

THE OZARK HOLLER

Ozark Land Trust Newsletter

Director's Compass

By Diana L. Sheridan, Executive Director

Contrary to popular media, we are living in optimistic times. As Ozark Land Trust builds our partnerships, landowner relationships, and conservation projects, we are met with an outpouring of enthusiasm and eagerness to participate. Private landowners and people who enjoy the outdoors recognize the importance of permanently protecting the places we love. This recognition has resulted in over 700 newly protected Conservation Easement acres in the first half of 2026, bringing OLT's total protected acres to over 33,000. (Look forward to learning more about these new conservation easements in the Winter issue of The Ozark Holler).

This issue highlights numerous success stories, including that of a family who over the last 20 years, protected their riverfront land with three separate conservation easements. We look at how they have used their optimism for the future to cultivate and sell native seed, spreading their legacy beyond the boundaries of their conservation easement.

There are stories of collaboration and innovation as well. OLT recently developed a StoryMap to illustrate the collective efforts taking place throughout the Meramec

River Basin, highlight progress made, and share a look at the regions of the watershed being prioritized for future conservation work. None of this could be possible without the foresight and optimism of our partners, private landowners, and dedicated private funding.

There are also stories of stewardship, volunteerism, legacy giving, and federal funding support. Each tale is firmly rooted in optimism, hope for the future, and recognition of the importance of the work we are doing.

On the final pages, our Board President, Debbie Gittinger, provides a financial summary and comparison between strategic planning years. OLT's commitment to collaboration and long-term vision is paying off by leveraging new funding sources which compliment every dollar contributed by individuals, helping us bring more Conservation Close to Home.

We hope you find the stories included in this Holler an inspiration and reason for optimism. We eagerly anticipate working alongside our private landowners and the conservation community, using the powerful conservation tools at our fingertips to protect the land we cherish, with optimism for the future guiding the way.

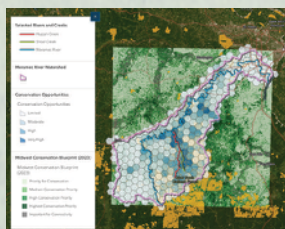
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Explore how OLT has permanently protecting places we love

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Illustrates the efforts taking place throughout the Meramec River Basin

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Financial Summary and comparison between strategic planning years

Options for Farmland Protection: OLT and the NRCS

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

By Eric Gramlich, Outreach and Partnership Manager

Across the Ozarks, farmers and ranchers are facing increasing pressure from development, high land prices and the break-up of large tracts of agricultural land. Through its partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Ozark Land Trust is helping agricultural producers protect their land while strengthening the future of agriculture.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is a voluntary NRCS initiative designed to keep working lands in production. Its Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) component focuses specifically on preserving farms and ranches by limiting non-agricultural development through conservation easements - ensuring that the land remains available for farming for generations to come.

A Partnership That Works for Farmers and Ranchers



Ozark Land Trust serves as a key local partner in the Ozarks, working directly with landowners to navigate the easement process. Through ACEP-ALE, NRCS provides financial assistance to help purchase conservation easements, while land trusts like Ozark Land Trust hold and steward those easements long-term. This model operates on a competitive basis, and easements are approved in accordance with NRCS ranking priorities and the availability of Program funds. The

ACEP program allows farmers to access federal easement funding support while working with a trusted, local & Missouri-based conservation organization.

Real Opportunities for Missouri Landowners



The ACEP-ALE program offers several benefits that can make it an attractive option for farmers and ranchers:

- **Financial Compensation Without Selling the Farm**
Landowners can receive a one-time payment for placing an easement on their property - 50% of the easement's fair market value. The fair market value of an easement is the difference in the value of land unrestricted by the easement vs the fair market value of the same land with the development restrictions in place. An easement's value is determined by an appraisal of the value of the land with and without the easement. These appraisals are conducted by a qualified appraiser to meet NRCS federal requirements.

The NRCS payment provides capital that can be used to reinvest in operations, reduce debt, or support farm transitions.

