

Advanced Ecology, Ltd.

Advancements

April 2008

What is a Conservation Easement?

The term conservation easement is used in many natural resource circles but often the application and ramifications of easements can be confusing.

A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization that protects the land from development. The landowner retains ownership and the rights to sell it or pass it to heirs, but typically cannot subdivide the property. Most easements allow for normal agriculture activities, outdoor recreation, and limited building of additional structures. Typically, organizations that hold conservation easements are called land trusts, these are 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations that have a primary mission to protect lands.

If a landowner is interested in pursuing an easement, the first step is researching the various land trusts that are available. A great place to start is the Texas Land Trust Council who maintains a directory of all the land trusts in the state. It is important to interview the land trust, and ask them about their overall mission to see if it is compatible with your goals. It is helpful to have basic details about your property including location, acreage, interesting species, or unique facts. Once a land trust is identified that fits your goals and works in your region, it is important to have the land trust make a site visit on your property.

After the land trust and the landowner agree to proceed with an easement, it is helpful to know all the steps in the process. Enacting an easement can be time consuming, and on average takes 3-6 months depending on different variables. It is highly recommended that landowners obtain legal representation to help them navigate this process. In addition to the easement, two other documents must be completed to finalize the process, an easement appraisal and a baseline document report (BDR). The conservation easement

appraisal is necessary to claim the easement as a tax deduction. The BDR is a detailed report of all the biological characteristics of the property, and all the existing structures on the property. BDR's are prepared by consulting groups, such as Advanced Ecology, or in some cases by the land trust. Once the easement is enacted, the land trust is mandated by the IRS to



make a yearly site visit to ensure the easement terms are being upheld. This is when the BDR is used for comparison year to year to ensure the terms of the easement are intact.

So why would a landowner pursue a conservation easement? Two primary rea-

sons are a strong commitment to land conservation and tax incentives. Many properties have a long family history and would like to see that conserved for future generations, or the landowner has worked to restore the property and does not want to see their work destroyed or subdivided. Financially, there are potential tax benefits of a donated conservation easement which are twofold. If an easement is donated for conservation purposes it is usually a tax deductible charitable gift, but the easement must be perpetual to obtain tax credit. Second, the conservation easement works as an estate planning tool by reducing the overall value of the property, thereby reducing the estate tax liability for the next generation.

Conservation easements are an invaluable tool that can help ensure the long-term protection of land, and are gaining popularity as more landowners see the financial benefits. Currently, Texas has nearly 200 conservation easements which encompass approximately 1.4 million acres with more being added each year. If you have questions about easements or would like to request an information packet contact the Texas Land Trust Council at (512-236-0655) or online at www.texaslandtrustcouncil.org.

- Contributor: Mark Steinbach, Executive Director, Texas Land Conservancy

U.S. Forest Service Data Reveals Positive Gains

Recent U.S. Forest Service data confirms that the forestland in the U.S. is roughly as abundant today as it was 100 years ago. The Forest Service's Resource Planning Act 2007 reveals both state and regional increases in forestland across the country. Among the key findings are: 1) there are 750 million acres of forestland in the U.S. today, about the same as in 1907; 2) Eleven states had increases of over 25% over the last century, and nine states had increases over 30%; 3) Overall, forestland in the northern U.S. has increased by almost 30%. The report is available for viewing or downloading at www.safnet.org/aboutforestry/index.cfm.

Source: Texas Forestry, March 2008



Supplemental Feeding for Game Fish Production

Supplemental feeding is an important practice in fisheries management for private ponds and lakes. In fact, pelletized fish food is essential for growing channel catfish and hybrid striped bass in ponds. These fish especially are suited for put-and-take fishing in ponds of one acre or less. Research indicates that channel catfish can convert two pounds of fish food into one pound of fish. Therefore, in these situations, good fishing can be achieved quickly.

Managing the food chains for largemouth bass also can utilize supplemental feeding. This is assisted by providing pelletized, floating fish food to stimulate growth and abundance of bluegills, an important forage fish for largemouth bass. Maintaining a healthy bluegill population is needed to support a healthy bass population. The coppernose variety of bluegills is recommended because these fish grow larger, particularly when a supplemental feeding program is used. Interestingly some anglers suggest that the table quality of bluegills is improved when the fish consume ample supplemental pelletized feed.

Additionally, bluegills can be easier to catch around fish feeders. They become concentrated to the feeder location because of the regular and readily available food supply. Some people find that a tight dough ball formed from dampened fish food pellets makes an excellent bait because the bluegills are accustomed to taking those pellets that slowly sink after becoming waterlogged.

The preferred feeders are those types that throw pellets directionally. The feeder shown in the accompanying photograph distributes pellets only to the front – as opposed to deer feeders that

distribute feed in a circular pattern. A rule-of-thumb is to install one fish feeder per five surface acres of water. Timers are set to run the distributors at dawn and at dusk. The timer duration depends on the amount of feeding activity by the fish. Generally, the amount of distributed food should be enough for the fish to eat all the pellets in about 15 minutes. Timers may need to be set for longer periods when a lot of fish are feeding at the site. Additional time and feeding periods may be needed during the warmer months.

When planning construction of a new pond or lake, a fisheries management plan should be developed as the impoundment is being built. The importance of this action will be discussed in future editions of the newsletter. Landowners planning new lakes can consult the staff of AEL for fisheries management recommendations.

Contributor: Carl Frentress, AEL Sr. Biologist



Where Did the Plywood Go?

Good forest management strategies are needed now more than ever, with markets for southern pine changing over the past twenty years. Previously, a large portion of pine timber was used in plywood, then the mainstay of housing construction. The introduction of less-expensive oriented strand board, produced using pulpwood-grade trees, combined with the high pricing of plywood has resulted in the closing of a majority of plywood plants. The market prices for trees used in lumber manufacturing have been flat. The conversion of industrial forestlands to small-diameter, short-rotation plantations coincided with this change, with this large supply of plantation timber increasingly competing with private timber.

Planting trees continues to be a good alternative to other investments, and offers a way to spread out risks in an investment portfolio. Trees also offer the opportunity to provide future income that may result from unforeseen ecosystem services, such as carbon storage or watershed protection.

Growing trees offers benefits as compared to other agricultural practices. Trees do not need constant attention, and marketing your timber can be delayed for better prices more easily than annual crops. Additionally, trees offer the side benefits of aesthetics, recreation and wildlife habitat, as well as the overall value that forests add to a parcel of land.

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For More Information

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AEL Annual Meeting **March 25-26, 2008**

We had a great meeting this year at Hawkeye Hunting Club in Center, discussing the triumphs over the past year, as well as the new and exciting endeavors yet to come. We have added three new people to our staff since the new year, Mark Bird (Forester), Brandi Killen (Administrative Assistant) and Dan Johnson (Biologist). We are also debuting two new sister companies this spring. Please look for more information on them and their services in the next newsletter. Thanks to everyone for a great year so far. We are looking forward to the upcoming months and projects that lie ahead. Please feel free to contact us with any comments or questions.



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Economic Development with Environmental Conscience