

BY Jennifer Brady-Connor

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

## You Will Love What's Under the Cover!

**H**ave you met the 2015 *Requirements Manual*? It may look the same from the outside, but under the cover it is a streamlined, compact and dramatically improved guide to understanding how a land trust will be evaluated when it pursues accreditation and renewal. With less redundancy and fewer requirements, land trusts are freed up to spend more time doing what they do best: save the places people love.

The streamlined *Requirements Manual* is just one piece of the year-long accreditation program improvement plan started last year. The 2015 edition of the manual represents almost a year of detailed analysis, debate and decision-making by a team of commissioners (many of whom work for accredited land trusts) and Alliance board and staff representatives.

The annual *Requirements Manual* review process started with examining comments received from land trusts throughout the year and suggestions from commissioners on how to make the requirements clearer or more flexible. This year for the first time the Commission also presented draft changes to the *Requirements Manual* for a public comment period prior to publishing the final document.

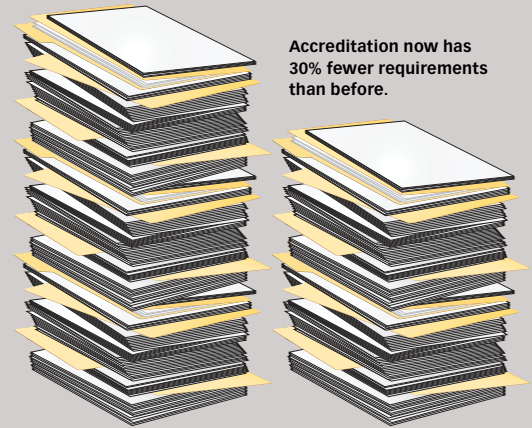
This approach of engaging the land trust community before finalizing major changes, was well received by many, including Joelle Ferguson, community relations director of Little Forks Conservancy (accredited 2010). “As the field evolves, the accreditation program is evolving with it in order to maintain and expand the benefits of staying accredited. Who better to provide feedback on

changes than accredited land trusts living this work every day?”

The *Requirements Manual* provides increased flexibility to land trusts and review teams. For instance, land trusts are no longer required to prove that they secured funding for each conservation easement; instead they can demonstrate that they meet the overall conservation easement stewardship and defense funding requirements for their easement portfolio.

Changes were also made to minimize or eliminate unnecessary costs tied to accreditation. For example, land trusts will no longer have to demonstrate that they have fee-land funding, management plans and annual monitoring for non-conservation fee properties. This proposed change received almost unanimous support during the public comment period.

Not surprising, every proposed change to the *Requirements Manual* had at least one commenter who argued against the change and for keeping that particular requirement. This underscores the diversity of opinions in the land trust community and some of the challenges that commissioners face when trying to modify the



requirements to serve the entire land trust community. However, commenters seemed to share a general understanding that just because a requirement was eliminated does not mean a land trust shouldn't be doing it—just that land trusts should not have to document that they did it. Joelle says, “Based on the direction these changes are going, we will be spending a lot less time preparing documents for renewal. Our accreditation team can now refocus its attention toward demonstrating that we meet these fewer renewal requirements.”

Jennifer Lorenz, executive director of the Bayou Land Conservancy (accredited 2012) strongly supported both the public process and the proposed changes. “Even though I could still make a case for keeping some of these requirements (and I appreciated the opportunity to make my case), most of the ones that were eliminated were redundant, seemed outside the scope of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* or seemed like they would be difficult to evaluate. What is most important to me is that the rigor and value of accreditation was not diluted because that is most important to our donors, our landowners and our partners.” 