

South Dakota Ag Land Trust

Newsletter

January 2026/Vol 8

SDALT Continues Focus on Helping Landowners

Last fall, SDALT received notice from the NRCS National Office that they were rescinding \$17.2 million of funding we had been allocated through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to help with easements in the grassland periphery of the Black Hills.

SDALT and our partner landowners reached out to our congressional delegation and NRCS staff to communicate the importance of this program in helping protect grasslands in this area. An accelerated rate of exurban growth in the area threatens the sustainability of agricultural-based communities and the ability of ranchers to retain their grass based agricultural operations.

Inflated property values of rangeland in the pathway of development inhibit the ability of ranchers to transition

their ranching operations to an heir or other aspiring producer. If left unchecked, exurban growth will irreparably damage the ability of the prairies in the Black Hills area to support a viable agricultural economy, as well as fish and wildlife populations.

Multiple landowners in western South Dakota have contacted SDALT seeking assistance in protecting over 77,000 acres of ranch property from development. The combined development value of these ranches is well over \$100 million.

It is a testament to their commitment to the future of agriculture that landowners are willing to donate half the value of the development rights of their ranches to receive 50% cost-share from the RCPP funding.

SDALT secured the RCPP funding to help keep private properties in private ownership under minimally restrictive working land easements and to keep future ranchers on these ranches.

Over 96% of the rescinded federal funding was slated to go to South Dakota farmers and ranchers in alignment with USDA's "Farmers First" initiative, which highlights the importance of America's family farms and ranches in sustaining and preserving our small towns, rural communities, and the American way of life.

SDALT continues to work with landowners, NRCS staff, and our congressional delegation to highlight the value of investing in conservation efforts for the future of South Dakota.

Our Mission



SDALT is an organization founded by South Dakota farmers and ranchers for South Dakota farmers and ranchers.

We work with landowners to conserve South Dakota's agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations.

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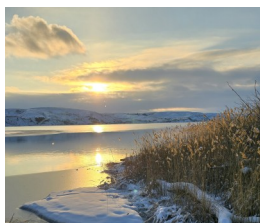
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South Dakota Ag Land Trust

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The Roller Coaster Ride of 2025

By Tony Leif, SDALT Executive Director

Ups and downs are a part of every organization. They seem to be more pronounced and impactful on young organizations like SDALT, and this year had plenty of them.

The year started out great with the addition of a conservation easement on 144 acres of the Oak Hills Ranch in Lawrence County and 444 acres on the Wagner Ranch in Brule County.

On the flip side, uncertainty surrounding frozen and rescinded federal funding created operational challenges that started in January. These challenges are typical for periods of changing federal administrations and they persisted all the way through the federal shutdown of 2025.

Agriculture and conservation policy sit at the intersection of science, individual values, and personal philosophies. While the merits of conservation easements are undeniable to farm and ranch families in the pathway of development, the rhetoric of perpetual protection solutions can be challenging. These challenges provide the opportunities for collaboration and SDALT continues to seek partnerships of sometimes conflicting interests. As conservation challenges become more prominent in our state, the role of working lands easements will grow in all levels of political conversations.

The days of conservation being a source of divisiveness are long gone for those of us who have a genuine interest in the future of agriculture and natural resources. While the core of the debate transcends political affiliations, each political ideology seeks to place their own labels on both the problem and solutions. Labels aside, the protection of farms and ranches secures a future for families while providing all of us with the protection of open spaces, water, and wildlife.

Conservation politics shape how governments balance environmental protection with economic stability and community needs. Understanding this intersection helps explain why debates of conservation issues are often complex and sometimes emotional. We cannot let the deepening political polarization consume the practical need for sound solutions for important issues like conservation.

While the political turbulence of 2025 disrupted the timely progress of ongoing easement projects, the reinforced USDA commitment to sound agricultural land easement programs was reassuring.

As we continue to see interest and support grow in South Dakota, we're more motivated than ever to expand our reach and deepen our impact. Our mission is resonating with so many people, and we're excited about the future as we find and form new collaborations with even more like-minded individuals and organizations.

We couldn't have reached this point without the dedication, passion, and commitment of everyone involved. Your ongoing support and belief in our mission are what keep us going every day. Together, we're creating something powerful – and it's amazing to witness how it has grown and the anticipation of where it will go.



SDALT Founding Organizations:

South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation

South Dakota Grassland Coalition

South Dakota Cattlemen's Association

South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts

Faulstich Retires from SDALT Board

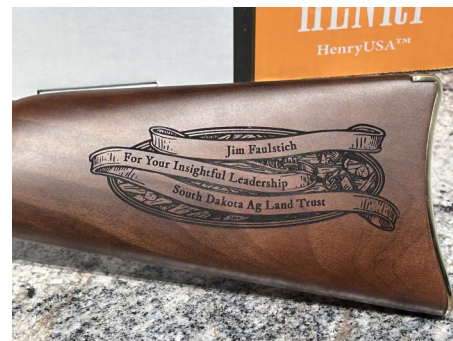
One of the driving forces behind formation of the South Dakota Ag Land Trust recently retired from the Board of Directors.

