



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANFORD LAND TRUST

↑ Branford Land Trust's Julie Wagner (left) and Joan Merrick (right) worked together to complete the renewal of accreditation application.

ACCREDITATION MADE EASIER

By **KIRSTEN FERGUSON**

The Second Time Around: Lessons from Two Land Trusts

For the all-volunteer Branford Land Trust in Connecticut, accreditation was a smoother journey the second time around. The 57-year-old organization, which stewards roughly 70 preserves along Long Island Sound, owns or holds conservation easements on tidal salt marshes, wetlands and other lands, while maintaining miles of trails for the public.

Current president Julie Wagner and past president Joan Merrick partnered closely to lead the renewal effort, receiving that renewal in December 2024. Their complementary skills and strong working relationship made all the difference. "Joan and I have different strengths

and knowledge bases. We worked together very closely," says Wagner.

Merrick, who had taken a major role in the trust's initial accreditation, brought valuable institutional knowledge. Both leaders also benefited from attending Accreditation Commission seminars and having flexible schedules—Merrick is retired, and Wagner has adaptable work hours.

"We had the most efficient system for us," Merrick notes.

While the two spearheaded the process, they brought in others when needed. For financial documentation, they leaned on their treasurer. They consulted their attorney and involved two board members, including a younger one, to encourage exposure to the process and build leadership capacity.

Compared to the first time, renewal felt far more manageable. "Our land trust already had solid procedures, but during the first accreditation, our documentation fell short. That year was mostly about paperwork and ensuring we could properly demonstrate what we were already doing," says Merrick.

Following that experience, Merrick developed new documentation checklists. The trust prioritized improvements and embedded them into its strategic plan. "That strategic planning helped us focus," says Wagner. "It clarified that maintaining the accreditation requirements was something we needed to do over the next five years."

Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton, Montana, also took a team-based approach to its accreditation renewal. The mid-sized trust, with about 10 full-time staff, divided the application into sections assigned to a working group based on expertise. While the process was handled internally, the executive committee of the board remained informed.

Operations Director Kori Anderson led the effort, supported by Stewardship Director Rhiannon Klingonsmith and Lands Director Melissa Odell.

"Having a good team made all the difference," says Anderson. "Each of us was an expert in our area and knew where the documents lived. And also having a system of checks and balances

was really helpful for us. Sometimes you've been looking at something so long, you need someone else to double-check and make sure it's all there."

Branford Land Trust followed a similar philosophy. "We took free rein on each other's work—no pride of ownership," Merrick says. "One of us would write a section, the other would review it."

At Bitter Root, preparations began about a year before the deadline, with intensive work ramping up in the final six to eight months. Regular check-ins helped the team stay on track. Anderson, who went on maternity leave mid-process, credited the team's momentum and structure with keeping things moving.

"Pacing ourselves was key," she says. "The five-year work plan provided by the Accreditation Commission really helped us stay current and aware of what needed attention."

Now, the land trust has incorporated accreditation awareness into new staff onboarding and remains committed to maintaining high standards.

"Accreditation encourages you to examine your practices closely," Anderson says. "Are we doing this the best way? Are we meeting a level of excellence across the board? While it's a significant time investment, it's definitely worth it."

Merrick emphasizes that there's no universal formula for success. "Each land trust has to evaluate its people, its electronic systems and its land holdings to figure out the best approach," she says.

"This worked for us. And liking each other went a long way," adds Wagner.

Top Takeaways for Renewal Success

- **Divide and conquer:** Assign sections based on each person's expertise.
- **Play to your strengths:** Match roles with individual knowledge and availability.
- **Check in regularly:** Use scheduled meetings to monitor progress.
- **Pace yourself:** Set internal milestones well ahead of the deadline.
- **Use the right tools:** Branford used Google Drive and checklists; Bitter Root relied on Excel and the accreditation online platform.
- **Double-check everything:** Assign reviewers to catch missing details.
- **Consult the five-year plan:** Regularly review and update your work in alignment with any updates to the accreditation requirements. ☺

↓ Branford Land Trust protects tidal salt marshes, wetlands and other coastal properties in Connecticut.



LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

landtrustaccreditation.org

THE LATEST ACCREDITATION RENEWALS

The following land trusts have achieved accreditation renewal for either the first, second or third time—congratulations!

Accreditation involves a rigorous evaluation that ensures applicants are operating at the highest conservation standards. Thank you for continuing to lead the way in conservation excellence.

- American Chestnut Land Trust (MD) ♦
- Brandywine Conservancy & Museum of Art (PA) ♦
- California Farmland Trust (CA) ♦
- Conserving Carolina (NC) ♦
- Countryside Conservancy (PA) ♦
- East Haddam Land Trust (CT)
- Elkhorn Slough Foundation (CA) ♦
- Five Valleys Land Trust (MT) ♦
- Frenchman Bay Conservancy (ME) ♦
- Friends of the Columbia Gorge and its affiliate, Friends of the Columbia Gorge Land Trust (OR)
- Heritage Conservancy (PA) ♦
- Housatonic Valley Association (CT) ♦
- Hudson Highlands Land Trust (NY) ♦
- Ice Age Trail Alliance (WI) ♦
- Kestrel Land Trust (MA) ♦
- Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County (CA) ♦
- Land Trust of Napa County (CA) ♦
- Louisville & Jefferson County Environmental Trust (KY) ♦
- Norfolk Land Trust (CT) ♦
- North Branch Land Trust (PA) ♦
- North Shore Land Alliance (NY) ♦
- Placer Land Trust (CA) ♦
- Rondout-Esopus Land Conservancy (NY) ♦
- Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust (ID) ♦
- Scenic Hudson and its affiliates, Scenic Hudson Land Trust and Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail (NY) ♦
- Sonoma Land Trust (CA) ♦
- Vital Ground Foundation (MT) ♦
- Wareham Land Trust (MA) ♦
- Washington Farmland Trust (WA) ♦

List as of March 2025.

♦ Denotes second renewal ♦ Denotes third renewal.