

Rhode Island Land Trust Census 2025



Introduction

The Rhode Island Land Trust Council (RILTC) is the statewide coalition of 50+ land trusts. RILTC strengthens and supports the network of land trusts across the state, ensuring they have the tools and resources needed to conserve and steward land for the benefit of all Rhode Islanders, now and into the future. Through training, technical assistance, convening, and advocacy, RILTC serves as a backbone organization for a diverse community of land trusts, the majority of which are all-volunteer organizations.

To better understand the evolving needs, priorities, and accomplishments of Rhode Island's land trusts, RILTC conducted a comprehensive census in 2025. This effort builds on, "2020 Rhode Island Land Trust Conservation & Stewardship Accomplishments, Activities, and Practices - Survey Highlights." It provides a snapshot of conservation and stewardship activities, organizational capacity, and emerging challenges across the state.

The findings in this report highlight both the extraordinary impact of Rhode Island's land trust community and the growing complexity of conservation work. This information provides a road map for RILTC's programs, advocacy efforts, and resource development strategies, allowing us to respond effectively to the needs of the land trusts and the communities they serve.

Rhode Island's land trusts vary in size, structure, geography, and mission. Some organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy and Audubon Society of Rhode Island, steward thousands of acres across the state, while others focus on conserving land within a single municipality, watershed, or even on a single property.

We expanded the scope of the Census this year to include information on farmland, affordable housing, funding, and more. This report summarizes the key findings of the 2025 Census and will guide RILTC's continued efforts to support a resilient and inclusive land trust community in Rhode Island.

Key Findings from 2025:

- Of Rhode Island's 50 active land trusts, 39 participated in the 2025 Census. Of those respondents, 34 also completed the 2020 Census, allowing for comparisons over time.
- Almost 2,000 properties covering almost 62,000 acres (nearly 97 square miles) are protected either solely, or in partnership with a land trust in the state.
- Between State, Federal, local, private, and water supply holdings, it is estimated that there are around 120,000 acres of conserved land in Rhode Island. Land trusts make up 51% of all conserved land in the state.*
- RI land trusts maintain and steward nearly 400 miles of trails.
- 69% of Rhode Island's land trusts are all-volunteer organizations.

*There is some overlap between land trusts and RIDEM, including Conservation Easements that make up 29.8% of DEM properties tallied.

Definitions

Municipal Land Trusts:

Are comprised of appointed volunteers, advisory to city/town.

Private All-Volunteer Land Trusts:

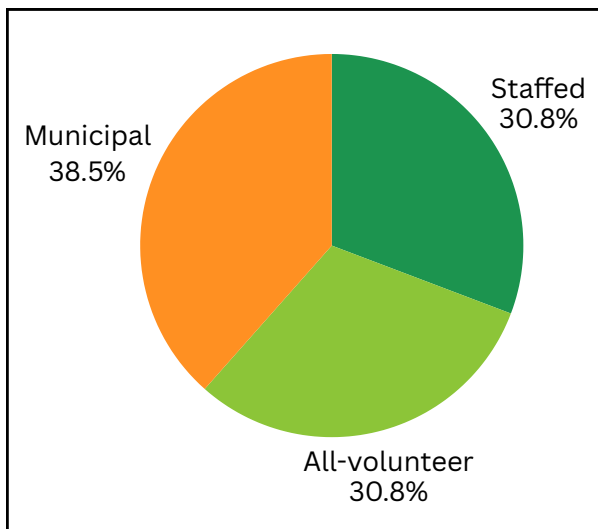
Are 501(c)3, non-profit land trusts run entirely by unpaid volunteers.

Private Staffed Land Trusts:

Are nonprofit, 501(c)3 land trusts with paid employees.

Types of Land Trusts

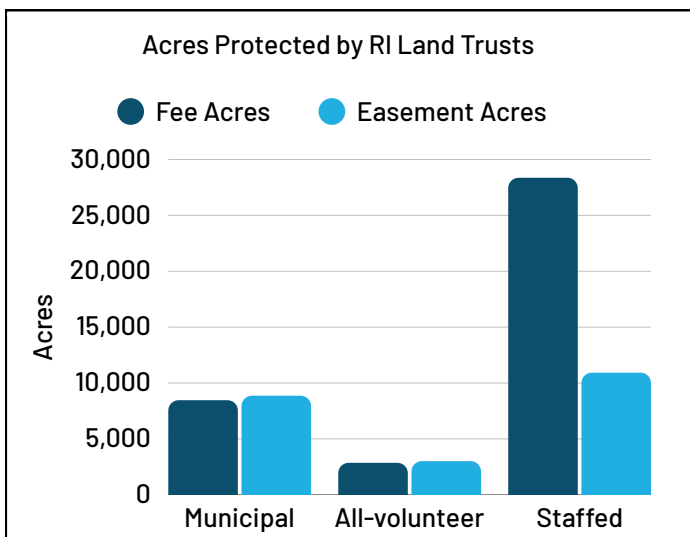
In total, 69% of Rhode Island's land trusts are all-volunteer, including 501(c)3 volunteer land trusts and municipal land trusts. These land trusts are run by an all-volunteer board of directors.



Survey findings point to an expected capacity gap between staffed land trusts and those operated by municipal or all-volunteer boards. All land trusts reporting fewer than 10 annual volunteers (excluding board members) were all-volunteer organizations, while all four land trusts engaging over 100 volunteers per year have paid staff. This pattern underscores the ongoing challenges small and volunteer-run land trusts face in recruiting, coordinating, and sustaining volunteer involvement, an issue that directly impacts stewardship, public access, and long-term conservation management. The majority of land trusts (23) have 25 or fewer volunteers, and six have zero volunteers.

Protected Properties

As expected, we've seen growth in conserved acreage statewide. Land trusts now collectively protect approximately 62,285 acres or 97.3 square miles across 2,000 individual properties—an increase of 6,900 acres and 95 additional properties since 2020. These trends reflect steady progress, underscoring the ongoing importance of providing technical assistance, training, and resources related to conservation permanence to support the state's diverse network of land trusts.

