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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.*

# Renewal of Accreditation

## Answers to frequently asked questions – March 2012 update

The land trust accreditation program was launched in 2006 to build and recognize strong land trusts, to foster public confidence in land conservation, and to ensure the permanent protection of land. Land trusts were first accredited in 2008; 158 organizations have now earned this distinction.

The Commission will publish a revised *Applicant Handbook* and companion publications to fully outline the accreditation renewal process by June 2012. This fact sheet serves as an interim update that answers frequently asked questions.

### **Why is renewal of accreditation required?**

Land conservation is a dynamic, changing field. As the field evolves, renewal of accreditation ensures that land trusts continue to comply with [Land Trust Standards and Practices](#), the 26 “[indicator practices](#)” drawn from *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, and the accreditation program requirements.

## **Renewal Process**

### **When must a land trust apply for renewal?**

Accreditation lasts for a term of five years, at which time a land trust must renew its accreditation in order to maintain its accredited status and to continue to display the accreditation seal. In order for its accredited status to remain in effect, a land trust must submit its application for renewal before its five-year accreditation term expires. As long as the land trust applies prior to its expiration date, it

will remain accredited during the renewal application review process and until such time as it receives a final renewal decision from the Commission.

Looking ahead to 2013, there will be two rounds of renewal applications (one in the spring and one in the fall); specific dates will be announced on the Commission’s website. For accredited land trusts renewing in 2014 and beyond, specific information about renewal due dates for applications and pre-applications will generally be posted on the Commission’s website by early summer of the prior year.

### **Can we submit our renewal application on paper, rather than online?**

All accredited land trusts applying for renewal will be required to submit a renewal application electronically. The online application system is still in development but is expected to be completed by fall 2012 and will be available for accredited land trusts applying for renewal in 2013.

### **What are the steps of the renewal process?**

As noted above, this is an interim fact sheet and a revised *Applicant Handbook* and related materials (including a document that augments and combines the existing *Guidance Documents*) will be released by June 2012.

The renewal process will include the following steps.

- There will be an online registration system; registration will be available by fall 2012 for accredited land trusts planning to apply for renewal in 2013.

- There will be an abbreviated, online, pre-application step. Applicants will upload a Land Conservation Project List, a Form 990, an accreditation agreement, and a map of conserved properties.
- The online application will include an application questionnaire, uploaded attachments and project documentation.
  - Projects for which project documentation will be required will be selected from transactions completed during the accredited term.
  - Applicants that hold conservation easements will be required to submit easement monitoring reports and a baseline document report for a project(s) selected by the Commission for which at least five years of monitoring data are available.
- A renewing land trust will be able to self-attest to some elements of several practices. The self-attestation approach will be coupled with a system that selects one or more self-attestation items for verification in each round.
- Once an applicant submits its application for renewal, a review team comprised of at least one commissioner and one Commission staff member will evaluate it.
- To streamline the process, the steps of the conference call between the Commission review team and the applicant and the follow-up letter will be combined. The applicant will receive a letter following the review of the application identifying any additional information or action needed with an invitation to hold a call with the review team if clarification is needed.
- The review team will make a final recommendation to the Commission and the Commission will make a decision to award accreditation or to not award accreditation. If renewed accreditation is not awarded, the Commission will provide information on the reason(s) for the decision. For more information on when accreditation is awarded and not awarded see the Commission's [policy on final decisions](#) on application decisions.

## Preparing for Renewal

### What should my land trust be doing to prepare for renewal?

- Review a copy of your organization's accreditation award letter for the following:
  - To confirm the date your accreditation expires. Plan to register for and submit an application for renewal prior to your organization's accreditation expiration date.
  - To review any expectations for improvement (EFIs) provided along with the award letter. Make sure that your organization can document how each EFI was met. (EFIs may also have been issued during the compliance confirmation process.) See more information in the [EFI fact sheet](#).
- Review the advance-release version of the [renewal application](#).
- Plan now to complete an [assessment](#) against the full set of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* within three years of your accreditation renewal.
- Review the [Guidance Documents](#) to make sure your land trust is meeting current accreditation requirements. Several of the *Guidance Documents* contain "minimum" elements that are required to be in place at initial accreditation and "desired" elements that are required at renewal. Accredited land trusts should review these elements to make sure they are prepared to demonstrate compliance with renewal requirements.
- Be sure that you can show your land trust is meeting *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and accreditation requirements such as by being able to document annual monitoring for each of your conservation easements and periodic inspection of your fee properties over the five-year accreditation period.

