



*Turning Questions Into Answers.*

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** THE NATURE CONSERVANCY/ TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

**FROM:** LORI WEIGEL  
PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

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**RE:** LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING THE “LANGUAGE OF CONSERVATION”  
FROM THE NATIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

**DATE:** JUNE 1, 2004

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These “lessons learned” regarding the language of conservation are drawn from both qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of The Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Land by our two firms in 2004. As conservation experts with a very technical and specialized vocabulary, one goal of the research was how to translate “policy speak” into everyday vocabulary which resonates with the general electorate. Therefore, we are providing these recommendations in a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for communication. While there can certainly be unique circumstances, we found few exceptions to these broad rules in terms of geography or key demographic groups in the survey.

### THE LANGUAGE OF CONSERVATION

First, there are two “W’s” – water and working farms and ranches - that should be included in discussions of land conservation with the public. A third “W”- wildlife - resonates strongly with activists. These are essential concepts that should be normalized into everyone’s vocabulary on this topic:

- *DO talk about water FIRST and foremost.* Water cannot be stressed enough, and really it doesn’t matter how you say it. In fact, voters prioritize water as a critical reason to purchase and protect land, no matter how it is expressed: vast majorities of those polled see it as “very important” to buy land to protect drinking water quality (84%); improve the water quality in our lakes, streams and rivers (75%); protect lakes, rivers and streams (72%); and protect watersheds (66%). Moreover, water is tops in every region (not just the perennially thirsty West) and rates just as high in big cities (85% very important) as rural areas (84%). Most importantly, this data substantiates one of the things we heard in focus groups throughout the West – voters closely link land conservation with protecting water.

Finally, there is a clear link between government (and therefore taxpayers') responsibility to protect clean air and clean water, more so than some of the other issues. Air and water are consistently seen as "needs" rather than "wants."

- *DO stress "preserving" water quality.* The focus groups and our other research on this topic indicate that voters do not view water quality as a problem NOW, rather they want to preserve the good water quality they already have and recognize a need to invest in preserving the water quality.

Notably, as our focus groups were in the western U.S., we also found that when talking about water quality, voters in this region automatically translate "quality" into "supply" if water supply is a greater concern. Respondents view land conservation as connected to both preserving water quality AND protecting water supplies.

- *DO link land conservation to preservation of "working farms and ranches."* Fully 63% of Americans say that protecting "working farms and ranches" is a very important reason for their state or local community to buy land and protect it from development. Moreover, voters nationally perceive the "loss of working farms and ranches" as a major problem, with 49% saying it is an extremely or very serious problem – higher than say the same regarding loss of open space, natural areas, or scenic vistas, and on par with concern about pollution of rivers, lakes and streams (50% say the latter is an extremely or very serious problem).

The word "working" must ALWAYS precede farms and ranches. Our focus groups found that there is a great deal of value placed by voters on preserving small, family farms. The word "working" is an important one as it means the land is productive and being used. It is NOT assumed by respondents. In the focus groups, we also tested "agricultural land" (too dry and not as evocative) and "farmland and rangeland" (better, but not as positive as working farms and ranches).

- *DO evoke protecting wildlife,* although the phrase "wildlife habitat" speaks more to the base (its ranking as a reason to fund land protection tends to increase the more active in environmental causes one is). Overall, 56% say it is a very important reason to fund land conservation – about middle of the pack. Notably, our focus groups demonstrated that voters interpret "wildlife" to fit their locale – urbanites view rabbits and birds on their lawns as "wildlife." Wildlife also resonates, because there is a strong sense that the animals are voiceless and need someone looking out for their needs.
- *DO NOT use "endangered species" as interchangeable with wildlife – voters view them differently.* While voters are broadly supportive of protecting wildlife, the focus groups demonstrated that "endangered species" is a more polarizing term. Voters can point to examples where environmental regulations have held up important projects in order to protect what many deem to be obscure and unimportant species.

- *DO NOT say “open space.”* “Open space” is NOT one of the better terms to use in the vocabulary of conservation, and “urban open space” is even worse. In the focus groups, voters perceived “open space” as empty land, not near them, and did not necessarily see how they benefited from it or could use it. “Urban open space” was perceived as a bench between sky scrapers, or an abandoned lot.