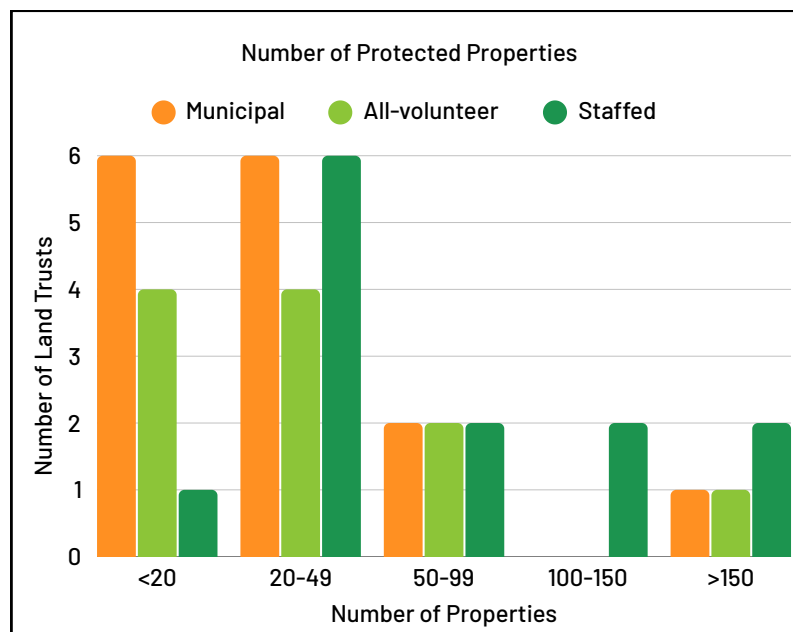


Municipal land trusts have seen the greatest change, more than doubling their number of easement acres reported (from 3,872 acres in 2020 to 8,865 acres reported today). Some of that is due to the fact that not all municipal land trusts in this census reported in 2020.

Staffed land trusts also saw a significant change, growing their fee acre holdings by about 1,670 acres (26,695 acres in 2020).

For the majority of land trusts with a conservation easement on their fee-owned land, RI Dept. of Environmental Management holds (or co-holds with the land trust) the easement. After that, municipalities, The Nature Conservancy, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service are the most common holders or co-holders of conservation easements.

Twenty-five land trusts say they have used State funding for their land trust protection projects, and 21 have used federal funds. Land trusts regularly partner with the State to fund conservation projects, yet state funding for conservation is unpredictable. The majority of the funding available comes from voter-approved Green Bond issues every two years. When State funding is unavailable and uncertain, federal and philanthropic matching funds are difficult to access.



Other interests that land trusts hold include trail/pedestrian easements (10), historical sites (10), management agreements (7), and community meeting space (2).



Conservation Priorities

We asked participating land trusts about their land protection priorities. Below are the top priorities for each type of land trust (there were several items that were tied).

For staffed land trusts, land protection priorities were:

1. Habitat protection and creation
2. Climate change resilience
3. Scenic lands and/or recreation
4. Forest stewardship
5. Drinking water supply, Biodiversity (tied for 5th)

The land protection priorities for all-volunteer land trusts were:

1. Scenic lands and/or recreation
2. Habitat protection and creation, Tree preservation/planting, Forest stewardship (tied for 2nd)
3. Biodiversity

And finally, the land protection priorities for municipal land trusts were:

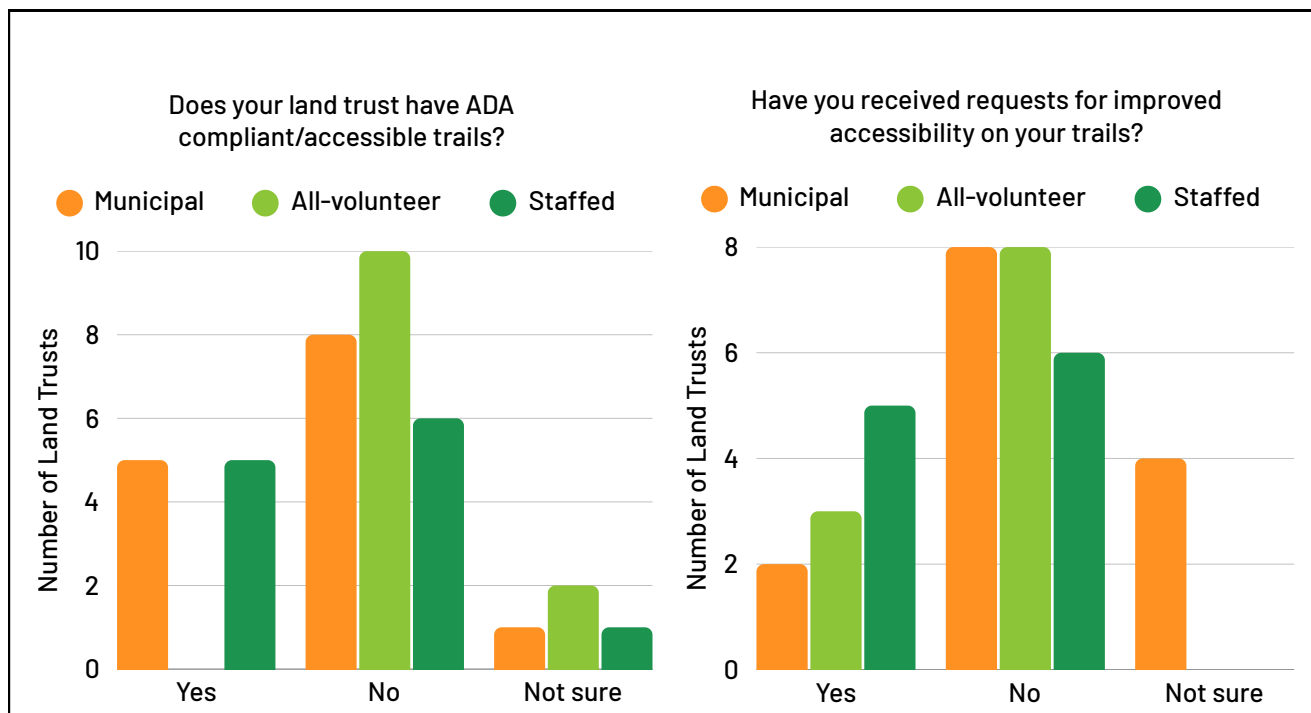
1. Scenic lands and/or recreation
2. Habitat protection and creation
3. Drinking water supply, Tree preservation/planting, Farmland and/or food production (tied for 3rd)