- There are other requirements instituted since 2008 that your organization will want to review. In particular, if your organization has a related entity or operates via multiple corporations, it is likely to have to submit information on the related entity or entities as part of the renewal application. Please see the Commission's fact sheet on [multiple corporations](#).
- If your land trust has or is about to accept land assets from another land trust or undergo a merger or other corporate combination, see the Commission's fact sheet, [Frequently Asked Questions about Accreditation and Accepting Fee Land or Conservation Easement Projects from Another Land Trust and the Corporate Combination of Land Trusts](#).
- Review the renewal webinar available on the Commission's website in the ["Tips and Tools: Training" section](#) (additional webinar will be offered in June 2012).
- Stay current, the Commission will continue to provide more information about the renewal process in its eNewsletters.

### **How much time and effort will renewal take?**

Accredited land trusts have documented that they have the necessary systems, policies and procedures in place to achieve accreditation. These systems, particularly with respect to recordkeeping and documenting activities and decisions, should result in less time needed to prepare for renewal of accreditation.

It is anticipated that the following factors, coupled with an accredited land trust's consistent implementation of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* since accreditation was awarded, will also result in reduced applicant preparation time and effort.

- There are approximately 30% fewer attachments requested in the application for renewal.
- Only about half of the attachments in the application for renewal are required for all applicants; the remainder are "if applicable" and depend upon the following:
  - o The complexity of the land trust, and
  - o Its activities during its accreditation term.
- Documents will be uploaded to an online system, rather than copied and shipped.

### **Are the requirements for renewal the same as for first-time accreditation?**

There are some differences in accreditation requirements for applicants for first-time accreditation and for renewal. For instance, accredited land trusts applying for renewal are expected to document implementation of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and the indicator practices throughout their accredited term, as agreed to in the Accreditation Agreement. Accredited land trusts applying for renewal must also document how they met any EFIs. In addition, several of the *Guidance Documents* outline "minimum" elements that are required to be in place at initial accreditation and "desired" elements that are required at renewal.

Like all accreditation programs, the requirements for land trust accreditation are modified as best practices in the field evolve or become clarified. As a result, current applicants have requirements that were not in place in earlier years. For example, organizations applying for first-time accreditation after the application was revised in 2010 must supply compliant gift substantiation letters and at least three Forms 8283 and corresponding appraisals. Renewal helps ensure that organizations accredited several years ago are able to document that they comply with current requirements.

## How much will renewal cost?

As with the current first-time application process, an accredited land trust will pay a registration fee as well as an accreditation fee based on the applicant's operating expenses. Fees for renewal are anticipated to be similar to the fees for new applicants.

Accreditation fees are established on an annual basis and are announced the previous year, generally concurrent with announcements for upcoming pre-application and application due dates. The accreditation fee schedule for 2012 is available on the Commission's website for reference; it describes not only current fees but also a new option that allows an applicant to pay its accreditation fee over a five-year period.

## Benefits of Accreditation

Accredited land trusts report the ongoing benefits of accreditation are real, though sometimes hard to put a dollar value on. These groups indicate they are stronger, more engaged organizations because of accreditation and indicate some of the following benefits:

- Board members have a much greater understanding of the business of land conservation.
- Policies are codified so that each situation is handled consistently and in accordance with *Land Trust Standards and Practices*.

- Operations are efficient, leaving more time for proactively pursuing additional acquisitions and stewardship.
- Organizations are much better positioned to care for and defend their properties and easements over time.
- Accreditation is an incentive for continued improvement and a commitment to excellence that will outlast today's board and staff members, becoming part of the permanent culture of their organization.
- Land trusts that pioneered in achieving accredited status can take pride in their leadership role in a program that is increasing the credibility and success of land trusts and land conservation for generations to come.

In addition to the internal benefits of land trust accreditation, accredited land trusts are finding that landowners, public agency partners and donors recognize the value of accreditation. The following [public and private programs](#) provide incentives for land trusts to achieve and maintain accreditation.

- Terrafirma
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service's Federal Grassland Reserve Program
- The State of Colorado
- The Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation

### For more information

For more information on the land trust accreditation program or the renewal process, please contact the Commission:

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