- **Potential Tax Benefits for Qualified Farmers and Ranchers**
Landowners may be eligible for a federal income tax deduction for the remaining value of the easement donated to OLT. Local property tax Assessors may reduce tax assessments after considering the restrictions imposed by a conservation easement.
- **Keeping Land in Agriculture Permanently**
Easements restrict non-agricultural development, helping ensure that productive lands remain in farming rather than being converted to subdivisions or commercial use.
- **Voluntary and Flexible Participation**
Farmers continue to own and work their land. The program simply ensures it remains dedicated to agriculture, with terms tailored to each property.

Strengthening Missouri's Agricultural Future

Through its work with NRCS, Ozark Land Trust is helping connect Missouri farmers to these opportunities—ensuring that working lands remain productive, resilient, and protected for future generations.

Learn More

Farmers and landowners interested in ACEP-ALE are encouraged to reach out to Ozark Land Trust or their local NRCS office to explore eligibility and application opportunities. With the right partnership, protecting your land can also strengthen your operation—and your legacy.

Alford Forest: Trees in the Heart of the Bryant Creek Watershed

By Brian Haenke, Executive Director, AFI



Following the March 2026 board meeting held at Rockbridge, Missouri, OLT board members and staff paid a visit to nearby Alford Forest in northern Ozark County. Alford's combined 3200-acres of native forest parcels comprise OLT's largest landholding, which serves to protect important forests, wildlife habitat, and stream corridors. Prime weather made for an enjoyable Sunday morning hike hosted by the staff of Alford Forest, Inc. (AFI), property and forest manager under OLT.

The group hiked along Cane Bottom Hollow near the former site of a 1920s mill town, then continued to Magic Cedar Hollow with its large rock outcroppings and seasonal waterfall, with OLT staff identifying flora and fauna along the way.

Most of this oak-pine-hickory forest lies within two miles of Bryant Creek, a major tributary of the North Fork of the White River, including over a mile of steep Bryant frontage. The landscape features numerous rugged ridgetops and deep valleys, perennial and intermittent streams, and Dream Cave—Ozark County's longest mapped cave system (over 6,000 feet)—home to rare fossil stromatolites and managed by the Missouri Caves and Karst Conservancy.

The forest was heavily logged from the 1920s through the early 1940s and again during the 1960s. Miriam

Ella Alford became the sole landowner in 1980 with an interest in protecting the forest. Between 1998 and 2005, Ella donated all of what has become known as Alford Forest to OLT and granted OLT conservation easements on an additional 1100 acres of nearby properties. (Ella passed away in December 2005, not long after completing her generous gifts.) AFI was established in 2000 as a supporting nonprofit to manage the forest, with David Haenke as its director. David employed the sustainable harvest practices of Missouri's renowned Pioneer Forest to improve forest health and increase stocks over time. OLT and AFI also monitored the emerging carbon offset market for an opportunity to generate operating revenue consistent with the goals of preserving the forest. In 2017, OLT signed onto the California compliance carbon program with AFI serving as its program manager.

Today, OLT and AFI continue to build partnerships with state and federal agencies, universities, consultants, and the local community to fulfill Ella's legacy. For more information on Alford Forest's history and AFI, visit <http://www.alfordforest.org>.



Partners and Positive Outcomes: The Inception of Habitat Strike Teams and Invasive Honeysuckle Removal at OLT's Schulze Nature Preserve

By Eric Gramlich, Outreach and Partnership Manager

At Schulze Nature Preserve, work towards ecological restoration has been underway for some time and is receiving a major boost thanks to help from the Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever (PF/QF) Habitat Strike Team. This specialized restoration and habitat management crew is playing a vital role in OLT's ongoing efforts to eradicate invasive bush honeysuckle - one of the most aggressive and damaging plant species in Missouri's woodlands. The team from PF/QF conducted the first sitewide sweep of honeysuckle in late 2025 and completed additional eradication efforts at the beginning of honeysuckle leaf-out in early 2026.



A big thanks to the SNR Habitat Strike Team Crew!!

A forever effort - over the years, OLT staff and volunteers have been battling the honeysuckle infestation at Schulze and due both to the severity of the infestation and how fast it spreads, it wasn't clear that we were winning. Private landowners, NGOs and agency natural resource managers alike face similar issues controlling invasives; a broad geography to cover; limited internal resources; and sparse outside assistance available to help. The first of what has recently expanded into four regional Habitat Strike Teams staffed by PF/QF formed in 2021 and grew out of the need for habitat management assistance for private landowners and agencies alike.

