

## Accreditation at Any Size: What Motivates Land Trusts to Apply for Accreditation

by Caity Pinkard

When the Presumpscot Regional Land Trust in Maine merged with three nonprofits in 2016 and 2017, the organization was at a crossroads. "As a small regional land trust that had grown quickly, our leadership was motivated to create systems that would ensure our future sustainability," recalls Rachelle Current Apse, the executive director of Presumpscot, and one of two full-time staff. "It was clear that accreditation was a key component toward becoming more sustainable."

Going through the accreditation process helped Presumpscot bring all of its internal policies up to best practices, and meet their promise of protecting land in perpetuity. "With accreditation, we joined the hundreds of land trusts around the country leading the land conservation movement," says Apse. "The seal offers us the assurance that we have the systems in place to keep the promise of forever conserving land." And while land trusts apply for accreditation for diverse reasons, meeting this promise of perpetuity is chief among them. Even with one full-time and one part-time staff at the Historic Virginia Land Conservancy (HVLC), Executive Director Patrice Sadler describes a similar motivation behind HVLC's application for accreditation after nearly 25 years of business.

"Accreditation is referred to as a mark of distinction," Sadler says. "After decades dedicated to the same national quality standards that the Commission professes, including sound finances, ethical conduct, responsible governance, and lasting stewardship, accreditation became a clear and natural conclusion for us." Since achieving its first accreditation in 2015, Sadler feels HVLC has only continued to benefit from the standards implied by the seal. "The value of accreditation is demonstrated every time we meet with a landowner," Sadler explains. "A landowner's initial thoughts about giving up any property rights—'forever'—is often met with trepidation. That accreditation seal helps to authenticate the organization and its mission."

While the benefits of accreditation are well known, the application process can still seem intimidating to land trusts applying for the first time. Sadler notes "the volume of information requested is enormous and involves projects spanning the life of the business." That said, she doesn't think the added work should deter land trusts motivated to apply. "I strongly suggest reaching out to the Commission for direction if one finds themselves standing at a crossroads," she says. Not only can the Commission guide the organization through unexpected issues, but they can also support land trust staff in navigating the overall process.

Of course, the Commission and the Alliance aren't the only sources of support for land trusts approaching accreditation. As Apse notes, there is already a network of land trusts nationwide waiting to be tapped into. "We had support from many lands trusts in the region who had already been accredited," Apse says. "As such, we didn't have to reinvent the wheel, and instead learned from others."

Despite the rigors of accreditation, the process is well worth the effort. "A land trust cannot help but be strengthened by the process," Sadler explains. But it's also more than that. "The landowner, organization and community benefit from an accredited organization, which is fortified, and can comfort the public when making huge decisions about permanently forfeiting property rights in the name of land protection." And that means land trusts all across the nation can better meet their fundamental promise: protection in perpetuity.

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*This is the second story in a series that will explore how land trusts of any size can achieve accreditation. [Read the first one here.](#)*

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*Presumpscot Regional Land Trust's Hawkes Preserve features trails that run alongside the Presumpscot River in Gorham, Maine.*