Based on these conservation priorities, 89.5% of land trusts surveyed have prioritized properties they'd like to conserve, if future funding conditions, landowner goals, and objectives align.



Trails & Access

Collectively, Rhode Island land trusts maintain 394.5 miles of publicly available trails for recreation and use. Out of the land trusts surveyed, 10 land trusts (5 staffed, 5 municipal) have ADA compliant/accessible trails, and one municipal land trust is in the process of installing an ADA compliant trail. Ten land trusts (5 staffed, 3 volunteer, 2 municipal) say they have received requests for improved accessibility on their trails.



Stewardship

We asked about land trust's biggest challenges in terms of fee property stewardship. By type of land trust, they responded:

Nonprofit, staffed

1. Invasives
2. Impacts of climate change
3. Ongoing maintenance

Nonprofit, volunteer

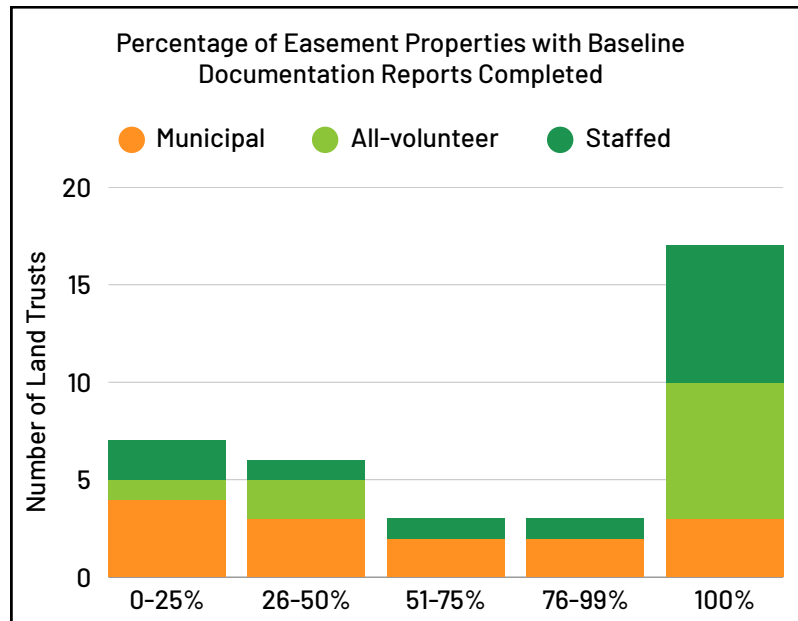
1. Finding service providers, volunteers, and/or stewards
2. Ongoing maintenance
3. Legal challenges

Municipal

1. Invasives
2. Finding service providers, volunteers, and/or stewards
3. Impacts of climate change

Baseline Documentation Reports

Baseline Documentation Reports (BDRs) document the conservation values of a protected property and describe the existing condition of the property's features that are relevant to the Conservation Easement. BDRs are legally required for Conservation Easements (or Deed to Development Rights, or Conservation Restriction) and recommended for fee and municipal properties. A BDR is critical for establishing the condition of the property as of the date the Conservation Easement was granted and is the basis for future monitoring and defense. Rhode Island's land trusts have strengthened their BDR systems over time. Seventeen of the land trusts responding have BDRs completed for 100% of their Easement Properties (up from 13 in 2020). Since 2020, the number of land trusts with BDRs for only 0-25% of their easement properties has been cut in half, from 14 land trusts down to 7, showing significant progress in the implementation of best practices. Since 2019, RILTC has prioritized addressing the backlog of easement properties without BDRs. A significant number of properties still remains in the mid-range categories (26-50%, 51-75%), indicating an ongoing need for technical assistance.

