



Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works subcommittee on Fisheries, Water and Wildlife: Great Land Trust Field Hearing Testimony August 17, 2015

INTRODUCTION TO GREAT LAND TRUST

Great Land Trust was founded in 1995 by Alaskans to work with willing landowners, agencies, communities, local governments, and other partners to conserve Southcentral Alaska's special lands and waterways. GLT is a private, nonpartisan non-profit organization dedicated to conserving lands and waters essential to the quality of life and the economic health of our communities. GLT seeks to conserve wetlands, salmon habitat, farmlands, and places of cultural, historical and recreational value. GLT works throughout Southcentral Alaska with a focus on the Municipality of Anchorage, the Mat-Su Borough, Prince William Sound and Kodiak.

GLT has played a critical role in wetland mitigation and economic development projects in Alaska since 1998.

RECOGNIZING A NEED FOR COMPENSATORY MITIGATION

The Municipality of Anchorage recognized the need for mitigation following a report in 1993 that concluded that between 1950 and 1990, approximately 10,000 acres of wetlands in the Anchorage Bowl had been filled or altered (Anchorage Wetlands Management Plan, April 8, 2013). There was a need to conserve wetlands to maintain wetland functions critical to the health of the community. Cumulative impacts to wetlands had resulted in:

- A reduction in anadromous fish populations
- Impaired water quality
- An increase in flood hazards

GREAT LAND TRUST'S ROLE IN COMPENSATORY MITIGATION

In 1998, GLT signed an agreement with the Alaska District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to establish an In Lieu Fee compensatory mitigation program. This program allows GLT to accept funds from permittees to purchase high-value wetlands from willing landowners to compensate for the loss of other developed wetlands. GLT plays no role in the Corps' decision to approve or deny a development permit, or in decisions regarding the type of mitigation necessary. In 2011, Great Land Trust updated its agreement with the Corps as required by the Corps' 2008 Mitigation Rule. GLT's agreement with the Corps allows permittees a streamlined way to fulfill their mitigation requirements that benefits the communities within the Municipality of Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough, where we operate our program.

GLT provides economic opportunities for wetland landowners. As an example, GLT's wetland mitigation program has enabled Alaska Native corporations to

Conserving lands and waterways essential to the quality of life and economic health of Southcentral Alaska.

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capitalize on corporation-owned wetlands. GLT uses mitigation dollars to purchase conservation easements on high-value, corporation-owned wetlands, keeping the land in native ownership and available to shareholders for subsistence use. To date, GLT has conserved over 7,000 acres of lands owned by Alaska Native corporations.

GREAT LAND TRUST'S APPROACH TO COMPENSATORY MITIGATION

To select wetland projects, GLT gathers data including wetland type and function, fish and wildlife habitat, land status, and threat of conversion, and then maps priority areas. Working with local, state, and federal agency staff, regional biologists and GIS professionals, GLT ranked nearly 100,000 land parcels for wetland conservation within the Municipality of Anchorage and over 105,000 parcels in the Mat-Su Borough.

Once GLT has identified a parcel using the methods described above, it works with the Corps to evaluate whether it is the right fit for the compensatory mitigation program. The Corps enlists the assistance of its Interagency Review Team (IRT), a group of agency experts assembled by the Corps to evaluate compensatory mitigation projects. The IRT gives feedback to GLT and provides the Corps with expert opinion as part of its decision-making.

PROPERTIES CONSERVED THROUGH THE PROGRAM

GLT's work under this program has resulted in the protection of over 8,000 acres of wetlands to date, including wetlands visited by thousands of residents, school groups and tourists every year at sites such as Fish Creek Estuary in downtown Anchorage, Bowman Elementary School, and Campbell Creek Estuary. Through this program GLT has provided our community:

- 45 miles of conserved salmon stream habitat
- 5 public trails and boardwalks
- 6 new access points to public lands
- 8 conserved estuaries
- 7 city parks

