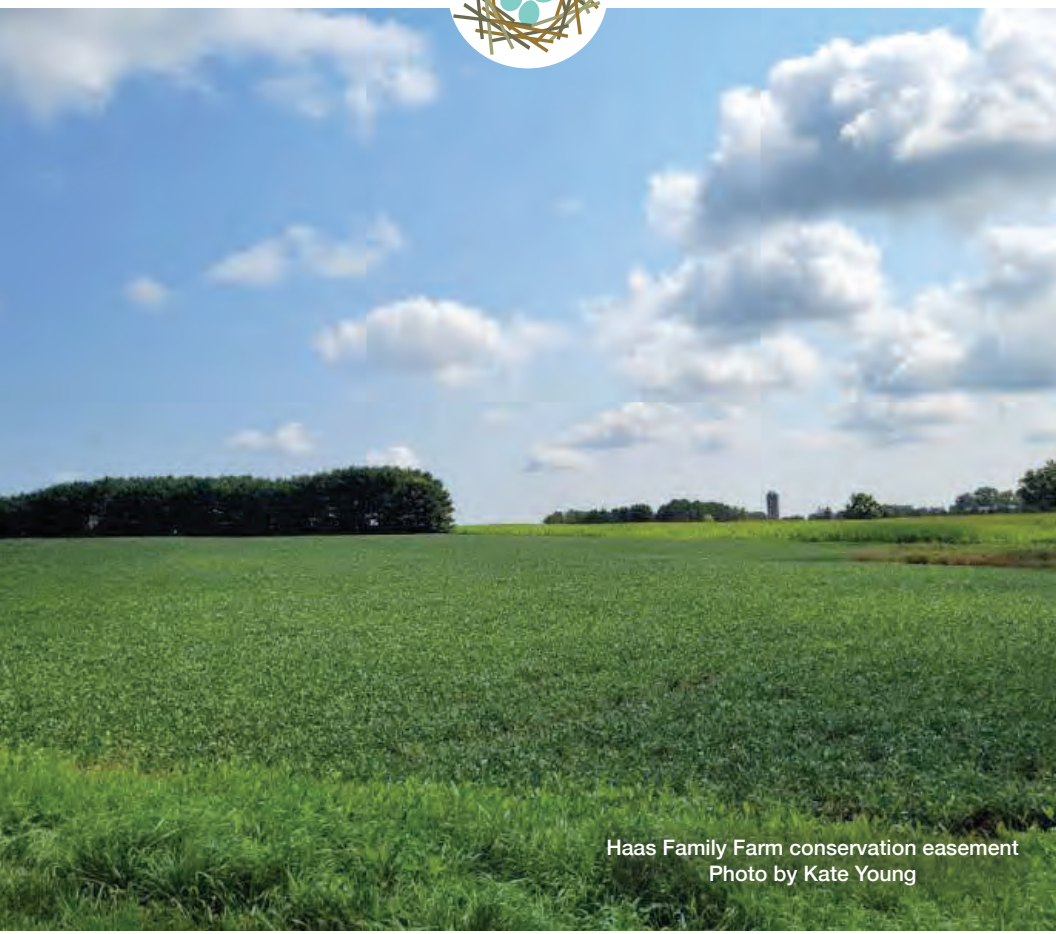
THE UNDERSTORY

Legacy Land Conservancy

Spring *2025*



Haas Family Farm conservation easement
Photo by Kate Young

LEGACY
Land Conservancy

GREETINGS

As waves of news from Washington D.C. continue to shape the national landscape, we want to assure you that Legacy remains steadfast in its mission. Our commitment to protecting the land you love is unwavering. Whether it's conserving forests and farmland, creating public nature preserves, or hosting volunteer workdays, we will continue to work tirelessly on behalf of the land and communities we serve.

Federal funding plays a critical role in supporting local land conservation efforts. Recent proposed cuts to conservation funding have raised concerns about the future of key projects and programs. Additionally, the federal workforce reduction poses a significant challenge, limiting the ability of land trusts, communities, landowners, and federal agencies to collaborate effectively in preserving local forests and farms.

While these proposed changes present major challenges, Legacy has a 54-year track record of being both resourceful and adaptable. As your local land trust, Legacy is part of a broader movement of organizations dedicated to advancing the public good. Thanks to the support of our generous donors, community advocates, family foundations, and close partnerships with state and municipal agencies, as well as the Land Trust Alliance, we are confident that our local conservation community will remain strong.

