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Indiana easement signing a historic event

Harrison County agreement marks the first use of the federal agricultural land easement component in Indiana.

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HISTORIC MOMENT: Teresa and Steve Haggard (front, center) stand with representatives of the George Rogers Clark Land Trust, USDA NRCS, Harrison County Land Conservation Program and Indiana University Conservation Law Center. NRCS

You've likely heard about conservation easements. Perhaps a property near you is protected by one. Maybe you have land protected by one, or you work with a group that holds conservation easements. All these easements are important because they protect farmland from future development. However, an easement signing in Harrison County, Ind., in late October was historic.

Becky Fletcher, communications specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, now retired, says it was the first use of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program's agricultural land easement (ALE) component in Indiana. The program is authorized by the farm bill.

Conservationists had been trying to use the program in Indiana for years, Fletcher notes. Before it was ACEP, it was the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. The limiting factor in the past in Indiana was lining up a third party to purchase, hold and monitor the easement, Fletcher observes.

Wetland easements are an agreement between NRCS and the landowner. But for the ALE program, guidelines require that someone besides the federal government has primary responsibility for holding and monitoring the lease.

When the George Rogers Clark Land Trust agreed to act as the third party for easements, it made participation in the ALE program possible.

Behind the scenes

Steve and Teresa Haggard own the 177 acres now protected by the conservation easement. Concerned about development in rural Harrison County, they began looking for a way to keep their land in agriculture more than two years ago.

Pat Larr, president of the George Rogers Clark Land Trust, began working with other conservation partners and the Hoosier Hills Resource Conservation and Development Council in the 1990s to establish the trust to serve the area. "People want to work with people they know," Larr says. "There are many land trusts in Indiana, and most of them could have worked with the Haggards, but it makes more sense to donate an easement to a group like us that is in touch with agricultural production and can monitor land use on a regular basis."

The trust applied for and received a grant from the Harrison County Land Conservation Program that allowed it to provide the cash match required for the ALE. Then the trust submitted an application for federal funding through ACEP.

Eric Wise, county planner for Harrison County and secretary of the land conservation program, adds, "It's rewarding to see partnership efforts like this where local funds leverage federal dollars to help farmers keep farming and improve the community's quality of life for future generations."

Larr notes that it took dedicated directors of the trust to make this possible. It also takes legal expertise to help groups working with easements dot the i's and cross the t's properly. The George Rogers Clark Land Trust was aided by the Conservation Law Center in Bloomington, Ind., in drafting a solid conservation easement, Larr says.

Jerry Raynor, NRCS state conservationist, is excited by this historic event because he notes that farmland continues to disappear across Indiana and the U.S. at an alarming rate, converted to non-ag uses. He hopes that with one agricultural land easement on the books, the ball will start rolling so that more groups will use ACEP.

Information supplied by NRCS was used in this article.