Moreover, the survey demonstrates that “loss of open space” rates lower as a concern for voters (38% extremely or very serious problem) than many other environmental concerns, even those somewhat related such as “poorly planned growth and development” (45% extremely or very serious concern). Pluralities of both Western and national voters indicate they think their community currently has “the right amount” of open space (51% and 46%, respectively).

- *DO say “natural areas” instead.* In the focus groups, “natural areas” brought to mind images of trees, mountains, or water, such as streams or waterfalls. Natural areas could be wildlife habitat, could have trails for public use, or simply could have scenic value. This phrase implies a pristine state where “nothing’s been touched” and “nobody is around” - the polar opposite of sprawl.
- *DO NOT just say “trails” – say “hiking, biking and walking trails”.* “Trails” can’t be assumed as a phrase that envelops recreation. Instead, attaching some uses to it made the phrase resonate more strongly in the focus groups.
- *DO NOT focus on creating new parks for their own sake.* Instead, connect parks to a broader goal. While the focus groups demonstrated that “neighborhood parks” is better than the generic term “parks” (neighborhood parks resonates because it implies access and public use), the concept of new parks suffers in the abstract. For example, just 22% say a lack of neighborhood parks is an extremely or very serious problem. However, positioning parks in relation to children improves the concept. Fully 59% say that creating “parks and other places where children can play safely” is a very important reason for their state or local community to buy and protect land (right behind “natural areas” in the national rankings). Importantly, the focus groups helped expose that saying “playgrounds” was redundant for most voters, as they assume parks include playgrounds and possibly ball fields.

Moreover, our other research has demonstrated that talking about the repair and maintenance of neighborhood parks OR preventing the closure of neighborhood parks resonates more than creating new parks.

- *DO NOT use any of the following terms*, as the consistently negative response from the focus groups indicate they should be replaced in how we talk about conservation:
  - “Undeveloped land” is simply land that has not been developed YET, but will be developed.
  - In drought-stricken areas, “green space” can imply wide swaths of water guzzling Bermuda grass. DO NOT go there.
  - “Working landscapes” does not mean anything to respondents. They cannot place a scene or image which would be a “working landscape.” Using the term, therefore evokes nothing.
  - “Natural landscapes” also does not work as well as natural areas. Landscape is too close to “landscaping” and some in the focus groups equated this to xeriscaping, or other gardening terms.
  
- *DO NOT use the threat of “sprawl” unless with CORE supporters.* In the focus groups, “sprawl” tended to elicit the most emotionally negative response of any words or phrases tested. However, it rated weakest of anything tested as a reason a state or local community should buy and protect land from development (only 41% rate it as a very important reason). “Reducing sprawl” as a goal rates only slightly higher among urban voters (46%), BUT among more liberal audiences and traditionally more liberal urban areas, “sprawl” can resonate. Fully 51% of self-described liberal voters nationally rate “reducing sprawl” as a very important reason for their state or local community to buy land and protect it from development. In addition, voters living in mostly coastal urban centers – from DC to Boston, the entire West coast, and along the Great Lakes (Chicago, Detroit and up to Buffalo) rate sprawl 15 points higher than those in the interior U.S. or along Southern coasts.
  
- *DO use “poorly planned growth,”* rather than “unplanned growth” or “sprawl” with the general electorate. Focus group respondents tend to say that communities have a plan, it just isn’t a very well thought out one. In addition, voters say that “rapid development” can be good if done well. It refers only to the pace of development and not how development is thought out, and therefore did not elicit as negative a response.

Growth messages that are put into the local context and use specific statistics (e.g. one million more people in the next twenty years) generated a strong response in all the focus groups.

- *DO stress “planning” in terms of growth.* Voters want well-thought out and responsible planning for growth. A growth-related message which focuses on planning tested well nationally: “Continued growth in our area will lead to more and more development, traffic, and pollution. We must plan carefully for this growth and reduce its negative impacts by preserving clean air, clean water, and open space” (53% much more inclined to support state or local community purchasing land).

