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## Finding the Humanity in Complicated Laws: Learning from The Nature Conservancy



Photo by Morgan Heim

Federal legislation such as the Farm Bill or the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) can be so complex that it's difficult even for lawmakers themselves to understand how these laws will affect people at ground level. Realizing this, The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) policy communications team decided to capture those first-person stories and bring them back to Washington, D.C.

The results are "[Harvesting Hope](#)" and "[Decade to Deliver](#)," two collections of stories that vividly illustrate the real-world impact of provisions in the Farm Bill, IRA, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) – massive policies that support climate action and conservation.

In November, I had the chance to interview the leaders of these projects at TNC, Jill Schwartz and Eric Bontrager, who shared some of their experiences in developing, specifically, the Harvesting Hope series. Their observations provide useful guidance for anyone who deals with complex legislation, systems change, or other abstract subjects that may be missing the human touch. *(Please scroll down for the full story.)*

<i>Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center</i>		
TELL STORIES	PLAN CAMPAIGNS	RUN MEETINGS
Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative	Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter	Meetings for People who Hate Meetings
January 14, 21, 28 & February 4 9am - 10am PT	February 10 & 12 11am - 12pm PT	March 11 & 13 11am - 12pm PT

## Finding the Humanity in Complicated Laws: Learning from The Nature Conservancy (cont.)

**Kirsten:** How and when did this project begin?

**Eric:** Harvesting Hope focuses on the Farm Bill, which is America's largest investment in the voluntary conservation, restoration and management of America's private lands. It's a major policy focus for TNC, and our work on the latest version of the bill—last passed in 2018—began in early 2023. We had just finished developing our Farm Bill policy platform. At the time, we had a new Congress that had come in, and we also had some funding to explore potential storytelling. This was a chance for us to make this real personal connection to the Farm Bill for lawmakers, but also see to what extent could we really [use] storytelling. We'd done it in pieces, but we had never really done it in this kind of large, concentrated way. This is about the time that Jill came in, and her big focus has always been on storytelling.

**Jill:** When I was interviewing at TNC last year, I asked them, "What's the main thing that you need?" And they said, "Stories about people who benefit from federal policies." When I got here, I found out that [some] people were actually thinking of project overviews instead of stories. There was a little education to be done. We had to "show, don't tell." Show people what we mean by people-centric stories. So, my team just started producing stories [that] focused in on one person, and then we started publishing them and sharing them internally and externally, and they were very well received.

**Kirsten:** How did you go about gathering the stories for Harvesting Hope?

**Eric:** That was the biggest hurdle for this project. We had to find somebody who had a connection [to the storyteller], and we wanted them to be nested in the different categories we needed -- so somebody for conservation easement, soil health, forestry, etc. We wanted them to be compelling stories, but we also

wanted to be both geographically and demographically diverse. That's where you may not have as extensive a network or as diverse a network as you want. So, it was a lot of cold-calling. It was a lot of reaching out to our networks and talking to our chapters and then doing a lot of interviews with potential subjects. I would say that was a lion's share of the initial work.

**Jill:** There was a lot of calling one person and then they direct you to another person who would direct you to another person, but we would eventually get to the people who work on the ground. You have to go down the org chart to find those people.

I was new and most of my team was new, and so we just didn't really know who to go to. It's such a big organization that just finding the people who are in the field and know the actual cast of characters is hard. But then the other thing was just realizing that not everybody knew what we meant by "story," and they were giving us themes, not actual stories that had a central character. That's when we brought in The Goodman Center to lead several storytelling workshops, which were incredibly well received to help people understand what a story is. Not because we were asking them to write the story, although we welcomed that. It was more [that] we wanted them to be the eyes and ears for potential story ideas related to the Farm Bill, as well as the IRA and IJA (the focus of our Decade to Deliver story series). They could only do that if they knew what we meant by story. And so, if they could find the ideas and pass them on... we could pursue them.

**Kirsten:** We appreciate the plug. How difficult was it to strike a balance between finding compelling stories and being strategic about the content of the stories?

**Jill:** For the Harvesting Hope project, we knew we were going to do five story packages about the Farm Bill. Originally, we thought, let's find the congressional leaders who we really need to influence to get the Farm Bill passed, and we'll just do one story in each of their districts. Well, we had to take that off the table as criteria because it was just another level of complexity. So, we then tried to find people in certain states where the congressional person might live, but even [that wasn't working].

We eventually decided if we have a good story, it's going to inspire somebody no matter where they live. Then, we were also mindful of finding people who had tapped into different programs. We also looked for diversity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, location and the type of agriculture being done.

**Eric:** We know that there is power in storytelling, especially with lawmakers who may not have a good versatility on a particular policy issue. My personal goal for this – it's not like a metric or anything – I would love to have one lawmaker mention one of our stories on the House or Senate floor during debate. If they did that, I'm done. I have achieved my objective!

