

BY Christina Soto

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION 

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

Giving a Break to Those Who Need It

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission can be described as a highly professional body made up of a dedicated group of volunteers from the land conservation community who spend hours and hours reviewing accreditation applications. But it's also a group of human beings with heart.

When Lowcountry Land Trust properties were extensively damaged by Hurricanes Irma, Jose and Maria, all of which impacted the South Carolina Lowcountry region in fall 2017, the Commission offered flexibility to the land trust so it could focus on the immediate need for community and land trust cleanup efforts, and later focus on submitting its remaining accreditation renewal application materials.

When tremendous flooding struck the Estes Valley in September 2013, Commission staff stayed in touch with Estes Valley Land Trust staff, answering questions and offering guidance about how

to triage end-of-year monitoring, particularly in areas where the landscape was dramatically changed or still underwater.


And when terrible wildfires struck close to Sonoma Land Trust in California in fall 2017, rather than hold the land trust to the looming renewal deadline that was assigned, the Commission stepped in with a one-round extension to give the land trust more time to focus on disaster recovery and get back to normal operations before having to assemble records for renewal.

"Sometimes there are circumstances over which we have no control, such as natural disasters," says Commissioner

Bruce Runnels, "and we just have to be compassionate about how to work with land trusts that have been severely affected. The hurricane and wildfire seasons of 2017 certainly presented unique challenges at an unprecedented and unimaginable scale."

In the case of the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain, preparing for accreditation helped the land trust *recover* from Hurricane Katrina, which wiped out all of its files. Executive Director Judy Steckler said that to rebuild their files, from legal documents to baselines to board minutes, "I called anyone who may have had pieces of the puzzle. Everyone chipped in. Preparing for accreditation [earned in 2009] was very helpful to complete the picture."

And sometimes humor can go a little way toward starting the healing of a disaster-struck land trust. When Commission Executive Director Tammara Van Ryn emailed Brian Stark of Ojai Valley Land Conservancy to ask how they had come through the 2017 California wildfires, Brian wrote back saying everyone was OK but the area had suffered extensive damage. But then he told her, "A funny note for you, though—as I was evacuating my office and leaving for the last time, I instinctively grabbed my accreditation folder. While I have the digital versions on the cloud, I felt like I needed to save all the work it took to put that thing together. Go figure!"

To read about land trusts affected by the natural disasters of 2017, see page 14 and the Alliance website at www.lta.org/news/land-trusts-hit-disasters-help-their-communities. 



BILLY DUGGER

Judy Steckler, executive director of the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain, in 2011, six years after Hurricane Katrina wiped out the land trust's records.

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LOOK FOR THE 2018 REQUIREMENTS MANUAL IN MARCH AT WWW.LANDTRUSTACCREDITATION.ORG/2018RM.