



Mountain Conservation Trust of Georgia's Mission

The Mountain Conservation Trust of Georgia is dedicated to the permanent preservation of the natural resources and scenic beauty of the mountains and foothills of North Georgia through land protection, collaborative partnerships and education.

General Guidelines For Conservation Easement Stewardship

Stewardship Basics

Conservation easements alone cannot protect important lands and natural resources forever. Once the easement negotiation process is over, the document signed and the baseline documentation completed, it may seem that the Land Trust's work is done. In reality, our work is just beginning. Only the continued commitment of the Land Trust to monitor, defend, and enforce the conservation easements it holds can ensure protection into the future.

In accepting the donation of a conservation easement, MCTGA also accepts the responsibility of ensuring the property is managed in a manner that is consistent with the terms of the easement in perpetuity. Even when protected properties pass to new owners or plans for a property change, we are still responsible for making sure the terms of the easement are upheld.

To fulfill these responsibilities, the Land Trust has established a Stewardship Program, which is partially supported by the Stewardship Fund. The primary role of the Stewardship Program is to ensure that the conservation values of protected properties are preserved. This is achieved through careful monitoring and record keeping, but more importantly, by fostering a mutually beneficial relationship with each and every landowner.

Stewardship Program Responsibilities

The responsibilities of the Stewardship Program include:

- monitoring of protected properties
- documenting changes to properties periodically using photographs and GIS
- tracking changes in ownership
- providing easement education to new landowners
- reviewing and granting approval requests for permitted activities
- maintaining property records
- serving as a resource for landowners regarding property management issues
- correcting violations through voluntary compliance or, if necessary, legal proceedings.

The most important part of our stewardship responsibilities is the annual monitoring of properties. Consistent, regular monitoring can produce several beneficial outcomes for everyone involved.

First, regular monitoring can foster and strengthen a quality working relationship between the landowner and the Land Trust. We prefer that landowners view the Land Trust more as a partner in protection, and

less as an enforcer of rules and regulations. Monitoring visits allow landowners and Land Trust representatives to come face to face in order to address questions and concerns regarding the property and the restrictions placed upon it. These discussions aid in educating the landowner about the conservation values associated with the property. It also gives us a chance to address potential problems before they occur, discuss management options which may be available and express the Land Trust's commitment to the protection of the property.

Second, regular monitoring keeps the Land Trust informed on the current condition of the property, the compliance with, or violation of, easement restrictions and provides a record of these actions and conditions.

Although we are the stewards of the easement, the landowner continues to be the steward of the land. Day-to-day management of the property is still the landowner's responsibility. We can and do advise landowners on aspects of property management or try to refer them to someone who specializes in that area, but the landowner is just that – the LAND's owner – and is ultimately responsible for the decisions regarding the property and its use.

Stewardship Fund

To ensure our ability to fulfill our stewardship obligations 10, 50 or even 250 years from now, we have established a Stewardship Fund. The fund's purpose is to:

- generate investment income to cover annual stewardship and monitoring expenses
- build our legal defense capabilities. Over time, there may be violations of the easement restrictions. We need to be prepared to defend restrictions through litigation if voluntary means fail.

Landowners have been the primary source of the donations used to build the fund, but it is also supplemented by 8% of our annual membership dues, all memorial gifts and any donations specifically designated for stewardship by the donor.

Landowners who consider a conservation easement or gift of land are asked to consider the importance of this fund to ensure the long-term protection of the land. A stewardship donation is a suggested charitable donation and is not a prerequisite for acceptance of a conservation easement.