations, the stewardship fund may include funds for legal defense, or these may be separated by the organization into a legal defense fund.

Direct Land or Easement Acquisition Project: a land or conservation easement project where the applicant for accreditation is included in the chain of title on a fee parcel or is the grantee of a conservation easement.

GAAP: the Federal Accounting Standards Board (FASB) issues Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). FASB's Statement of Accounting Standards 116 and 117 provide standards for financial statements for nonprofit organizations.

Internally Designated Fund: a fund designated internally by an organization, for which the organization retains the ability to undesignate or redesignate funds, where income is used to support a specific purpose and the principal may be expended under certain circumstances. May also be called a board-restricted fund.

Important Conservation Values: these are the key values on a site that are the focus of protection efforts. Important conservation values are determined during property evaluation and project planning.

Insiders: board and staff members, substantial contributors, parties related to the above, those who have an ability to influence decisions of the organization and those with access to information not available to the general public.

The IRS generally considers "insiders" or disqualified persons under IRC §4958 to be persons who, at any time during the five-year period ending on the date of the transaction in question, were in a position to exercise substantial influence over the affairs of the organization. "Insiders" generally include board members, key staff, substantial contributors [see IRC Section 507(d)(2)], parties related to the above and 35-percent controlled entities. While these are strict definitions within the tax code, land trusts are advised to take an even more proactive approach to the potential damage that conflicts of interest may cause an organization and also include in the definition of "insiders" all staff members and those with access to information not available to the general public (such as certain volunteers).

"Related parties" is defined by the IRS to include spouse, brothers and sisters, spouses of brothers and sisters, ancestors, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and spouses of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

IRC: Internal Revenue Code.

IRS: Internal Revenue Service.

Land Management Fund: the amount of funding the land trust has set aside, in either an endowment or an internally designated fund, to cover the costs of administering and managing its fee holdings. The land management fund may include funds for legal defense, or these may be separated by the organization into a legal defense fund.

Land Trust: a nonprofit organization that, as all or part of its mission, actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land or conservation easement acquisitions, or by engaging in the stewardship of such land or conservation easements.

Land Trust Accreditation Commission: the nonprofit corporation that operates the land trust accreditation program. The Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance created in 2006, recognizes community institutions that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever.

Land Trust Alliance: a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that is working to save the places people love by strengthening land conservation throughout America. The Alliance leads and serves a national network of roughly 1,700 community-based, nonprofit land conservation organizations working to safeguard land for present and future generations. The Alliance focuses its work on increasing the pace, quality and permanence of land conservation across America through advocacy, education, communications, and legal defense programs, and financial support for the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

Legal Defense Fund: the amount of funding the land trust has set aside, in either an endowment or an internally designated fund, to cover the costs of defending and enforcing the conservation easements it holds or of taking legal action to protect its fee holdings. In some organizations the legal defense fund may be combined with a conservation easement stewardship fund or land management fund.

Letter of Opinion: a written estimation of a property's value, most often prepared by a qualified appraiser and occasionally prepared by a highly experienced real estate professional.

A letter of opinion may be used instead of a qualified independent appraisal when the economic value of the property is so low as to negate concerns about private inurement or private benefit or when a full appraisal is not feasible before a public auction. (A letter of opinion is not sufficient in the case of transactions with insiders.) An appraiser may call this document a Restricted Use Appraisal Report.

Lobbying: attempting to influence legislation as defined in IRC §4911(d).

Major Violation: a breach of a conservation easement that costs (or would cost) the land trust more than $5,000 to resolve (costs include human resources and other direct costs). [This definition is used by the Land Trust Alliance to track violation statistics nationally. Land trusts may have more comprehensive definitions in their own policies, definitions that would generally include evaluating the impact of the violation on the conservation values.]

