As a rancher, a banker and a real estate professional, I know first-hand that Texas is losing productive agricultural land at an unprecedented rate. Our legendary wide, open spaces are falling victim to urban sprawl and fragmentation. While it’s hard to imagine Texas without farms, ranches or elbow room, it is becoming a reality with each passing day.

We stewards can stand and helplessly wring our hands or we can use the tools at our disposal to conserve our working lands. One practical solution for keeping ag land in families’ hands is a conservation easement, a tool that offers tax and estate planning benefits, while keeping land in production for perpetuity.

But for conservation easements to be a viable solution in a private lands state, ‘Texas’ ranchers and farmers need an organization that understands the ins and outs and ups and downs of agriculture. That’s where TALT, which was created by visionary agricultural and conservation leaders, comes in.

In December 2006, TALT was incorporated by leaders from the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, Texas Wildlife Association and Texas Farm Bureau. Since that time, TALT has enrolled almost 100,000 acres in conservation easements, putting it on the same conservation footing as other land trusts that have been in existence for much longer. All of this was accomplished with a part-time executive director and administrative assistant, and with initial grant funding from the American Farmland Trust and the Meadows Foundation.

Although TALT is young, it is proven. The organization is ready to take its programs to the next level. Blair Fitzsimons has joined us as full-time executive director, and we welcome Ashley House as Land Transactions Associate. We have recently embarked on a five-year fundraising campaign that will provide the financial underpinnings necessary for TALT to operate at its highest level. The money will allow TALT to transact additional conservation easements, protecting more of Texas faster.

For years, landowners have asked, “What can we do to keep our land in the family and in production?” There hasn’t always been a good answer, but today many people are seeing the value of conservation easements, particularly when they can be entrusted to a responsible, ag-oriented organization like TALT.

With your support, TALT will continue to partner with landowners to protect Texas’ wide open spaces for the benefit of future generations.
Landowners who want to conserve their valuable working lands often find themselves asking, “Where do we start?” American Farmland Trust has completed a comprehensive guide designed to give landowners the essential information all in one easy-to-use guide.

“There are myriad programs available to conservation-minded landowners,” TALT Executive Director Blair Fitzsimons said. “Because there are many different options, it can be a bit overwhelming trying to determine which program and which provider might best meet an individual’s needs. This guide was created to point landowners in the right direction.”

The guide includes information on state and federal conservation programs and policy recommendations to help move Texas to the forefront of land conservation. The guide also profiles Texas A&M University’s Institute for Renewable Natural Resources Texas Land Trends Study, which chronicles the alarming rate at which we’re losing our agricultural lands.

Please contact Blair Fitzsimons bfitzsimons@txaglandtrust.org

**Guide Now Available for Texas Landowners**

**TALT: Created By Landowners for Landowners**

Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) was created by landowners who understand the ever-changing world of farming and ranching. Facilitated by American Farmland Trust and modeled on successful agricultural land trusts in Colorado, Wyoming and California, TALT promotes the conservation of private working lands, wildlife habitats and natural resources.

TALT’s philosophy, mission and principles reflect our overarching respect for landowner’s property rights and our commitment to protect them now and forever.

TALT’s board consists of men and women who own land and know firsthand the challenges of managing farms and ranches. Since 2007, TALT has helped landowners to protect almost 100,000 acres through the use of agricultural conservation easements. The following principles guide our actions and decisions:

- **Stewardship requires stewards.** Keeping productive rural lands in private hands and under private management is the best way to conserve Texas’ natural resources.

- **Help landowners to protect their lands.** TALT does not own fee title to any properties.

- **Focus only on private lands.** TALT refuses to acquire conservation easements that will end up in public hands or that involve condemnation.

- **Trust the landowner to manage.** TALT does not interfere with day-to-day management decisions.

- **Respect landowners’ rights.** The donation of an agricultural conservation easement does not require the landowner to provide public access, nor does TALT require it.

The mission of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust is to help Texans conserve their agricultural lands, wildlife habitats, and/or natural resources, and to enhance and sustain the long-term stewardship of private lands for the benefit of all Texans.

**Officers:**

Steve C. Lewis, President ★ Richard M. Lucas, Jr., Vice-President ★ A. Ryland Howard, Secretary ★

Clark Willingham, Treasurer

**Board Members:**

Marilynn Dierschke ★ Joe Maley ★ Larry Mellenbruch ★ Rick Peebles ★ Wade Richardson ★

Julie Kelleher Stacy ★ Don Steinbach

**Executive Director:**

Blair C. Fitzsimons
Land Stewardship in Action

Jim Bill Anderson and his wife, Deborah, have spent their adult lives putting the Anderson Ranch back together. And they’ve done their life’s work well. The ranch was honored with the 2010 Leo- pold Conservation Award by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department through its Lone Star Land Steward Awards Program.