We are committed to continuing our important work despite these obstacles. We will keep moving forward with ambitious land conservation projects that provide essential public benefits, including clean water, wildlife habitat, local food, and opportunities for outdoor recreation and education.

By being a supporter of Legacy, you are already a champion for conservation. And now more than ever, we need your continued support to ensure these treasured spaces are preserved for generations to come.

Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor who was inspired by this call to action, all donations we receive from now until June 30 will be matched, dollar-for-dollar, up to $25,000! Donate today, and double your difference!

Together, we will continue to protect the forests, farms, preserves, and trails that are vital to the health and well-being of our communities, and the future we all share.

Yours in Conservation,

Diana Kern, Executive Director

What Can You Do?

It's easy to feel discouraged by the latest news, but we must focus on actions we can take. Here are a few ways you can help:

Spread the word: Share posts and updates from us and our partners, on Facebook and Instagram, to keep your community informed.

Contact your legislators: Make your voice heard—policy decisions are influenced by public pressure.

Volunteer or donate: Get involved and give back to land protection organizations like Legacy and our partners. Whether it's time or money, it makes a difference!

Double Your Difference – All donations to Legacy through June 30 will be matched, dollar for dollar, up to $25,000! Donate today!

If you'd like to learn more or find other ways to get involved, the Land Trust Alliance has provided these additional resources on their website:
https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/new-federal-landscape/

Preserving a Legacy: 216 Acres of Natural Beauty and Farmland Protected Forever

On a stretch of Scio Church Road in western Washtenaw County, where open skies meet rolling fields, fertile farmland, and lush forests, Legacy has secured the permanent protection of 216 acres of land. This conservation effort, made possible through a donated conservation easement from landowner Jacob Haas, ensures that this land will remain forever preserved while staying in private ownership.

The Jacob Haas Family Farm has long been a staple of the community, offering stunning views that passersby can enjoy. Just west of Ann Arbor, in an area facing significant development pressures, this land is a rare sanctuary of natural beauty and ecological diversity. By securing this easement, Legacy is preserving not only scenic farmland but also valuable wildlife habitats, including woodlands and wetlands, that are crucial for the region's ecological health.

Located at the crossroads of Lima, Scio, Freedom, and Lodi Townships, the Haas Family Farm joins a growing patchwork of conserved lands in the area, helping to create a vital green corridor. This connected space allows wildlife—from amphibians to aquatic invertebrates—to roam freely, safeguarding diverse ecosystems that are increasingly rare in our rapidly urbanizing world.

For Jake Haas this conservation easement is a heartfelt commitment to the land he has lovingly cared for over the years.

"I want it to remain as it is for future generations," he shared. "Protecting it ensures that the farm's legacy—and my love of farming—will continue to thrive long after I'm gone."

In addition to its ecological importance, the farm remains a crucial piece of prime agricultural land. As development pressures mount in the region, preserving this farmland helps maintain local food production, protects vital soil, and prevents irreversible damage from suburban sprawl.

"This conservation easement reflects our commitment to preserving the natural beauty and working lands of Washtenaw County," said Legacy Land Conservancy Executive Director Diana Kern. "By protecting it, we're safeguarding invaluable ecosystems while supporting the future of local farming."

Thanks to the generosity of the Haas family, this land will continue to provide environmental, cultural, and agricultural benefits for generations to come.

Jacob Haas (C), Susan LaCroix (L), and Diana Kern (R)

There's more to the story on our website! Scan the QR code for details & more photos

Corn growing on the Haas Family Farm conservation easement. Photo by Kate Young

Federal Funding Uncertainty: Why Michigan's Private Lands Need You Now More Than Ever

Over the last six years Legacy has worked to strengthen local land conservation by casting a wider, more diverse funding net. As interest in voluntary land protection through conservation easements has grown, so too have the costs and our efforts to fund this work.

Historically, landowners donated their easements because it was the only option. But as the conservation movement evolved, funding opportunities became available for purchasing easements. Now, for various reasons, more landowners are approaching Legacy with a need to be compensated for the value of their land's development rights, which they part with in entering a conservation easement.

In 2023, Locust Hills Farm (226 acres) was protected using funds available through the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-ALE). Photo by Susan LaCroix

This payment helps landowners invest back into their land and their families. Farmers repair or purchase equipment, restore structures, or bolster conservation practices. Aging landowners create a retirement plan, or even support a child through college.