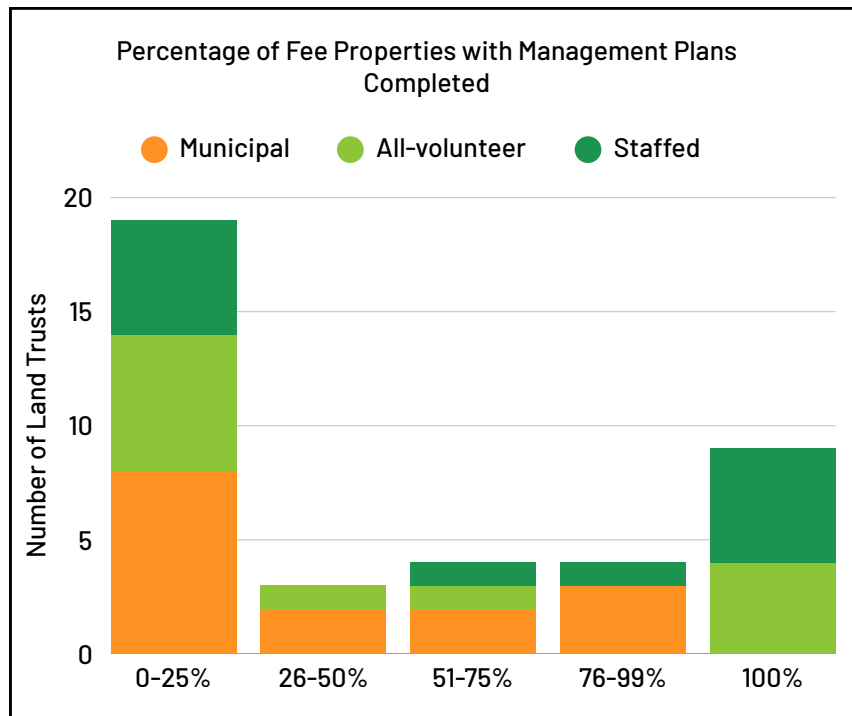


Management Plans

Management plans are important tools that help land trusts steward and care for their properties over time. While the format and complexity of management plans can vary depending on the property and organizational capacity, they generally outline the long-term vision, stewardship goals & priorities, and recommended actions. Management plans may address topics such as habitat management, invasive species control, forestry, agriculture, public access, trail maintenance, climate resilience, cultural resources, and ongoing stewardship responsibilities.

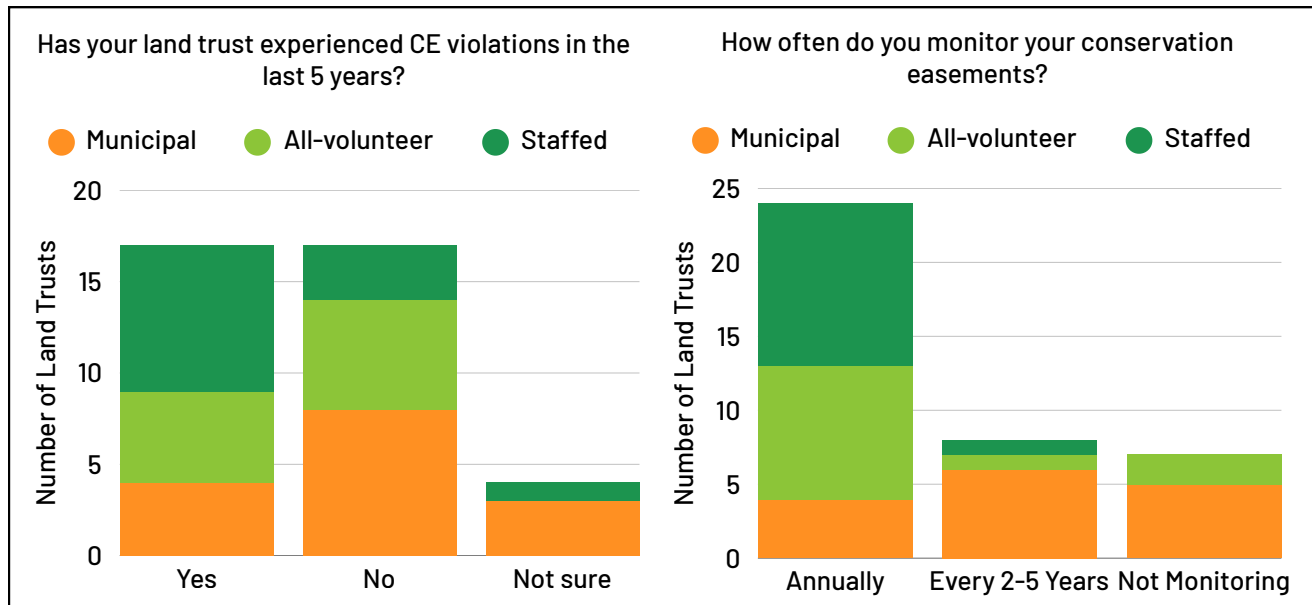
Nine land trusts reported having management plans completed for 100% of their fee properties, while an additional eight reported having management plans completed for 51-99% of their fee properties. The remaining 22 land trusts have management plans for 50% or less of their fee properties and of these, 17 are all-volunteer or municipal land trusts. These numbers have not changed significantly since 2020.

Fifteen land trusts have management plans that include all the information typically found in a BDR.



Monitoring

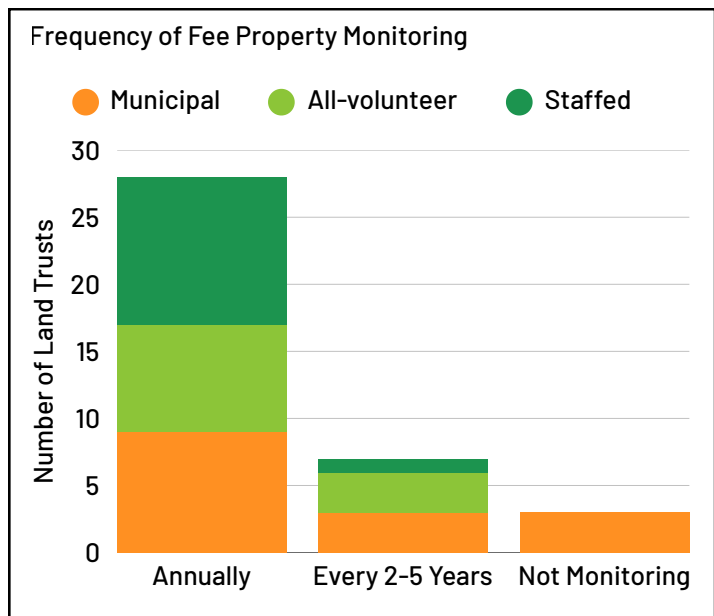
Monitoring is one of the core responsibilities of land trusts and is essential to ensuring that conserved lands remain protected in perpetuity. Regular monitoring helps land trusts document property conditions, identify potential stewardship concerns or violations, and uphold their long-term conservation commitments.



Conservation Easements

Twenty-four land trusts (4 municipal, 11 staffed, 9 volunteer) are monitoring their conservation easements annually, a 26% increase from 2020. Eight land trusts are monitoring at least every five years, double the amount of land trusts in 2020. Seven land trusts (5 municipal, 2 volunteer) are not actively monitoring their conservation easements.

