

Securing a Ranching Tradition



PHOTO COURTESY THE CONSERVATION FUND

Wyoming family secures 113-year-old ranching tradition with conservation easement.

The Conservation Fund announced Jan. 27 the conservation and expansion of one of the oldest operating ranches held by one family in the Green River Valley of Wyoming. A conservation easement will permanently protect the natural resources of more than 10,000 acres across two homestead ranches owned by the Espenscheid family near the town of Big Piney. The Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust (WSGALT) will be responsible for the long-term stewardship of the easements.

The Budd-Espenscheid family can date their Wyoming roots back to 1879, when Daniel Budd inherited a herd of cattle and settled along the Piney Creeks, where Big Piney is currently located. In

1905, his son John established the family's first homestead ranch approximately 9

miles west of town. Over the next century, the family purchased additional neighboring properties and expanded their ranching operations. Today, Budd Ranches Inc. is owned and managed by brothers Chad and Brian Espenscheid and their wives, Gudrid and Annie, the family's fourth generation of ranchers.

"The Espenscheid brothers approached The Conservation Fund with

a bold vision to significantly expand their ranch's size by purchasing the neighboring

ranch and funding the purchase with the sale of a conservation easement on both properties," said Luke Lynch, Wyoming state director for The Conservation Fund. "It's a complicated strategy, but together with WSGALT and other partners, we rose to the challenge and designed a unique conservation plan to protect the land and accomplish the landowners' goals."

This land preservation agreement will

enable the Espenscheid family to continue its ranching operations while protecting important wildlife habitat in the Green River Valley. The property provides thousands of acres of crucial wintering ranges and migration corridors for pronghorn sheep, mule deer, moose and elk, as well as important wetland habitats for songbirds, shorebirds and numerous aquatic species. In addition, approximately 15 miles of streams, including several miles of North Piney Creek — an important tributary of the Green River that provides spawning habitat for the Colorado River cutthroat trout — have been secured.

Brian Espenscheid stated, "Along with 100-plus years of previous generations

NRCS funding key to protecting more than 10,000 acres of high-quality wildlife habitat in the Green River Valley.

A national view on agricultural easements

Among advocates of farmland protection efforts, agricultural easements are now regarded as the most promising tool for dealing with urban conversion trends. Largely because of their nonregulatory and landowner compensation features, easements just in the past quarter of a century have become a widely popular technique for the express purpose of protecting farmland — and it is estimated that about 1,100,000 farmland acres nationwide have been put under easements at an approximate cost of \$2.3 billion.

A great deal is known about the strategies and practices of organizing, funding and acquiring easements — the "front end" of the agricultural easement story. What is less certain, however, is the effectiveness of the technique in reversing or minimizing the

farmland conversion trend in the United States — the "back end" of the process. Considering that additional billions of federal, state, local and private sector dollars soon will be added to what has already have been spent, how are the public benefits of this large investment evaluated?

46 programs, 15 states

American Farmland Trust and the Agricultural Issues Center of the University of California–Davis conducted the most in-depth and comprehensive analysis of agricultural easement programs undertaken in the United States by examining approximately 46 agricultural easement programs in 15 states — a majority of the leading programs in the nation in acres and individual farms covered by easements. Most are oper-

ated by county or other local governments but some are statewide programs (Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Vermont) or nonprofit land trusts in a few states. The intent is to draw out conclusive lessons about how program methods and strategies generate more- or less-effective accomplishments while providing detailed profiles for each program and a comparative analysis of program performance and impacts. To read about the four reports involving profiles and maps, how programs select farmland to fund, easements and local planning, and measuring success in protecting farmland with easements from the study, visit www.farmland.org.

— Adapted from the *American Farmland Trust*

‘working it out, figuring it out and sticking it out,’ this easement helped us to achieve our goals of not only preventing the often inevitable dilution of agricultural lands due to generational splits, but to expand our operation to the point that we will have an opportunity to pass on economically viable agricultural businesses to our young children.”

“The conservation of private ranch and farmlands through voluntary conservation easements held by local, private land trusts is the most effective and efficient use of limited public dollars for habitat conservation,” said Pamela Dewell, executive director of the WSGLT. “When we can also help facilitate the generational transfer of Wyoming’s working ranches, preserve our agricultural heritage and inject dollars into our rural communities, too, it’s a grand slam.”

The Conservation Fund acquired easements on both properties with funding from the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), a federal program managed by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provides matching funds for the purchase of agricultural easements on land. The matching funds were provided by the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT), the Jonah Interagency Mitigation Office, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Knobloch Family Foundation and other private donors.

“The Natural Resources Conservation Service was thrilled to be able to once again partner with The Conservation Fund to conserve, in perpetuity, a large working ranch,” said Xavier Montoya, NRCS state conservationist. “Thanks to the foresight of proactive producers and our tremendous conservation partners, we’re beginning to conserve entire watersheds that provide important sage-grouse habitat and critical winter range for our big-game herds. Above all, these efforts ensure that our ranching families can continue to provide those and many other natural resource benefits to Wyoming.”

“As Wyomingites, we cherish our open spaces, wildlife habitat and ranching heritage, and this important project further fulfills the mission of the Wyoming Wildlife & Natural Resource Trust — to enhance and conserve wildlife habitat and natural resource values throughout the state,” said Steve Meadows, District 9 board member for the WWNRT.

“The Budd-Espenscheid family’s continued dedication to holistic resource management practices that improve the health of their land has served as a model to other ranchers in the Upper Green River Valley,” said Eric Decker, project coordinator for Jonah and Pinedale Anticline Interagency Office. “We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this effort and hope that other ranching families aspiring to conserve their working lands

and enhance the protection of important wildlife habitat will be encouraged by this success.”

The Conservation Fund and a host of partners launched an initiative in 2008 to conserve and enhance key wildlife habitat and agricultural lands in Wyoming’s Upper Green River Valley. To date, The Conservation Fund has worked with numerous public and private partners to

conserve and enhance more than 25,000 acres of private land in the Green River Valley.

About the fund

The Conservation Fund has protected nearly 7 million acres across America.

The WSGLT holds close to 170,000 acres of working lands under easement. Founded in 2000 by the 140-year old

Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the Stock Growers Land Trust is the ninth largest of 1,659 regional land trusts in the United States.



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