Our land acquisition pipeline currently has 25 projects and more than 2,000 acres of critical land waiting to be protected forever. A majority of these are conservation easements that will need to be partially or fully purchased. The total cost? More than $7 million dollars.

These projects represent dozens of eager, conservation-minded land owners looking to make sure their wetlands, family farms, pollinator habitats, sensitive ecosystems, and woodlands are protected forever.

Because these funds are not part of our program budget, we have to raise additional capital, posing a significant fundraising challenge to the organization. With that in mind, we began a more concentrated effort on securing funds outside of our traditional revenue sources of individual donors and private foundation grants. We refocused on federal, state, and local public grants and programs to help fill in gaps and pay for the total purchase cost of projects.

Together though–individually or combined–federal, state, and local funds available to us never fully cover the cost of each easement. We must still raise more funds to ensure these lands are permanently protected.

Legacy prides itself on building partnerships that leverage expertise and funding. Working with federal agencies is complex and requires significant staff effort and knowledge to meet grant application requirements and reporting demands. Although we don't rely on federal dollars to fund our projects entirely, they are a critical piece of the land protection financial puzzle and are necessary to protect and save our farms, forests, and waters.

The 2018 Farm Bill was a big win for farmland conservation and Legacy has eagerly pursued funding through it. The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) are Farm Bill programs that help fund up to 50 percent of the purchase price for conservation easements. In the last five years they have helped fund four Legacy-held conservation easements.

In 2024, Legacy applied for and was awarded a $24.6 million federal RCPP contract as the lead partner of the Southern Michigan Conservation Coalition. This award brings together our municipal partners – city of Ann Arbor, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation, Scio Township,

Webster Township, Augusta Township, Ann Arbor Township, Dexter Township, Northfield Township – with our land trust partners, Livingston Land Conservancy and Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, to protect 4,000 acres of private land in southern Michigan through conservation easements.

When we submitted our application, we had identified eight conservation easements in our pipeline that would be protected using money from the RCPP award.

In addition to this award, we were able to secure another $756,000 in funding in 2024 through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the state-based Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) 319 grants, which are partially funded with federal dollars.

Unfortunately, shifts in federal priorities have placed a question mark on all this funding as well as other state and federal programs we've relied on to protect private land. While the RCPP has been awarded, a contract has not been signed because it is one of the new federal contracts currently frozen. Our staff is actively working with federal staff to move this forward, but the program is facing uncertainty.

When federal funding is removed from the land protection equation, it leaves a large hole that needs to be filled from other revenue sources. Without this funding, it will take us longer to find those other revenue sources and push our closing timelines farther out.

This means that now, more than ever, your support is vital to protecting the forests, farms, and waters we love.

As we navigate the challenges of securing funding for land conservation in an increasingly complex financial landscape, the need for your support has never been greater. While federal and state programs have provided crucial assistance, shifts in funding priorities have created uncertainty, making it even more essential for us to rely on the generosity of individual donors and foundations.

In 2024, Jansen Farms (158 acres) was protected using funds available through the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-ALE).

With over 2,000 acres of critical land waiting to be protected, Legacy is more committed than ever to finding creative solutions and building strong partnerships to ensure these lands are preserved for future generations.

Your continued support allows us to overcome these hurdles and make sure that our region's forests, farms, and waters remain protected for the benefit of all. Together, we can keep our conservation efforts moving forward, ensuring that these vital ecosystems are safeguarded for years to come.

Sowing Seeds for the Future

By Ari Henson, Preserve Stewardship Associate

My first experience with native plant seed collection remains vivid and unforgettable. As a Stewardship Intern with the Land Conservancy of West Michigan in the summer of 2022, I was set loose in a vast prairie field, armed with nothing but a bucket clipped to my belt and pruners in hand. To some, it might have seemed like an ordinary task, but to me, it felt like the moment a gardener takes their first bite of a vine-ripened tomato after nurturing the plant all season long. In my case, my "tomato" was wild lupine, a native perennial with vibrant flowers so blue and purple they almost looked electric.

Ari holding wild bergamot.

My summer was spent caring for this prairie—removing invasive species, clearing trails, and tending to the land so that native plants, especially the lupine, could thrive. After a hot and dry summer, the seeds matured, and by early fall, it was time to collect the fruits of our labor. Alongside my crew, I spent days harvesting bucket after bucket of crisp, brown seed pods. At the end of each day, I was covered in dirt, but the sense of fulfillment was immeasurable.