Seventeen land trusts reported having a conservation easement violation in the last five years, which underscores the importance of monitoring easement properties.

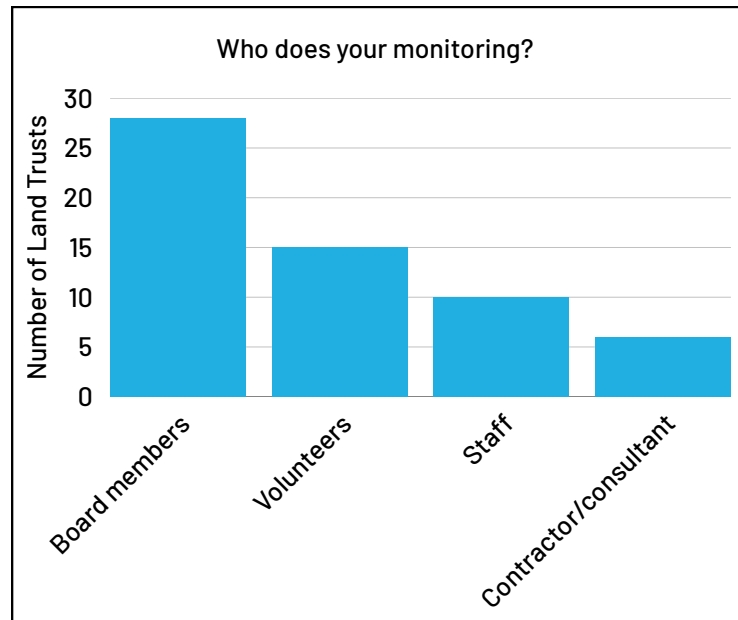


Fee Properties

In 2020, of the 35 Land Trusts holding Fee Properties, 28 (74%) reported monitoring their Fee Property annually, and an additional 7 (20%) reported monitoring at least every 5 years.

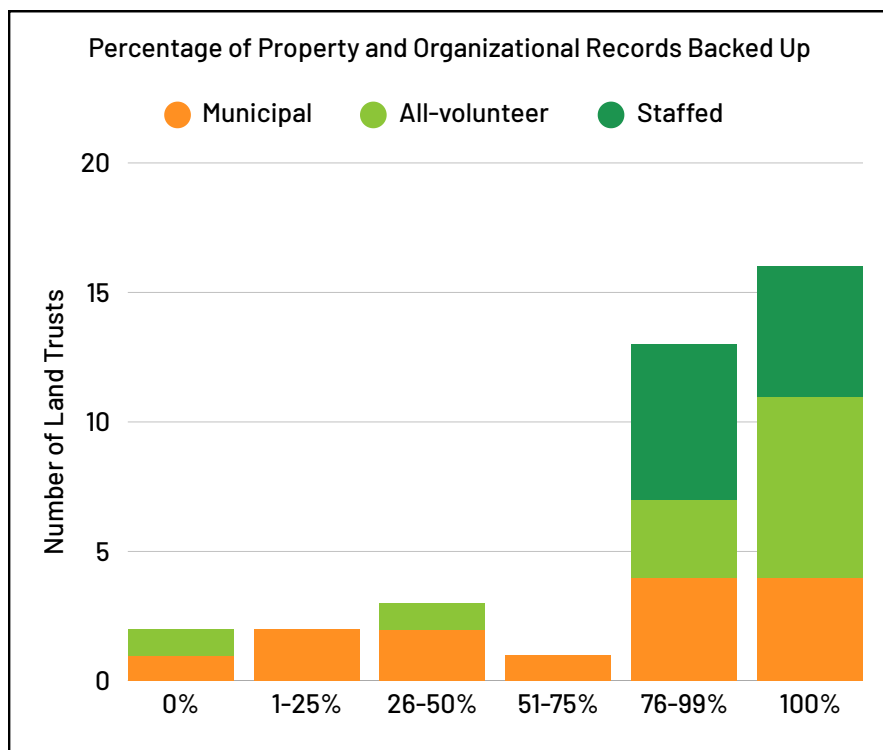
Municipal and all-volunteer land trusts monitor less frequently, including seven land trusts that reported they are not actively monitoring their easements. Limited staff/volunteer capacity appears to be the primary factor.

For fee-owned properties, 28 land trusts monitor annually (including all private, staffed land trusts). For Municipal land trusts, who often manage some of the largest acreages, capacity constraints again show through. Three municipal land trusts reported they do not monitor fee lands, and several others monitor only every two years.



Record-Keeping

Strong record keeping is essential to the long-term success and permanence of land conservation, ensuring that land trusts maintain the legal documents, stewardship records, maps, and organizational history needed to effectively monitor & defend conserved properties over time.



Most RI land trusts have systems in place to back up property documents and organizational records, and there has been no significant changes in these trends since 2020. Sixteen land trusts say that 100% of their property documents and organizational records are backed up. Fourteen land trusts have at least 75% of their records backed up, while five have less than 50% backed up. A small but significant number of organizations report limited or no backup systems, or uncertainty about their practices.

In terms of how land trusts back up their records, 30 have digital copies in a separate file, 18 have digital copies on an external hard drive, 26 use the cloud or an online backup service, two don't back up their records, and three are not sure.

