

# New Report Shows Economic Value Of Farm Bill Conservation Easements

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The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Montana Association of Land Trusts (MALT), and the Heart of the Rockies Initiative have partnered to produce a 20-page report analyzing the economic impact of conservation easements in Montana. The report concludes that since it was created in the 2014 Farm Bill, the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program has produced a \$182 million economic benefit to Montana agricultural producers, rural main streets, rural economies, and the state's overall economy.

"We always knew the Farm Bill and the ALE program provided a wide range of economic benefits for Montana farm and ranch families, and this report clearly documents those benefits through data and individual examples of how ALE program dollars assist farm and ranch succession planning, fortify agricultural operations and support our communities," said Tom Watson, Montana NRCS State Conservationist. "I'm proud of the partnership among the NRCS, landowners, and land trusts. Make no mistake, this partnership is increasingly valuable to Montana, and is producing important economic results."

The report, titled "Working for Montana: Economic Benefits of Conservation Easements for Montana's Farms, Ranches and Communities," is believed to be the first comprehensive examination of the economic benefits related to the ALE program in Montana. The full report is available on the NRCS, Montana Association of Land Trusts, and Heart of the Rockies websites. Links to the report's full economic analysis and data modeling are also available as is the full report by Montana State University Natural Resources Economics and Agricultural Economics Assistant Professor Dr. Daniel Bigelow. Dr. Bigelow writes that conservation easements generally do not reduce property taxes in Montana and at the same time allow farmers to make maximum financial advantage of their land, which is their major asset.

The ALE program is designed for farmers and ranchers to work with the NRCS and land trusts across the country to conserve farm and ranch lands, strengthen America's food production, and protect wildlife habitat through voluntary conservation easements. A conservation easement is a private property right utilized by a landowner that typically restricts development of the land but maintains almost all agricultural management options and opportunities.

The report shows:

*\* Between 2014 and 2021 the NRCS, farm and ranch families, and land trusts (or state agency) teamed up to invest \$109 million from the Farm Bill ALE program to conserve 289,000 acres of ag lands in 22 Montana counties.*

*\* Every ALE Farm Bill dollar allocated to farm and ranch conservation yielded \$1.89 of economic activity, nearly doubling the positive impact of the Farm Bill funding.*

*\* 95% of the allocated funds were used to directly assist with farm and ranch agricultural operations and expansion, farm and ranch family succession planning, business strength and stability, and direct purchase of farm and ranch equipment.*

*\* These dollars produced a total economic impact of \$182 million for Montana's economy, supported 1,057 local jobs and \$41.5 million in labor income, and contributed \$99 million to Montana's Gross Domestic Product.*

The report also points out that since 1990 Montana has lost 1.3 million acres of undeveloped land.

"We in the Montana land trust community have done a good job over the years documenting the extensive conservation benefits of conservation easements—conservation of ag lands and open lands, wildlife habitat and wildlife movement areas, protect clean water, maintain outdoor recreation opportunities and more—but we also have a powerful economic story to tell as well," said Gavin Ricklefs, MALT board president and executive director of Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton.

In addition to the economic data analysis and modeling, the report contains several individual Montana farm and ranch family stories about how the ALE program strengthened or improved the overall economic viability of their agricultural operations.