Fast forward to 2024, when I joined Legacy Land Conservancy as a Preserve Stewardship Associate. One of the first things our Preserve Stewardship Manager mentioned was expanding the seed collection program, and I couldn't have been more excited. Over the years, my fascination with collecting native seeds for conservation and ecosystem restoration had grown, and I was eager to get started once more.

During the fall, as the flowers began to wilt and the seeds ripened, I dove back into the prairies—this time at two Legacy preserves: Johnson and Iron Creek. At Johnson Preserve, I collected a variety of seeds—from tiny foxglove beardtongue to silky swamp milkweed. I also gathered seeds from towering grasses like Indian grass and big bluestem, which, by late summer, reach impressive heights that make it feel like you're walking through a sea of green.

At Iron Creek, I focused on the remnant prairie fen near the preserve's trailhead, collecting seeds from a stunning array of plants, including woodland sunflower, goldenrod, beebalm, and mountain mint. The process of collecting these seeds is not only important for preserving the unique species but also for ensuring that native plants are well-adapted to the local climate. Native plants rely on a process called winter stratification, where the seeds need cold temperatures to germinate in the spring, ensuring they don't sprout prematurely.

Seeds collected at Iron Creek Preserve in the fall of 2024

As Legacy continues to expand its seed collection program, we aim to create a seed bank using plants from the prairies at Johnson and Iron Creek. This will help preserve the local genetic adaptations of these species, ensuring they remain resilient to the region's climate.

While seed collection may seem like a simple task, it has profound, long-lasting effects on the health of our ecosystems. For me, it's a deeply fulfilling experience—almost spiritual. By actively preserving these plants, I'm playing a part in something much larger than myself, something that will endure for generations. I'm proud to be part of Legacy's mission, and I look forward to seeing the seed collection efforts continue to grow.

New Kiosk Installed at Sharon Hills Preserve

On a wet and snowy December morning, Ari and Kyler braved the cold and headed out to Sharon Hills Preserve. After almost two years of planning, designing, and prepping, the preserve signs were ready to install on the new trailhead kiosk. And even in unfavorable winter working conditions, stewardship work never stops.

"We had been looking forward to this moment for a long time, so waiting a minute more was not an option," Preserve Stewardship Manager Kyler Moran said. "We were excited to get it up, and we were even more excited for our visitors to use it."

Equipped with a ladder, two drills, a box of screws, and adrenaline keeping them warm, they eagerly attached the new signs to a 6'x6' kiosk at the preserve trailhead.

Ari and Kyler install the Spanish-version side of the Sharon Hills kiosk.

"I think we underestimated Mother Nature a little," Ari Henson said. "It was so cold, we broke the drill bit attaching the last of the English-version signs. But it was so worth it!"

A few weeks later Ari and Kyler went back and successfully installed the Spanish-version signs. It's all part of a larger Preserve Accessibility Project–to welcome more visitors and eliminate barriers to enjoying the beauty of our preserves–that we began in 2021.

The first barrier to the outdoors is often access. Unkempt trails can be unsafe and uninviting for users, especially those with mobility challenges and families with children. Unclear signage and trail markers can make users feel unwelcome and be a confusing challenge. We want everyone who visits our preserves—whether they're a seasoned birder, a senior looking to spend some time outside, or a college student taking a respite from mid-terms—to feel welcome, safe, and free to be their authentic selves while experiencing our natural world.

With a goal of expanding preserve stewardship and maintenance to ensure a positive, inclusive, and educational experience for everyone, the team has already made great progress on implementing pieces of the plan. Over the last few years, they've continued our accessibility push by adding more boardwalks, removing hundreds of pounds of invasive species, and adding trail blazes to all our preserves.

Kyler installs the English-version side of the Sharon Hills kiosk.

And now the addition of thoughtful signage, wayfinding, maps, and easy to understand information is another piece of the plan making our preserves more accessible so our community members feel welcome to return over and over again.

Although the kiosk signs have taken longer than we anticipated, the extra effort to get them just right has been an important part of the process. And now that the first preserve one is done, we are looking forward to installing the rest of them throughout the summer!

LEGACY
Land Conservancy

Protecting and Preserving Southern Michigan

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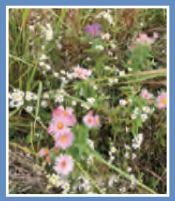
Scan the QR code for the Legacy Annual Report 2023-2024 on our website!

Mushroom and Asters Photos by Camryn Brent



Cardinal flowers Photo by John Lloyd

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