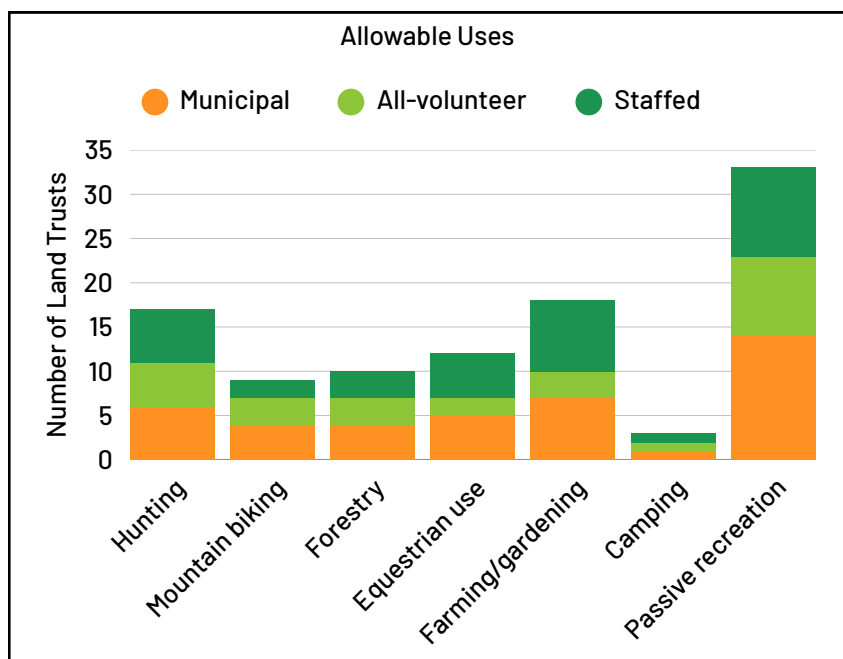
Shared Services

Rhode Island's land trusts demonstrate strong interest in collaboration, particularly around project-based and joint conservation efforts, where over 80% report being somewhat or very likely to participate. Interest remains high for Regional Conservation Partnerships and joint programming, though fewer organizations report current engagement. Mergers are overwhelmingly viewed as unlikely, showing that land trusts prefer to maintain organizational independence.

	Shared staff and/or services	Joint programming	Joint conservation opportunities	Merging	Regional Conservation Partnerships	Projects
Not likely	27%	11%	11%	76%	19%	9%
Somewhat likely	51%	44%	31%	11%	47%	34%
Very likely	22%	34%	44%	13%	25%	51%
Already doing	0%	11%	14%	0%	9%	6%

Allowable Uses

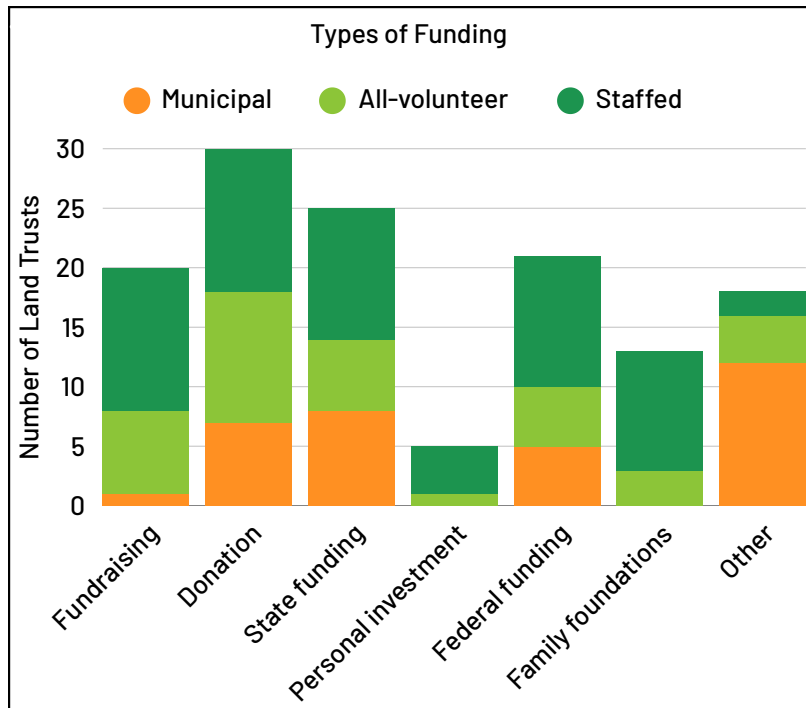
Conserved lands protected by land trusts support a wide range of recreational, agricultural, forestry, and stewardship activities, with allowable uses often shaped by a property's conservation values, public access goals, ecological sensitivity, and legal restrictions. The types of uses permitted on land trust properties highlights the diversity of approaches land trusts take in balancing conservation, recreation, working lands, and community access.



Land trusts were also asked about the allowance of motorized vehicle use and trapping on their properties; however, no responding land trusts reported permitting these activities.