Projects like this highlight the importance of active land management and partnerships in conservation and of the deep commitment felt by natural resource professionals towards the land they steward. OLT's collaboration

with the Habitat Strike Team demonstrates how focused, science-based efforts can restore natural balance and improve habitat quality. As restoration continues, visitors to Schulze Nature Preserve can expect to see a healthier, more diverse landscape taking shape - one that reflects the resilience of native ecosystems when given the chance to recover.

To learn more about the availability of strike team efforts in your area contact:

Dylan Jacobs

Habitat Restoration Manager

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever

Email: djacobs@quailforever.org

Address: 307 Pinetum Loop Rd.
Gray Summit, MO 63039

Websites: pheasantsforever.org | quailforever.org

Legacy Giving

By Diana L. Sheridan, Executive Director

For more than 40 years, Ozark Land Trust has been protecting the Ozark region from Missouri to Arkansas. Through decades of work with willing landowners, we have permanently conserved some of the region's most treasured natural landscapes. Every day, we continue building that legacy by stewarding our nature preserves, partnering with current and prospective conservation easement landowners, evaluating new conservation opportunities, and providing one-on-one voluntary conservation assistance. With each decision and relationship, we are working to ensure the Ozarks remain protected for generations to come. This is our Legacy. We all leave a



legacy of some kind, and we invite you to take a moment to consider including Ozark Land Trust as a part of your legacy.

A legacy gift is a powerful way to carry your values forward and ensure this work continues for years to come. Tax-deductible gifts can be directed to Ozark Land Trust or

to one of our established funds at the Community Foundation of the Ozarks. Each gift is stewarded with care and invested in the long-term sustainability of our mission.

Legacy giving to Ozark Land Trust is truly a gift for forever. OLT is committed to protecting pieces of the Ozarks in perpetuity. If you are interested in legacy giving through a gift in your will or trust or by naming Ozark Land Trust as a beneficiary in a retirement account or life insurance policy, we would be happy to visit with you. Thank you for being part of this work—both now and into the future.

Springfield Earth Day Music Fest

By Taylor Dye, Conservation Specialist

Blue skies, green grass, and the gleeful noises of a rhythmic band ushered in hundreds of people to celebrate our shared spinning blue rock at this year's Springfield Earth Day Music Festival. The sounds were all the more jovial for Ozark Land Trust, who was honored to be selected as the 2026 nonprofit beneficiary. The designation included a prime booth location at the event and ticket sale proceeds amounting to \$20,000.

Projected to be the largest turnout in its five-year history, 100% of the festival's profits are donated to environmental organizations serving the greater Ozark region. Springfield Earth Day Music Fest can boast a plastic-free event, who is committed to leave-no-trace principles. They accomplish this impressive feat through gifting reusable cups for water and beverages, volunteers who direct attendees to compost and recycling bins, and vendors who provide plastic-free goods and utensils. It was inspiring to witness such a large event free of overflowing trashcans and litter.

OLT took full advantage of this opportunity to share its mission and highlight current projects, including stewardship efforts at Woods Prairie and Schulze Nature Preserve, as well as the recently acquired Moore Cave- all of which will directly benefit from the event's proceeds. Staff also shared information about OLT's work in land



preservation through conservation easements and the ACEP-ALE Farm Bill program. With a booth located near the entrance, OLT was able to connect with a wide range of attendees who were curious about our environmental efforts. Stewardship's Conservation Specialist, Taylor Dye, carved dozens of stamps with the theme of Earth Day for an interactive experience. Children and adults alike stopped by to create handmade "Thank you" cards for our generous donors. It was a great success.

Prior to the highly anticipated headlining performance by Shovels and Rope, Executive Director, Diana Sheridan, Stewardship's Conservation Manager and Specialist, Haley Smith and Taylor Dye, and Board President, Debbie Gittinger took the stage to address the crowd. Diana and Haley shared OLT's mission, ongoing work,



and deep gratitude for the community's support. A formal ceremony to accept the festival proceeds took place in mid-June.

OLT extends a sincere thanks to all of those who made this possible- the hardworking volunteers and organizers of Springfield Earth Day Music Fest, with noteworthy consideration to

Molly Healey, their sponsors- Vital Farms and Thompson Cadillac- among many others, attendees, musical artists, and fellow community organizations who made this event such a success. Thank you to our friends, family, board members, and donors who supported us through attendance or best wishes, and a special thanks to OLT's own Haley Smith for submitting a thoughtful grant application that put the wheels in motion.