Minor Violation: a breach of a conservation easement that costs (or would cost) the land trust less than $5,000 to resolve (costs include human resources and other direct costs). [This definition is used by the Land Trust Alliance to track violation statistics nationally. Land trusts may have more comprehensive definitions in their own policies, definitions that would generally include evaluating the impact of the violation on the conservation values.]

Operating Budget: shows the annual expenditures for the land trust's general operations (excluding capital purchases) and the income supporting these expenditures for a given fiscal year. Operating expenses include all administration, management, fundraising, general conservation and other program expenses. Operating expenses do not include capital purchases, such as special land acquisition projects. [Also see Annual Budget.]

Operating Reserve: the amount of funding the land trust has available, that is not part of the operating income or otherwise dedicated to other uses, to cover operating expenses in the event that the organization has unanticipated shifts in income or expense.

Policy: a specific course of action to guide and determine present and future decisions. In this context, refers to a written, board-adopted policy.

Practice: the land trust's customary action; it may or may not be written. Also refers to an element of *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Primary Contact: The primary contact is the person designated by the applicant organization to receive information and inquiries from the Commission. It is not necessarily the board president or executive director. This person should be able to route information and inquiries to the appropriate person within the organization. Because e-mail is a key component of Commission communications, the primary contact should have an e-mail account that is checked regularly.

Primary Corporation: the corporation that has the legal authority, legal liability and fiduciary responsibility for the decisions made by the applicant organization.

Private Inurement: when the net earnings of a tax-exempt organization come to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.

Federal tax-exempt law requires that "no part of . . . [a tax-exempt organization's] net earnings [may] inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual." Generally this means that the financial assets of the organization may not be transferred to a private individual (without the organization receiving adequate compensation) solely by virtue of the individual's relationship with the organization. The IRS prohibition on inurement is absolute. The IRS also imposes penalties on directors, officers, key employees and other disqualified persons who engage in excess benefit transactions.

Procedure: a series of steps followed in a regular order. As used in accreditation, procedures are written steps for the board, staff and/or volunteers to follow and may or may not be approved by the board. This written series of steps may go by various names in different organizations but all are considered procedures for the purposes of accreditation.

Public Benefit: the benefits that achieve the organization's public, charitable purpose. Also includes the IRS definition of public benefit for determining the deductibility of conservation easements.

Public Support Test: one of the ways an organization can qualify as a public charity rather than a private foundation under IRS rules is if the group receives at least one-third of its financial support from a combination of the general public, other public charities and government. For more, see Treasury Regulation sec. 1.170A-9(e).

Qualified Independent Appraisal: an independent appraisal prepared in compliance with the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice by a state-licensed or state-certified appraiser who has verifiable conservation easement or conservation real estate experience.

Quasi-governmental Organization: an organization that has a primary mission of land conservation; has a government structure that provides oversight with a board independent of government; is a unit of government , rather than a private corporation, and is not recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3).

Review Team: evaluates applications and makes a recommendation to the full Land Trust Accreditation Commission on whether or not accreditation should be granted, tabled or denied. Consists of one or more commissioners and a Commission staff member.

Stakeholder: a person or organization that has a legitimate interest in the applicant for accreditation. For the purposes of accreditation and the public notice portion of the review process, a land trust's stakeholders are described in more detail on page 29.

Transaction: an agreement between two or more parties with respect to the purchase, sale, transfer, amendment, condemnation or other exchange related to conservation easements or land.

Volunteer: a person who donates time on a regular basis to help carry out the work of the applicant organization. Board members can be the most important volunteers, but some questions in the application ask the land trust to report on board member activity separately from non-board volunteers.

Widely Markets: announces the availability of a property for sale to lists of prospective buyers, through webpages, mailings, and listings in newsletters and other publications or media. "Widely markets" does not require public listing with a real estate agent.