**Kirsten:** That would be incredibly gratifying, I'm sure. So, what have been some tangible successes so far?

**Eric:** In September, we had an event in Washington, D.C. where we showed the first four Harvesting Hope videos (each story package for this project includes video and written content). We invited congressional staffers, as well as TNC trustees, donors and staff from the D.C. area. It was the first indication of the effectiveness of this because people were really receptive. They had a lot of questions. We actually had some of the farmers, ranchers and foresters in the films as speakers for a moderated discussion with the head of our North America region. The engagement was just unbelievable.

**Jill:** There has been such phenomenal acceptance of these stories at the organization. In fact, at her recent town hall with staff, our CEO spoke several times about the importance of storytelling, especially over the next four years. But I think what I'm most proud of is the first person we interviewed for the "Harvesting Hope" series, Treg Hatcher. He's a rancher in Kansas, and when I sent him the written story and draft video to review, two things happened. One is he said, "I never really realized I had a story to tell." And second, he has become so proud of his story that he was willing to come to Washington, D.C. for the day with his son and lobby on Capitol Hill for the Farm Bill with us. Since then, his son, who appeared in the film, has come back a second time to do that.

Helping people understand that they have a story to tell is really, really rewarding because you know in the end we're doing advocacy. We're trying to affect change. And if we can inspire somebody to be a public champion for our cause, that's a huge win.

I don't want to just write stories to write stories. I want to write stories that actually can change things. So the fact that we now had a rancher from Kansas who's willing to come to Washington, DC, and lobby for the Farm Bill was huge.

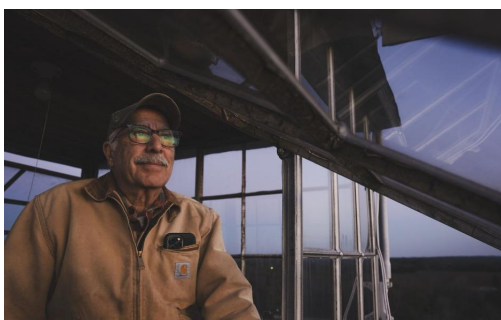


Photo by Neon Raven

**Eric:** [Our storytellers are] excited about their stories, which makes me feel like we were good custodians of their stories. Not only were they happy about it, they wanted to do more. They wanted to get more involved. For me, probably the biggest win was that we were caring for their story. That was of paramount importance to all of us.

We're very protective of these stories because these are people who are literally opening up their lives to us and their hardships. The Hatchers were about ready

to lose their ranch. Saloom lost hundreds of thousands of dollars worth in timber. You have to be very respectful of the story. Doing the legwork that we did beforehand, like pre-production trips, is important. We're not going to just stick a camera in front of you. We're going to meet with you when there's no pressure. It's not on the record. We just want to get a sense of who you are and make that personal connection. That helped create more authentic stories and a better filming experience later.

And then there is follow-up. We would share drafts with them as they got closer to the final, just to make sure that we were accurately reflecting their stories. It was definitely a collaborative effort. I still talk with one of the subjects all the time, just texting back and forth.

**Kirsten:** What is next for these stories?

**Eric:** One of the things that we talk about a lot is that [storytelling should be] 40% production, 60% distribution. So, my big focus right now is trying to figure how can we get these out there.

**Kirsten:** Jill, I remember you talking about the 40/60 rule before. Can you talk more about the plan for distributing stories?

**Jill:** Part of it is internal distribution. We still work within our organization to help people understand why policy matters and what we even mean by policy. So, anytime we have a story come out, we have a list of 20 or so internal newsletters or e-mail lists that we can send the stories to for inclusion in those. That's been giving us a lot of great exposure. When our policy people are making a presentation internally, we encourage them to tell an anecdote from one of those stories, or maybe even tell their own story.

Externally, we have been able to get some of the stories into TNC's external facing newsletter which goes to hundreds of thousands of people. We've gotten a few of them into the magazine which is also well distributed, and then we've been working on getting them into partner organizations, if they have a website or a newsletter or on social media.

We're just starting the process of trying to get [the films] into some festivals. As we said, we hosted a film screening where we showed the first four of our five "Harvesting Hope" video stories, and that was really successful. So we're probably going to do some more of those around the country.

**Kirsten:** Sounds like I will have to follow up next year to find out more about the long-term impacts of this storytelling campaign!

Please check out the written and filmed stories for [Harvesting Hope](#) and [Decade to Deliver](#).

*Thank you so much to Jill Schwartz and Eric Bontrager for taking the time to talk storytelling with me. Jill is the Director of Marketing and Communications, North America Policy and Government Relations, and Eric is Associate Director of Communications, North America Policy and Government Relations. The Goodman Center has been honored to work with the policy team, government relations teams and more at The Nature Conservancy over the years.*

## About Us

This edition of *free-range thinking* was written by Kirsten Farrell and edited by Andy Goodman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

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