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Land Trust Earns National Approval

Belle Haven, VA) – Virginia Eastern Shore (VES) Land Trust was awarded national accreditation Wednesday, one of just 130 land trusts throughout the country to earn approval from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance.

“Accredited land trusts meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever,” said Commission Executive Director Tammara Van Ryn. “The accreditation seal lets the public know that the accredited land trust has undergone an extensive, external review of the governance and management of its organization, and the systems and policies it uses to protect land,” she added.

To VES Land Trust, “accreditation recognizes the quality of our conservation program and gives our easement donors, contributors and partners greater confidence in our ability to preserve and protect resources on the Eastern Shore forever,” said Executive Director Peter N. Henderson. “Our land trust is a stronger organization today having gone through the rigorous accreditation program last year,” he said.

VES Land Trust was formed in 2003 by an eight-member board led by chairman Lucius J. Kellam III of Belle Haven, with guidance from founding executive director Megan Gallagher of The Plains, VA. In the past eight years, the land trust has helped Eastern Shore landowners protect 57 properties, a total of nearly 12,500 acres of working farms, forests, wetlands and historic houses and sites in Accomack and Northampton Counties.

Current VES Land Trust Chairman Timothy Brown of Greenbush said that land represents “our nation’s most important and valuable resource. Protecting land will ensure that we have clean air and drinking water, healthy local food, scenic landscapes, habitat for wildlife and places to hunt, fish or just enjoy the outdoors.” Brown and his family donated the land trust’s first conservation easement in 2003, in partnership with Ducks Unlimited/Wetlands America Trust.

In a statement announcing VES Land Trust accreditation, the commission said “Community leaders in land trusts throughout the country have worked with willing landowners to save over 37 million acres of farms, forests, parks and places people care about. Strong, well-managed land trusts provide local communities with effective champions and caretakers of their critical land resources, and safeguard the land through the generations.”

Accredited land trusts are able to display a seal indicating to the public that they meet national standards for excellence, uphold the public trust and ensure that conservation efforts are permanent. The seal is a mark of distinction in land conservation.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, based in Saratoga Springs, NY, was established in 2006 and is governed by a volunteer board of diverse land conservation and nonprofit management experts from around the country. The Land Trust Alliance is a national conservation group based in Washington, DC that works to save the places people love by strengthening conservation throughout the nation. More information on the accreditation program is available on the Commission's website, www.landtrustaccreditation.org. More information on the Alliance is available at www.landtrustalliance.org.

A VES Land Trust team – Brown, Henderson, Gallagher and board member Suzanne Wescoat of Church Neck – spent most of 2010 on program assessment and improvement and completing the comprehensive accreditation application. Henderson said the final notebooks documenting the land trust's easements, stewardship and other activities rose more than a foot high when stacked.

“Accreditation made our organization dissect and study very closely how we operate, improving practices wherever we could,” Wescoat said. “We hold easements in perpetuity, so it was vital to strengthen our organization as best we can. The process also enhanced the moral bond that our board and supporters feel to protect the land, that we must forever strive to do the best job we can,” Wescoat added.

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