

Case Statement for Statewide GIS Database of Wisconsin Land Trust Conservation Information

Gathering Waters: Wisconsin's Alliance for Land Trusts works to support and strengthen nearly 50 land trust members. As part of our new strategic plan—aimed at taking Gathering Waters and land trusts to a new level of leadership and impact in the conservation community—we have identified that *compiling, maintaining, & marketing information* about the benefits of land conservation and land trusts should become a core strategy as it underpins much of our other work, including: *developing the capacity of Wisconsin's land trusts; advocating for public policies and funding; enhancing strategic conservation planning and implementation; cultivating cross-sector collaborations; and connecting people to the land and celebrate successes.*

At the present time, Gathering Waters' access to land conservation data—particularly information about Wisconsin land trusts—is limited. We have aggregate data from the 2015 Land Trust Alliance census about the approximate number of fee simple properties (over 300) and conservation easements (nearly 1,000) held by Wisconsin land trusts, we maintain maps showing the counties in which land trusts operate; however, we do not currently have the tools or the information to depict the broader impact of land trusts' work or to assist land trusts with strategic conservation planning and implementation.

In Wisconsin, the land trust community has a wide range of conservation information capabilities, making it difficult to assess cumulative impact and often limiting how modern technology can be leveraged. Some land trusts have full-time Geographic Information System (GIS) professionals, while others utilize software like Google Maps. Several rely exclusively on paper files for retaining records about protected sites and are unable to effectively capture and maintain digital data on their holdings.

In order to better serve the land trust community, Gathering Waters proposes developing a single, statewide geographic database that would serve as a *direct service* to many land trusts and, importantly, as a starting point for *future capacity building* and *collaborative efforts*, for instance the creation of digital story maps and assistance on strategic conservation planning efforts. This database project could also help to support Gathering Waters future policy advocacy and communications efforts, all in support of Wisconsin's land trusts.

It is important to note that historically, there has been some sensitivity within the land trust community about sharing conservation information and how data about protected sites are shared, e.g., on maps, online, etc. Concerns have stemmed from landowners' desire for privacy, potential damage from overuse by members of the public, or possible confusion about limitations on public access. Although property records are publicly available, there continue to be technical limitations on how easily certain conservation information can be accessed, e.g., the online Wisconsin Statewide Parcel Map does not include information about conservation easements. **In this context, any effort to compile, maintain, and market land trusts' conservation information will need to be accompanied by a clear data-sharing agreement regarding how and when data can and should be utilized.**