You can find more information and photos of this event at www.earthdayspringfieldmo.org/.



Success Story



OZARK NATIVE SEED

Pasture. Prairie. Restoration.

By Rachel Hopkins, Business Owner & Larry Levin, Contributing Writer

For over two decades, Ozark Land Trust and its partners have actively worked with landowners in the Huzzah



Creek portion of the greater Meramec River watershed. By the end of 2026, OLT will hold nine conservation easements there totaling almost 1700 acres, with much of the land in active farm and ranch use.

Rachel Hopkins is part of a landowner family with one of the largest holdings that OLT protects in the Huzzah, who supplement their ranch and farm lands

with a successful seed business that utilizes 30 acres of the OLT-protected portion of their lands. Ozark Native Seed (ozarknativeseed.com) is owned and managed by Gatlin and Madison Bunton and Joe and Rachel Hopkins.

The start of the business grew from a variety of circumstances. “As most things in life happen, it was unexpected,” says Rachel. “Gatlin and I were both

employed with University of Missouri Extension. For several years we had worked with and been a part of several different native plant teams and demonstrations. Through this, we saw the need for retail sales, education and technical assistance. Not only for producers, but also for agencies and professional personnel.”

Ozark Native Seed is more than a seed sale company, as Rachel explains. “While our main focus is retail sales, we also consult on native plant establishment, management



and habitat restoration. From our previous experience, we have seen how folks want and need personalized guidance on their native plant journey. Gatlin is one of the premier experts in plant identification in the state.

“Education is another area that sets us apart. It is part of our mission statement. Starting this summer, we are going to offer education days for agency personnel and land stewards. These will be tailored to different interests, such as restoration, grazing and seed production.”

The business is flourishing both in Missouri and beyond, thanks to a growing market for their products and services. “Many of our customers are planting native grasses and wildflowers for the first time through state and federal cost share programs,” Gatlin points out. “These plantings are primarily conversions from tall



Rachel and Joe Hopkins

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Success Story Continued from page 6

fescue and cropland. We offer many of the common native species, but are working to offer more specialized and rare plants through our greenhouse. Some of the more uncommon plants and seeds we offer are river cane and Ozark wild gourd.”

Restoring native grasses wins their company high praise from one of the leading experts in grassland protection and restoration in the region. “We are thrilled that Ozark Native Seed is a professional member and a sponsor of the Missouri Prairie Foundation’s Grow Native! program,” says Carol Davit, Executive Director of the Missouri Prairie Foundation. “By providing seeds of native plants to the marketplace, Ozark Native Seed helps consumers increase the ecological functionality of their properties.”

Protecting the Meramec River Watershed: Using GIS to Tell Our Story

By Carl Taylor, GIS Specialist



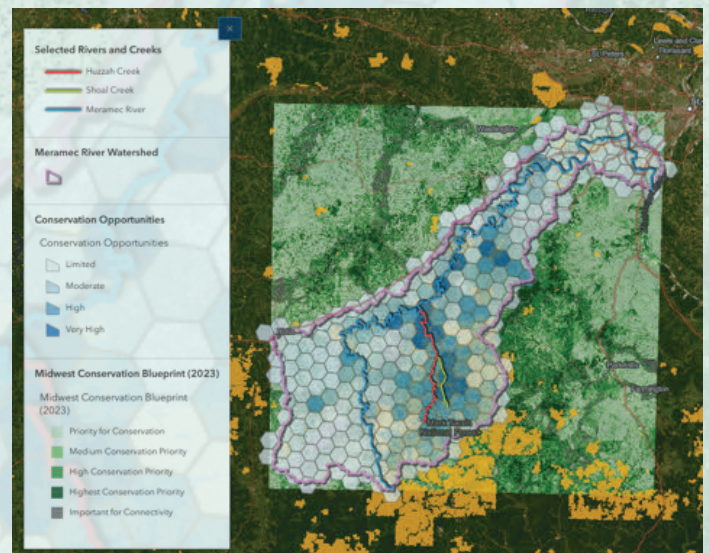
Along the Meramec River and its tributaries, landowners and conservation partners have spent years protecting land and improving the places where farms and streams come together: stabilizing streambanks, moving cattle away from creek edges, and building better crossings where farm equipment meets flowing water. Ozark Land Trust’s new Meramec River StoryMap explores this work by combining maps, photos, and narrative to show how conservation happens across a watershed.

