

Page 4

Just my opinion

Dear Lee:

I just want to take this opportunity to thank you for your unwavering dedication to hold The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and its activities up to public scrutiny. You do society a great service.

I write this letter in support of your efforts and to help ranchers and rural folks to understand why we must fear and resist TNC and other land trusts. The land trusts do not, I repeat, *do not* believe in private ownership of land. They believe in the power of money, government regulation, ownership by trust (or socialism) and totalitarian control of resources. TNC is an immensely wealthy and powerful bureaucracy run by lawyers in three piece suits who reside in Washington, D.C. However, the difference between land trust bureaucracy and government bureaucracy is the land trusts are not subject to the same checks and public scrutiny.

TNC is the largest of the land trusts. There are about a hundred such organizations in the nation. Many believe that TNC is dedicated to using the American system of willing buyer-willing seller to protect significant ecological areas. But the truth is, it is exploiting the system to create a new class of property and property ownership. And believe me, this new class of property will foster neither freedom nor a better environment.

If the land trusts really believed in private property, and its built-in incentives for responsible stewardship, they would be lobbying Congress for less federal ownership and the passage of The Private Property Rights Act. They would lobby for changes in the Clean Water Act, wetlands regulations, federal land acquisition policies, the National Natural Landmarks Program and the Endangered Species Act. If they really believed in our system they would support the individual ownership and stewardship that is responsible for maintaining all the unique and biologically significant properties they "snatch out of the jaws of destruction" and cram into trust ownership. If they really believed in private property they would decry the socialist management of the one-third of the nation in federal ownership instead of conspiring to extend it.

The land trusts have found a niche where they can use to advantage, the free-enterprise system and non-profit status while avoiding the real world constraints of normal property ownership (taxes, need for return on investment, government regulation, community participation, production, contribution to the national welfare, etc.). You see, they pretend to buy into the system but the truth is they exploit the system without actually making a contribution to it. They pretend to believe

that private property is the only way to go, while working feverishly to make sure that less land is available for private ownership.

The status of the class of property created by TNC ownership is not clear. What is clear is that when property goes into TNC ownership it goes into limbo. It is no longer private — it is no longer public. Of course, this should come as no surprise because TNC itself is not exactly private and it's not exactly public either. Its processes are not open to public scrutiny. It is not accountable as a government bureaucracy would be. In fact, even when a government agency conspires to acquire property, when TNC is the broker, normal public oversight processes are dispensed with.

When the Carlsbad Sportsmen's Association made a Freedom of Information Act request of the BLM for real estate appraisal information concerning the Black River Land Exchange it was denied due to "privileged information" classification. But that's not surprising considering Larry Woodard, State Director, BLM, was on the Board of Directors of TNC at the time.

When land enters TNC limbo its status changes forever. Even land which is sold to the feds for taxpayer dollars is usually restricted more than other federal lands. Sometimes the restriction is absolute. An example of absolute restriction would be the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge.

Of central concern to this issue is the non-profit status of TNC. This status amounts to a form of government support which allows it to outbid other real world property buyers.

I believe that when a non-profit's central purpose is to compete for and amass property, it should be denied non-profit status.

Then there is the problem of reduced tax revenues. Of course, TNC makes a big deal about paying the property taxes even though they don't have to. But the truth is, it only pays token taxes. In most cases the property taxes are only a portion of the total tax contribution of a working ranch. By reducing livestock on a property TNC affects taxes, employment and future economic activity. And it doesn't necessarily reduce livestock because the property is being overgrazed. For example, The Gray Ranch was lauded by all concerned for the excellent management of the previous owners, but TNC promptly cut livestock numbers by 2/3rds.

In addition to the government support provided by non-profit status, the relationship between government and TNC often smacks of conspiracy. A good example is the sweet deal worked out by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and TNC to trade The Gray Ranch into federal ownership. The entire deal was cooked up while Michael J. Spear, Region 2 Director, FWS, sat on the Board of Directors of TNC (The Gray Ranch is in Region 2).

If you think this is just a Western problem, consider this from *An Indictment Of Government By The People Of The Adirondacks* by Carol W. LaGrasse and Donald H. Gerdt:

"The land trusts epitomize the evolution of the environmental organizations from concern with definable environmental problems that can be

specifically coped with to limitless agendas driven by huge sums of money. Ultimately becoming brokerage houses for the American countryside, the land trusts went from buying up and maintaining local nature preserves for the appreciation of bird lovers to utilizing the full taxing power of the state and federal governments to feed their coffers. Their abuses have just begun to be exposed to the light, but already documented are prearranged land deals where in minutes, land trusts reaped million-dollar profits of over 100 percent; where a land trust was used willingly for blackmail of permit applicants by a government agency; where a land trust illegally lobbied for legislation to create a land acquisition fund it would have access to; where the land trust acted as an illegally solicited "donor" of land on request of the National Park Service; and where the land trust rode roughshod over local zoning laws. As part of their routine deals as real estate brokers for the federal government, the land trusts do studies of land, comment professionally during negotiations and hearings, perform the actual negotiations, and are hired to manage federal land after purchase."

The Adirondacks are in New York. It's very sad to read of their plight. Twenty major state and federal land-acquisition and land use control programs are in effect right now in the Adirondacks. Just one of the federal programs alone covers 10 million acres! The testimony of local residents reads like the stuff that used to come from communist countries.

"Democracy could have flourished in the Adirondacks. The people could

have seen their culture blossom. Economic security could have been the norm.

"Environmentalists zoned the future of a region away. They planned the death of rural communities. They regulated the culture into near oblivion. They strangled the economy. They manipulated and bludgeoned the democratic hopes of a people.

"Not satisfied with the successful subjugation of the Adirondack region, the preservationists have mercilessly arrayed a seemingly endless conspiracy of programs and legislation to close in on what remains of private property rights and economic viability. Adirondackers are pressured into negotiations and capitulation at tremendous disadvantage.

"But what could have been ... could still be. If we did not hope that the people of the Adirondacks and the people of rural America could not take back their constitutional rights, if we did not hope that their families and communities could flourish again, we would not fight this war . . . Courage! This truly is a fight for justice and freedom."

— Carol W. LaGrasse

Make no mistake about it; the land trusts are a stalking horse for the destruction of individual property ownership and rural society. They are like a virus that the immune system does not recognize. But you can rest assured that disease will erupt, it already has. We must put a stop to the cozy manipulations of the free-enterprise system by the land trusts.

With warmest regards,

Al Schneberger
Albuquerque, NM