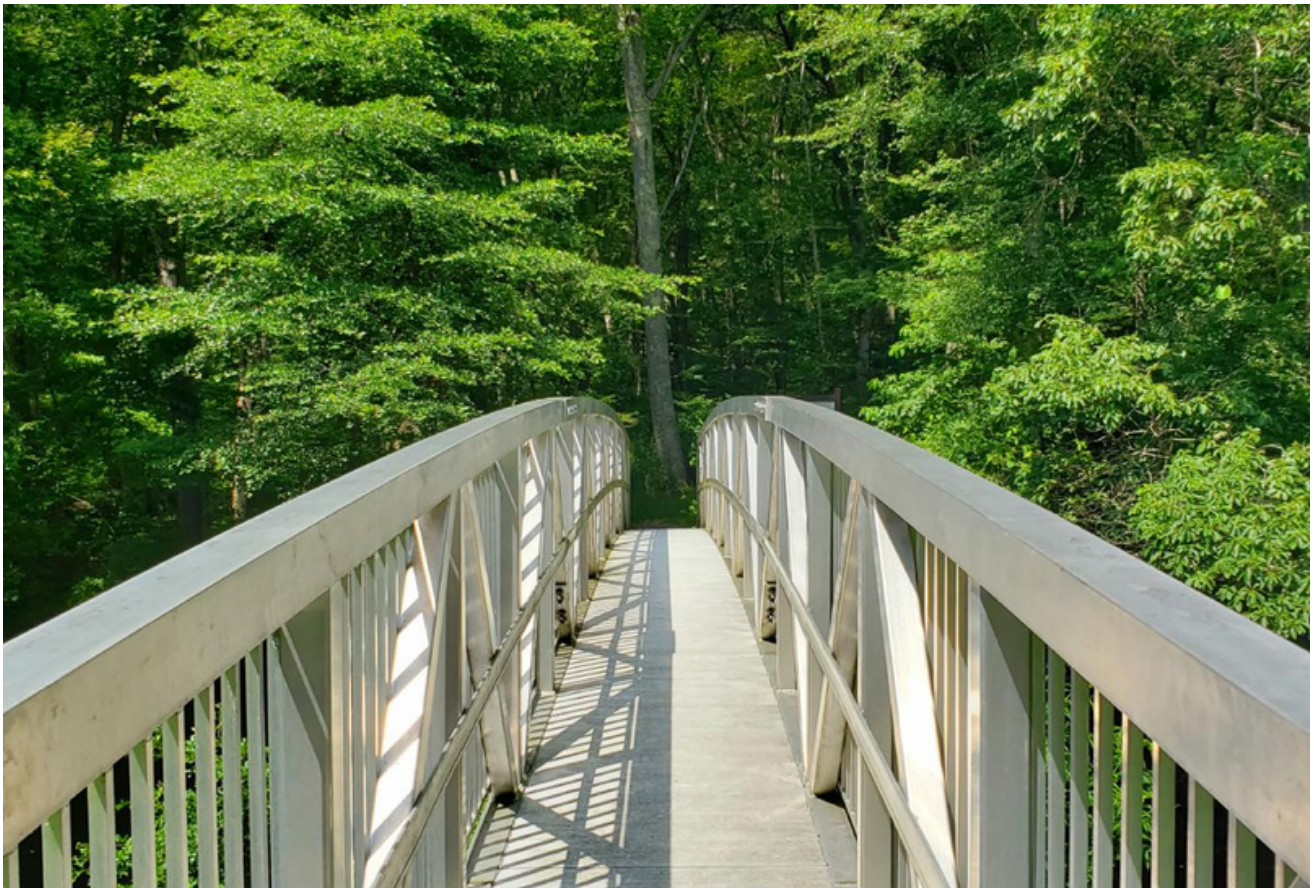
Funding

Sustainable funding remains one of the most significant challenges facing Rhode Island land trusts.



The Census asked organizations to assess how well funded they feel across a range of revenue categories. Overall, responses suggest that many land trusts do not feel adequately funded in any one category, highlighting the ongoing need for diversified and reliable financial support to sustain conservation, stewardship, and organizational operations.

We asked the land trusts to rate how well-funded they are in different program areas, on a scale from 1 (underfunded) to 3 (well funded). The average for each area is under 2, indicating that overall, none of these areas are sufficiently funded.

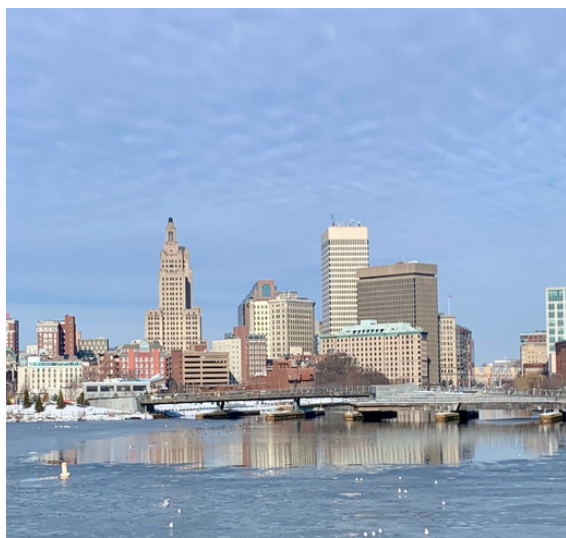


Broadening the Conservation Conversation

For the first time, the 2025 Census included questions related to affordable housing, diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ), and farmland access and protection. The Council recognizes that conservation does not happen in isolation, and that land trusts are increasingly navigating issues connected to housing, food systems, equitable access to land, land use challenges, and community well-being. These questions were intended to better understand how Rhode Island land trusts are thinking about and engaging with these evolving priorities, and how we can best support them in this work.

Affordable Housing

We asked land trusts if they have done anything related to supporting affordable housing in their communities in the past two years. Ten land trusts (4 staffed, 1 volunteer, 5 municipal) reported engaging in efforts, indicating affordable housing as an emerging priority. Most activity focused on early-stage learning (8), with fewer (6) building purposeful relationships, and four taking action by publicly advocating for and/or implementing projects that advance affordable housing with or without a conservation component. Municipal and staffed land trusts are more likely to be involved, while all-volunteer land trusts show limited participation, likely due to capacity constraints.