The 5,600-acre ranch is home to an integrated livestock operation and the increasingly rare lesser prairie chickens as well as a myriad of other wildlife. The family decided that the ranch, located east of Canadian in the sand-sage Canadian Breaks prairie, will remain intact forever.

“As stewards, we believe that we have a responsibility to care for the land during our time and to leave it better than we found it for future generations,” Anderson said. “We have built our entire operation on the concept of sustainability -- the ability to carry a practice on into the future -- and a conservation easement fits into that framework. It helps us accomplish our long-term goals.”

One reason that the Andersons chose to conserve their legacy is the rapid fragmentation of agricultural land in Texas.

“Texas is losing agricultural land faster than any other state in the nation,” Anderson said. “The size of Texas disguises the urgency of the problem because it seems like we’ve got a lot of land. But if this trend continues, we could wake up one day and see that it has gone too far. What will we do then?”

Although others argued that geography would protect the Anderson’s holdings from urbanization, the family took a different view.

“Canadian is not the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, but that doesn’t mean that fragmentation won’t come,” Anderson said. “While our area probably won’t be dealing with strip malls and hotel chains, we could see the big ranches carved up into 300-acre recreational properties. It’s already happening in adjoining counties.”

To stop potential development, the Anderson family chose to enact a conservation easement.

“People enter into conservation easements for all sorts of reasons, including tax considerations and estate planning benefits, and while those were important considerations for us, the big reason we chose to do this was philosophical. In the long-term, keeping our land intact is as good for the people who live in the city as it is for us. Open space land benefits us all.”

Although the Andersons began investigating conservation easements several years ago, they did not complete the process until the Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT) was created.

“I did a lot of research and talked with a lot of people,” Anderson said. “The people at TALT really understood that it is possible to make a living from the land AND conserve its resources. Because they were people of the land, they spoke our language, understood our concerns and gave us confidence that we were entrusting our legacy to capable hands.”

Anderson continued, “The people at TALT are professional, but practical. They’re committed to doing this – and doing it right. They bring a level of expertise to the process that is reassuring. Plus, it’s a bonus to deal with fellow Texans who have the best interest of our state and our people at heart.”
Texas Farm & Ranch Lands Conservation Program Approves First Project

The Texas Farm & Ranch Lands Conservation Program, created by the 2005 Texas Legislature, approved its first purchase of development rights (PDR). Thanks to the state-funded program, the Savannah Oaks Farm and Ranch, located 38 miles from downtown Houston, will be protected in perpetuity from the development that is encroaching on surrounding rural areas. Ducks Unlimited will hold the conservation easement.

“The intent of the Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program is to assist private landowners in protecting land from development, to keep it under private ownership and in agricultural production,” said Sheri Land, Director of Coastal Grants, Education and Outreach with the General Land Office. “The program is run by personnel with a deep affection for agriculture and is advised by a diverse Council representing various aspects of the industry.”

The 700-acre property, owned by Rodney and Donna Kuchar, has been in agricultural production since the late 1800s. Currently, the farm provides four major habitat types: rice production; managed wetlands; pasture/grasslands; and riparian woodlands that provide significant value to a host of migratory and resident wildlife species.

In addition, Savannah Oaks is five miles north of the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge and six miles, 1,389 acres, of managed wetlands and wildlife-friendly farmlands enrolled in the Texas Prairie Wetlands Program. The farm provides important feeding grounds for migrating waterfowl and other birds from the refuge.

“The Texas Farm & Ranch Lands Conservation Program is a valuable tool in the state’s efforts to conserve productive agricultural land,” TALT Executive Director Blair Fitzsimons said. “We’re excited that the program has made its first grant. Every day, TALT fields phone calls from people who want to keep their land in agricultural production, but cannot afford to donate a conservation easement. There is a huge need and a huge demand for a program like this.”

For more information on the Texas Farm & Ranch Lands Conservation Program, see www.glo.state.tx.us or call (512) 463-5824. Applications are available on-line and are accepted year-round.

Join us for the 2011 Saving Family Land Seminars in Houston and Amarillo, June 22nd and 23rd.

Visit our website for details. Registration closes June 6th and last year’s events sold out!

Protect, Conserve, Pass On

Anderson Family Photos courtesy of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
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