- *DO NOT allow your effort to be positioned as anti-growth.* The focus group research points to voters viewing growth as inevitable. They want growth that is well-planned, responsible, and does not negatively impact their overall quality of life. In fact, “protecting quality of life” is the fourth highest rated reason for government to fund land conservation (70% very important reason).
- *DO use phrases that imply ownership and inclusion, such as “our” and “we.”* All of the messages in the survey incorporate this language and this is in part why they all test so well. So, it is “OUR natural areas” and “WE need to protect OUR beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife. . .” etc..
- *DO NOT ask voters to protect the land for someone else – like tourists – no matter how important tourism is to a state or local economy.* Voters want to preserve the land for THEMSELVES to enjoy and use, and not so tourists can come in and trash the place. This may be a message to tout to a local Chamber of Commerce or specific business owners, but it is not a message for the general public.

Therefore, a message which originally focused on tourists instead was modified successfully to convey locals’ uses of the land: 55% say they are much more inclined for their state or local community to purchase land for conservation after hearing that “Every year, people in our area visit natural areas to hike, fish, camp, hunt, ride horses or simply observe nature. Preserving our natural areas will ensure that future generations have these opportunities too.”

- *DO NOT focus on economic rationales* for land preservation. Despite obvious concerns about the economy, many areas which have the most need for land preservation are those which have experienced rapid growth in the recent past, and the potential for MORE growth tends to be a turn-off. Focus group respondents disliked messages which evoke more people coming in. This may be a message which changes if the economy completely collapses, but even then, it may take some time for voters to respond as warmly to economic rationales as more emotional appeals.
- *DO connect land conservation to “future generations.”* Evoking children and future generations consistently tests very well as a rationale for land preservation. For example, 64% of voters nationally rate providing “opportunities for kids to learn about the environment” as a very important reason for their state or local community to buy land and protect it from development (ranks 6<sup>th</sup> overall). Importantly, there does not tend to be a difference in the overall ratings between parents and non-parents in their reaction to messages which evoke children or future generations: “We need to protect our beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife habitat for future generations. Unless we act to protect these areas now, many of our beautiful, natural areas will disappear before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy them” (57% of parents and 51% of non-parents say this is very convincing, although parents rate ALL messages higher than non-parents so the relative ranking is no different).

- *DO NOT go so far as to say that land preservation can keep kids out of trouble.* While we have seen this message resonate with seniors in surveys before, the idea that funding parks, ball fields and recreation can help kids stay out of trouble fared weaker than all other messages tested (43% much more inclined to support after hearing that “Providing more parks, sports fields and recreation areas will mean that our kids have the chance to get involved in something positive like sports, which helps keep them busy and out of trouble after school.”). Voters in the focus groups saw parents as the stop-gap for kids not getting into trouble – not ball fields.
- *DO NOT needlessly politicize an issue which has broad appeal across the political spectrum.* Talking about federal government cut backs tended to politicize the issue immediately in the focus groups, and the survey confirms that it is a turn-off to GOP voters (only 33% are much more inclined to support land preservation after hearing that “The federal government has sharply cut back funding and weakened laws and regulations that protect our land, air, and water. We need to do what we can here in our state to prevent further harm to our natural lands, air and water quality.”)
- *DO talk about yourselves as “conservationists” – not “environmentalists.”* This bears repeating. Voters are more likely to view themselves as “conservationists” (81%, 24% strongly) than environmentalists (73%, 20% strongly). Moreover, in the focus groups, there was a decided skepticism about the agendas of some “environmental groups” who engage in land preservation.

## A NEW VOCABULARY FOR CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

That's the LAST time you will see us use the phrase "conservation easement." In fact, we suggest it should be the last time that *anyone* uses this phrase in speaking to the general public. Our research demonstrates clearly and unequivocally that the language the environmental community has been using on this issue has NOT been helpful in positioning the issue with the public. Instead, we recommend the following:

- *DO NOT say "conservation easement."* *DO say "land preservation agreements" or "land protection agreements."* Even "conservation agreements" rates far better with the public than our traditional terms (on a zero to one hundred scale, where 0 is a "very cold/unfavorable" reaction and 100 is a "very warm/favorable" reaction).