Words in italics mark definitions from *Land Trust Standards and Practices.*

Top 5 Tips for Preparing Your Application

Lessons learned from the 2007 pilot program

1. Form a Winning Team

Accreditation is both an independent verification process and a way for your organization to engage in continual improvement. Improvement will occur through broad-based participation that fosters dialogue, planning and cooperative decision-making that continues after the accreditation application is completed. To gain these long-term benefits, we recommend that your organization establish an Accreditation Team.

The Accreditation Team is responsible for overseeing the completion of the application, talking with the Land Trust Accreditation Commission's review team, participating in a site visit, if necessary, and conducting any required follow-up. The Accreditation Team can have as many individuals as is appropriate for your organization and should include the following:

- Individuals knowledgeable about how things work (or don't) in your organization.
- Individuals who are able to recommend new policies or procedures as a result of answering the questions in the application.
- Individuals who can implement changes resulting from the accreditation review.

Long-lasting results are achieved when a commitment is made by the entire organization. We strongly suggest that the Accreditation Team include representatives of the board and that it frequently update the full board of directors on where the organization is in the accreditation process.

2. Designate Your Team Captain

Pilot program participants stress the need for one point-person to coordinate the application process for the organization. Each land trust should consider who best fills this role, but pilots emphasize the need for someone extremely organized and able to delegate and meet deadlines – a real taskmaster! Once you designate a person to manage the entire project, the accreditation coordinator should:

- Get board (or management) recognition that applying for accreditation is a priority for this person.
- Delegate components of the application to other members of the Accreditation Team.

- Set up a schedule and set deadlines.
- Order supplies (paper, binders, tabs, etc.).
- Find a non-team member to be the final reviewer.

3. Go the Distance

As your organization moves through the application process, you will be asked to meet several deadlines (i.e. pre-application and application, requests for additional documents, etc.). Our requests for information will almost always be via e-mail. Notice from the Commission begins when the e-mail is sent, not when it is opened by the applicant. We will include a due date in our request. This date is not a postmark deadline – please plan ahead to make sure your submission arrives in the Commission's office by that date.

You can anticipate some of these deadlines and make sure you have the materials needed to meet them. For example:

- Make sure to have the materials necessary to ship the application to the Commission (boxes, packing materials, shipping slips, etc.).
- Have a check processed in time to meet each fee deadline.
- Schedule board meetings in time to approve the required board resolution and other policies.
- Plan to include an article on accreditation in an upcoming newsletter, etc.

4. Conserve Your Energy

Land trust accreditation is based on a thorough paper-based process, but there are some ways applicants can help reduce the overall amount of paper – and energy – used.

- Please use double-sided copies. This not only reduces the size of the complete application binder, it saves trees!
- There is no need to make multiple copies of the same attachment and insert it multiple times. Simply attach it once and make a note on your Master Attachment Checklist. See page 33 for an example.
- In many cases your organization may have a written policy or procedure that fully describes a process and answers the application question. In that case there is no need to repeat what is in the written document. Your answer to the question can simply refer to the attachment and how you use the document.
- Complete an office copy of your application first; do not make all your copies at once. Once you think it is all together, have a non-team member review it. Then put sticky notes to indicate items that are missing or need to be moved and remove them as the items are

addressed. Once this is done, then it's time to make the Commission copies.

5. Strive for Best in Show

As one pilot group said, "Organize the application and present it well. If commissioners are looking at multiples of these, you want yours to stick out as the best!" Here are some tips for a well-organized application.

- When you attach documents that include a small reference to the item requested in the application (i.e. board meeting minutes, amended easements, etc.), please help the reviewers more quickly find the referenced information by highlighting the relevant text in some way (an arrow, highlighted text, stickers, etc.).

- You can aid reviewers by dividing information within the main tabs using mini-tabs or colored sheets to separate attachments within each standard.

- If you don't have a document, don't just ignore the question – tell us why or give us what you do have.

- Use sheet protectors for odd-sized documents, like maps and special event invitations. These plastic sleeves already have a three-hole punch and you can slide your documents into them without having to punch holes in the printed materials.