



# PRAIRIE STATE CONSERVATION COALITION

Making Conservation Land Trusts Stronger

**For more information, contact:  
Karen Yancey, PSCC board member  
847-721-9203**

## **ILLINOIS CONSERVATION LAND TRUSTS PROTECT 200,000 ACRES OF OPEN LAND**

(June, 2013) –Illinois conservation land trusts have helped preserve more than 200,000 acres of open land in Illinois over the last 50 years. The conservation land trust movement is gaining momentum and is supported by private landowners who are concerned about disappearing open spaces and wildlife habitat, deteriorating watersheds and the need for increased local recreational opportunities, according to the Prairie State Conservation Coalition’s recent census.

“As we move into the 21st Century, Illinois residents are supporting conservation land trusts’ efforts to protect private land from inappropriate development,” said Brook McDonald, president of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, Illinois’ state-wide association of conservation land trusts.

“Residents understand that more open space improves their quality of life, keeps property taxes low and ensures healthier, more sustainable communities for the future,” said McDonald.

There are 40 conservation land trusts in Illinois. Conservation land trusts are local, not-for-profit organizations that provide private property owners with a variety of legal tools to protect their property from inappropriate future development.

The most popular tool is a conservation easement, a legal agreement between a private property owner and a conservation land trust that allows the land to remain in private ownership. These agreements permanently restrict the type and amount of future development and activities that are permitted on a property to protect the land’s scenic and conservation values. In return, the property owner may receive significant income, estate and property tax benefits. In Illinois, a qualified conservation easement may, if eligible, provides a 75 percent reduction in the assessed valuation of property.

Conservation land trusts use land protection programs to protect open lands in rural areas, suburban landscapes and cities. In addition to conservation easements, land trusts also accept land donations and purchase land with high conservation value. They also work with other private and public organizations to buy and protect open land and maintain or restore its ecological health.

## **RURAL LANDS**

Illinois's rural lands have high conservation value for wildlife habitat, hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation and tourism. In southwestern Monroe County, 500 acres along the Mississippi River bluff corridor were recently purchased by two local conservation groups: Clifftop Land Trust and the Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation and Development, Inc. The project will create public hiking trails in one of the most scenic natural areas of the state.

"This project was a milestone in our continuing efforts to preserve the bluff lands that make Monroe County one of Illinois' most beautiful," said Carl DauBach, executive director of the Clifftop Land Trust.

In Galena, another scenic area of the state, local landowners were looking for a way to permanently protect a significant portion of their farm not far from downtown Galena. They worked with the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation to preserve the property, which included habitat for rare birds as well as a group of Native American burial mounds that were part of the Effigy Mound culture created in 700-900 A.D.

"Land trusts offer private property owners a variety of alternatives to protect their land that can help meet their financial needs as well as leave a legacy for future generations," said Nancy Winter, trustee of the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation.

A 272-acre wetland complex that is habitat for the endangered Blanding's turtle in southeastern Lee County was recently protected by the Illinois Audubon Society, an Illinois conservation land trust. Known as Amboy Marsh, the property also contains habitat for a variety of bird species and was funded, in part, by grants from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and the Grand Victoria Foundation.

"Primarily due to these conservation-minded foundations, Illinois conservation land trusts are protecting some of our most vital lands," said Tom Clay, executive director of Illinois Audubon Society.

In Ogle County, a retired school teacher preserved 50 acres of woodland in the Rock River Valley in a cooperative project. The teacher donated the property to the Northwest Illinois Audubon Society, which then donated a conservation easement to the Natural Land Institute to ensure that it remains protected forever.

Protecting farmland is a focus of rural conservation land trusts. In McDonough County the Prairie Land Conservancy used a conservation easement to protect a farm near the city of Macomb that included 45 acres of farm ground.

## **SUBURBAN AND COLLAR COUNTIES**

Conservation easements are often used to protect small privately owned parcels with high conservation value. In Barrington, Illinois, a rare gravel hill prairie, known only to equestrians who rode horse trails on the property, was protected by the Barrington Area Conservation Trust with a conservation easement on four acres of the owner's property.

"Although it is a small parcel, the rare native plants and scenic value to equestrians made a conservation easement particularly attractive to this property owner," said Karen Yancey, executive director of the Barrington Area Conservation Trust. The easement also reduced property taxes on the parcel.

In 2012, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County purchased a property with a natural creek and several oak groves in Harvard, a short walk from the new elementary school. Volunteers have donated more than 500 hours so far to restore the oak groves. Through a partnership with the school district, City of Harvard and Dunham Township, the property will become a public nature park, ensuring that local children will enjoy nature in the neighborhood.

Another privately owned parcel that received protection in 2012 was the 101-acre Dokum Mskoda Nature Preserve near Waukegan. The site is owned by the Fields of Cambridge Condominium Owners Association and Conserve Lake County (formerly Liberty Prairie Conservancy), with state protection bestowed by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.

“This year’s efforts will help protect the quality of life in our county in many ways for years to come,” said Steve Barg, executive director of Conserve Lake County. Like many conservation land trusts, Conserve Lake County is working with the county forest preserve district to protect thousands of additional acres of open space in Lake County over the next decade.

Along the Fox River in Batavia, The Conservation Foundation and the Batavia Park District purchased three properties that will open up scenic views along the river and improve the biking and walking trails. Located along South River Street, the purchase allows the groups to restore habitat along the river and provide for more public access to recreational activities.

## **URBAN OPEN SPACE**

Not all open lands are outside of the city. In Chicago, green space is just as important to conservation land trusts. In 2012, Openlands and its partners celebrated the creation of 10 new gardens at Chicago Public Schools.

“Openland Building School Gardens programs help engage students in not only greening their school grounds but providing vital connections between children and nature,” said Emy Brawley, Director of Land Preservation at Openlands.

Openlands was also instrumental in working with public and private groups this year to create the Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, along the Illinois-Wisconsin border between Chicago and Milwaukee. It will eventually protect an additional 11,000 acres of diverse habitats, remnant prairies, forests and pristine streams.

“Whether it is as small as a school garden or as large as the new Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, membership and support for conservation land trusts is growing as people recognize the value of protecting the state’s remaining open lands,” said McDonald.

For more information on the Prairie State Conservation Coalition and to find a conservation land trust working in your area, go to [www.prairiestateconservation.org](http://www.prairiestateconservation.org).