	Mean score
Land preservation agreements	60.3
Conservation partnerships	56.4
Land protection agreements	54.5
Conservation agreements	50.5

**Conservation easements** **41.2**

Why the negative reaction to easements? The focus groups demonstrate that "easements" itself is NOT a positive term. It tends to evoke being forced into doing (or not doing) something with part of your land. In focus groups, the word "easements" made them think of restrictions on their property when they purchased a home or land. However, "conservation" tends to be a positive term. The word "conservation" has been carrying the load in this phrase, but marrying it with another positive phrase ("agreements" or "partnerships") improves the initial reaction to this concept immeasurably.

- *DO NOT say "buying "development rights" or "buying the interest in the land" to explain the concept of land preservation agreements.* "Purchase of development rights" rated the lowest of any phrase tested (37.3 mean score). The focus groups demonstrated that voters perceive the purchase of development rights as meaning that someone wants to develop the land! The focus groups also showed that "buying the interest in the land" has no meaning to respondents. Voters' initial guesses as to its meaning are not necessarily positive.
- *DO stress the voluntary nature of land preservation agreements.* The concept of "voluntary" is an important one. Fully 68% of voters nationally indicate they are much more likely to support their state or local government using this strategy to preserve natural areas after hearing that it "is a voluntary agreement between a private landowner and state or local government." (For simplicity's sake in the survey we focused on government, rather than private organizations).

Voluntary is inherent in the word "agreement," which in part explains why phrases which incorporate the word "agreement" test far better than the word "easement."

- *DO provide a rationale for this strategy – especially if it is a cost effective means to preserve the land.* The focus groups demonstrated that voters’ initial concept of land preservation is either restricting development by zoning or purchasing it outright. The concept of land preservation agreements is not even on their radar screens. They need a rationale for this “new” concept and cost-effectiveness is one which resonates well.

“Allows non-profits and government to protect more land from development, because it is less expensive than buying the land outright.” (62% more likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation, 27% much more likely)

- *DO explain what “limiting certain types of uses” means in real life.* Give examples. Note the overwhelmingly positive response to two fairly simple explanations of the benefits of land preservation agreements which explain how land could still be used under the agreement:

“Keeps land in private hands and preserves traditional land uses, such as family farming and ranching.” (85% more likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation, 51% much more likely);

“Makes it possible to prevent natural areas, farms and ranches from being developed without forcing anyone to sell their land, and while still allowing the landowners to continue farming and ranching as they always have.” (75% more likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation, 39% much more likely to support)

In fact, these are the top two descriptions of land preservation agreements that we tested.

- *DO be aware that the “permanent” nature of most easements causes friction among voters.* We tested this concept in the survey two different ways and in both instances, the intensity of the positive response was matched by an equally intense negative response. This may be one area where language may not be able to smooth over and assuage voters’ concerns.

“Is attached to the land itself, so it permanently restricts all future owners from developing the land as well.”

(50% more likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation (23% much more likely); 48% less likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation (23% much less likely))

“Limits uses of the land even after the original landowner passes away.”

(49% more likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation (20% much more likely); 34% less likely to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation (19% much less likely))

In the focus groups, the concept of easements being “attached” to the land and binding for future owners created a dynamic where voters empathized more with the future land owner or heir, rather than being concerned about the value of the easement for future generations or even themselves as taxpayers.



- *DO be up-front and address voters' concerns about fair payment/return for taxpayers.* The Achilles heel for land preservation agreements among the general electorate is not public access or the permanent nature of some easements. It is, in fact, the potential for abuse. (However, in the focus groups all of this concern was directed at government. Concerns about “cronyism” are NOT directed at non-profit organizations.)

“Can be abused by developers, and can end up creating unfair tax breaks for rich landowners.” (60% less likely to support to support state or local government using this strategy for land preservation, 44% much less likely).

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**Methodology:** From April 3 to 12, 2004, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) conducted telephone interviews with 1,500 registered voters likely to cast ballots in November 2004. The interviews included a national sample of 800 voters (with a margin of sampling error of +/-3.5 percent), an oversample of 500 voters in the western United States (specifically Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming, with a regional margin of error of +/- 4.4%), and 200 additional interviews with Latino voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. References to “Battleground states” are to the 17 states generally viewed as pivotal in the 2004 elections (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin). The research also included a set of six focus groups with swing voters in Washington, Colorado and New Mexico.