Highmore area rancher Jim Faulstich was among the one of the five original incorporators of SDALT in 2019.

SDALT President Lyle Perman thanked Jim for his leadership and example. “Jim knows the importance of protecting agriculture and setting an example for others.”

Jim and his wife, Carol, own and operate Daybreak Ranch north of Highmore. The ranch consists of 8,000 acres of native grassland, CRP, cropland, wetland sloughs, food plots and tree plantings. While Daybreak Ranch is primarily a family ranching and farming operation, another key element is habitat management for nurturing wildlife—including pheasants, sharptail grouse, prairie chickens, hungarian partridge, ducks, coyotes, antelope, fox, whitetail and mule deer.

Jim credits SDALT and other landowner-led organizations with fostering relationships and partnerships that make things happen. He noted that SDALT exists today because of the working relationships among ranching and grassland conservation groups in South Dakota. He said, “Four organizations with horsepower came together and got it done.”



At his final SDALT board meeting in December, board, and staff presented Jim Faulstich with a commemorative Golden Boy .22 rifle.

Board member Gary Jensen, who served as a member of the SD Game, Fish & Parks Commission, got to know Jim through various Commission work groups. He credited Jim for keen observations, comments, and courage.

Board member Charlie Hoffman added that Jim has always been the voice of wisdom and reason. “For him, it’s not just about being a leader; it’s being an insightful leader.”

Jim has received more than twenty local, state and national awards for his leadership in agriculture and natural resource conservation. He served on the national Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America’s Diverse Fish and Wildlife Resources, as well as numerous boards representing production agriculture. Jim also has a passion for improving the land for future generations. He was instrumental in bringing the Leopold Conservation Award to

South Dakota to recognize landowners who excel in natural resource conservation, and was a leader in starting several landowner-led conservation organizations.

Jim is a 1968 graduate of Highmore High School and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture from SDSU in 1972. He was selected for a Distinguished Achievement in Agriculture Award from the Honor Society of Gamma Sigma Delta in 2011 and the Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2015, both from SDSU. In 2024, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from SDSU.

At this final SDALT Board meeting, Jim said, “I’ve got some real treasures. A lot of them are friendships.”

He added, “this organization has fantastic potential.”

International Year of Rangeland and Pastoralists



In 2002, the United Nations declared that 2026 would be the International Year of Rangeland and Pastoralists, to raise awareness of the important role these lands play in creating a sustainable environment and economic growth.

Over half of South Dakota’s landscape is covered with rangeland. The vast majority of these 24 million acres are under private ownership — 17,000 family-owned ranches support grazing for beef cattle, sheep, and bison, as well as provide the foundation for watershed protection, wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity.

AJ Munger Joins SDALT Board

AJ Munger joined the SDALT Board of Directors in December, taking the place of retiring board member Jim Faulstich in representing the SD Grassland Coalition.

Munger grew up on his family's homestead south of Warner, SD. He now lives east of Highmore, SD, on Eagle Pass ranch with his wife and two children. Alongside his parents and brother, they operate a diversified cattle and farming operation. They have been in the seedstock business for over 30 years, and hold an annual bull sale.

AJ focuses on striving for profitability without negatively impacting their land's resource base. Recognizing the importance of the grassland ecosystem, AJ serves as a board member of the South Dakota Grassland Coalition and as a member of the South Dakota Grassland Initiative's Grassland Conservation Strategy workgroup.



SDALT Signs Agreement with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

SDALT and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the framework for how the two organizations can cooperate to conserve private lands in South Dakota.

Land in South Dakota, particularly western South Dakota where most elk populations exist, is under significant pressure from exurban subdivision and development, which impacts wildlife habitat and the availability of agricultural land. RMEF's mission is to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat, and our hunting heritage. SDALT's mission is to conserve agricultural heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations. Together, the two organizations are working to provide landowners with conservation options.

Since the RMEF was formed in 1984, the organization has conserved or enhanced more than 9 million acres of habitat across the nation, including nearly 130,000 acres in our state.

The SDALT board will consider each potential easement on a project-by-project basis to ensure it aligns with our mission.

Why Conserve Working Lands?

South Dakota's farm and ranch heritage has built a place of strong community connections — where families can thrive, where neighbors help neighbors, and where visitors are greeted with hospitality.

With continued stewardship, this remarkable place we call home can continue to do all these things for the benefit of future South Dakotans.

What is a Conservation Easement?

A voluntary legal agreement

... between a landowner and an eligible entity

... that restricts what activities may take place on the property

... that protects a land's conservation values

What are SDALT's Guiding Principles?

SDALT will

... pursue voluntary conservation strategies that promote the long-term protection of agricultural land, while supporting private land ownership

... respect the right of landowners to make day-to-day management decisions

... recognize the role of sustainable land uses as a means of maintaining open and productive landscapes

... avoid fee-title ownership as a means of conservation



Your contribution makes it possible for SDALT to work with landowners to preserve working landscapes, protect water quality, and provide wildlife habitat throughout South Dakota. Donations may be made online at sdaglandtrust.org. You can also download and complete our contribution form and mail it to the SDALT office.

SDALT is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