Farmland

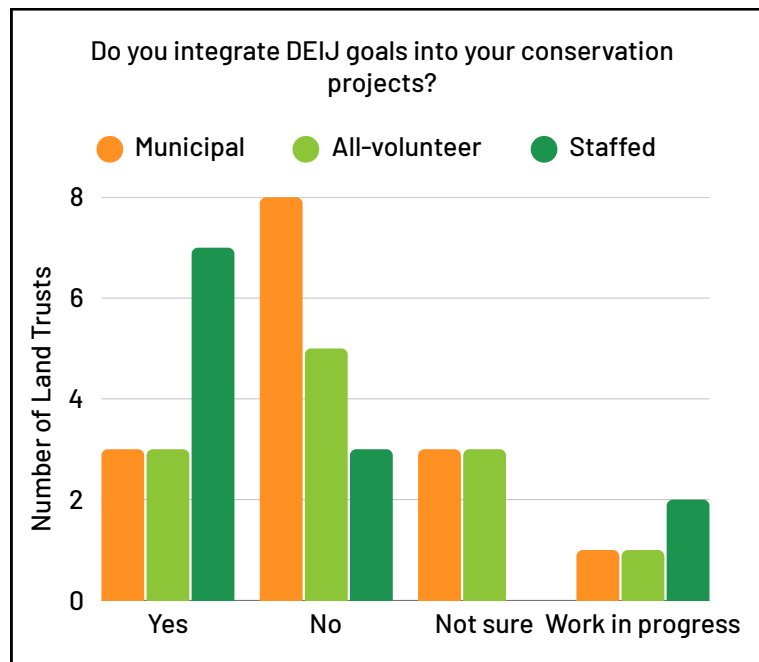


Twenty-six of the land trusts responding to this census protect farmland, totalling 4,264 acres and 177 individual farms. The number of acres protected per land trust range from as little as 3 acres to over 850 acres. Fourteen of the land trusts that own farmland (7 municipal, 1 all-volunteer, 6 staffed) hold conservation easements on land that is still owned and operated by a farmer. Fourteen land trusts lease land to farmers (4 municipal, 3 all-volunteer, 7 staffed). Lease terms vary from 1 year to 20 years, but the majority fall around 3-5 years. Only 2 land trusts say there are succession plans for the farmland in place, with one additional land trust reporting that some but not all of their protected farmland has a succession plan. Seven land trusts were unsure if there is a succession plan, and 12 do not have one.

DEIJ: Goals vs. Implementation

Census results show that while some land trusts are actively integrating diversity, equity, inclusion & justice (DEIJ) into their work, the field as a whole remains in transition. About one-third of land trusts (13 out of 39) say they are actively prioritizing integrating DEIJ in their organizational goals and conservation projects, and staffed land trusts are leading the way.

Few organizations are translating goals into programs and volunteer opportunities, yet only 11 land trusts have taken action. A majority of land trusts report that diversifying staff and volunteers is either a priority or in progress. Based on bandwidth and interest, municipal and all-volunteer land trusts report lower levels of engagement overall.



Strengthening Conservation in Rhode Island

The 2025 Rhode Island Land Trust Census paints a picture of a conservation community that is both resilient and ambitious.

Over the last few decades, land trusts have added thousands of acres while strengthening stewardship practices, increasing monitoring efforts, and improving records and documentation. These accomplishments reflect decades of commitment by local volunteers, community leaders, staff, and partners working together to protect the places that make Rhode Island special.

But protecting land is only the first step. With every property conserved comes a permanent commitment to stewardship. Land trusts have both a legal and ethical responsibility to monitor, care for, and defend these properties in perpetuity, ensuring that the public benefits they provide—including clean water, wildlife habitat, climate resilience, recreation, local food, and more—endure for generations to come.

At the same time, the Census highlights important challenges. Nearly 70% of Rhode Island's land trusts operate entirely through volunteer leadership, many organizations report being underfunded, and capacity limitations continue to affect volunteer recruitment, succession planning, and organizational resilience. As conservation responsibilities grow and the landscape of community needs continues to evolve, many land trusts are being asked to do more with less.

The good news is that Rhode Island's land trust community continues to adapt. Land trusts are demonstrating growing interest in collaboration, exploring shared services, engaging in conversations around affordable housing, and expanding efforts related to climate resilience, accessibility, and equitable access to conserved lands.

As the statewide backbone and support organization for Rhode Island's land trusts, the Rhode Island Land Trust Council (RILTC) ensures that local conservation efforts remain strong, effective, and permanent. By providing technical assistance, training, advocacy, stewardship support, and statewide coordination, RILTC works alongside land trusts every day to address emerging challenges and seize new opportunities.

The work ahead will require renewed partnership. Together, we can support the next generation of conservation leaders, expand access to funding and resources, foster collaboration, and ensure that conserved lands continue to benefit all Rhode Islanders for generations to come.

Join us in building the future of the conservation movement in Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Land Trust Census 2025 was made possible with the support of the Rhode Island Land Trust Council Excellence Committee. The role of the Excellence Committee is to bring tools, training, and services to land trusts in Rhode Island with the goal of supporting RI land trusts in their conservation and stewardship work, with an eye towards ensuring that conservation properties are permanently protected. The report was made possible with financial support from the Conservation Stewardship Collaborative, Rhode Island Foundation, and Rhode Island Land Trust Council.

The logo for the Conservation Stewardship Collaborative is a dark gray rectangle with the words "CONSERVATION", "STEWARDSHIP", and "COLLABORATIVE" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif, all-caps font. The rectangle has a subtle drop shadow.

Rhode Island's Land Trusts: By the Numbers

Rhode Island's land trusts steward an exceptional amount of land.



62,285

Total Acres Protected



400

Miles of Trails



2,000

Total Properties Protected



4,200+

Acres of Farmland

Stewardship responsibilities continue to grow.

- The increasing impacts of climate change and invasive species are of great concern to all land trusts.
- Land trusts protect 6,900 more acres than they did in 2020.
- Seventeen land trusts have experienced conservation easement violations in the last five years.

Land trust capacity remains a challenge across the board.

- 69% of Rhode Island land trusts are all-volunteer.
- Most all-volunteer land trusts have 25 or fewer volunteers yearly.
- All program areas were rated on average as not sufficiently funded.

Land trusts want more opportunities to collaborate.

- 85% say it is somewhat or very likely that they would collaborate on shared projects.
- 14% are already collaborating on joint conservation opportunities.
- 73% are somewhat or very likely to share staff or services.



Strong land trusts need a strong statewide partner. Your investment makes that possible.

Support the Council.

www.rilandtrusts.org/donate



Contact us at:
(401) 212-0832
ksayles@rilandtrusts.org

Rhode Island Land Trust Council
50 Sims Avenue, Space 209
Providence, RI 02909

 www.rilandtrusts.org
 RI Land Trust Council

 @ri.walks
 @rilandtrusts