One section centers on Shoal Creek Woodlands for Wildlife, a landowner-led partnership in the Huzzah and Shoal Creek area that has been active for nearly two decades. Through SCWW, landowners and partners have completed voluntary projects including streambank stabilization, alternative watering systems for cattle, improved stream crossings, and other practices that support both working farms and healthy streams.

The StoryMap also shows how GIS can help tell a broader conservation story. By layering streams, forests, existing protected lands, and areas of high conservation

Supporting those whose land is protected by a conservation easement in finding and cultivating uses consistent with the purposes of the easement is key, says Abigail Lambert, OLT’s River Stewardship Manager. “The ability of landowners to engage in activities that both support conservation and provide financial sustenance from their property is a double win.”

Gatlin & Rachel note that the goals of Ozark Native Seed are in sync with the work of OLT and other land trusts in permanent protection of working lands. “We hold conservation of the Ozarks to a high priority. This not only encompasses traditional conservation measures, but also encourages the preservation of farms and forests for future generations.”



value, the map highlights places where multiple benefits overlap, helping OLT and its partners understand where restoration, permanent protection, and long term stewardship can build on work already happening on the ground.



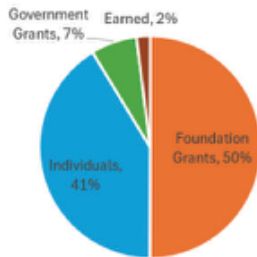
Scan the QR code or visit <https://arcg.is/0jny95> to explore the StoryMap.

Conserving our Future

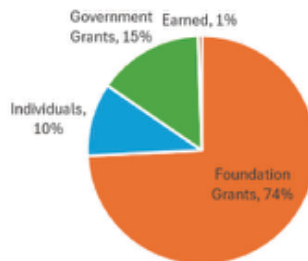
By Debbie Gittinger, OLT President

At the March 2026 Board of Directors meeting, OLT started strategic planning for the next 5 years. The prior strategic plan was completed in 2020 for the 5 years 2021 – 2025. We accomplished most of our financial goals including increased individual donations, increased corporate and foundation grants as well as increases to our operating and stewardship endowments. A comparison of operating finances between the two years:

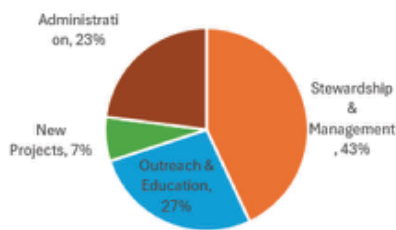
2020 Operating Income: \$439,139



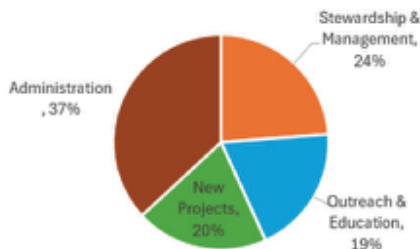
2025 Operating Income: \$1,469,803



2020 Operating Expenses: \$421,115



2025 Operating Expenses: \$814,872



In 2025, we worked with numerous foundations and the state to purchase Moore Cave in Perry County with donations of \$784,000 and \$125,000 to steward the property in perpetuity.

During our initial strategic planning we have already identified the following:

- Additional staffing needs to increase our ability to do more projects
- A review of OLT's policy for accepting land donations and the cost of stewarding fee owned property
- OLT property threatened by data centers
- Identifying projects important to our strategic partners
- Continuing need to improve our accounting system to identify detailed costs by project

Stewarding the organization to another steadfast 40 years is our biggest goal. While it is exciting to do the occasional large project like Moore Cave, we strive to continue to work with willing landowners to conserve their property. Your donations, large and small, are all appreciated and help us to do this rewarding work to conserve the Ozarks land and water around us.

THE OZARK HOLLER

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MISSION

To help people protect and conserve the natural resources and beauty of the Ozarks and to advocate for land conservation.

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