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NEWS FALL 2023

MLR'S ACCELERATE AG LAND CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

HELP AG FAMILIES ACHIEVE THEIR CONSERVATION AND BUSINESS GOALS

Family farms and ranches

define Montana and provide many of the state's signature views, critical wildlife habitat, and wide-open spaces. Often, families can't take advantage of the federal tax incentives for conservation easement donations and need cash to meet their conservation and business goals. In these cases, MLR partners with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help fund these easement purchases.

This summer, MLR worked extensively with eight Montana farm and ranch families to identify over 24,000 acres of important working land we hope to protect in partnership with the NRCS over the next year. Conserving these properties will protect rich soils and grasslands, multi-generation ranching operations, and important wildlife habitats



Lia Biondo

across four counties facing high risk of subdivision and development.

The process of applying for NRCS funding is a long one and increasing the number of projects MLR will work on in 2024 requires a significant amount of resources.

MLR made a commitment to accelerate this work to utilize the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act's "once in a generation" investment in ag land easement funding available for Montana agriculture families to protect a record-breaking number of ranches over the next three years.

The estimated cost to expand MLR's work on ag land projects is \$1.5 million. This was an unbudgeted expense and donations are still needed to expand project manager capacity, legal drafting and easement review capabilities, and other related expenses incurred to complete the conservation easements.

Please consider making a contribution to help fund this work today. Many thanks to the dozens of supporters who have already donated.

GIVE ONLINE

Use the camera on your phone to scan this code, or visit mtlandreliance.org/donate



Protecting Montana's Open Landscapes

NEWS

FALL 2023

Tim Murphy

THE BOX ELDER RANCH A LEGACY GIFT FOR THE GENERATIONS

Sara Campbell, a beloved central Montana landowner, passed last year and gifted a 10,000-acre ranch near Lewistown as a remarkable estate donation to The Montana Land Reliance (MLR).

The Box Elder Ranch, which is forever protected by an MLR conservation easement, lies on the north slope of the Judith Mountains with over 20 miles of perennial and seasonal creeks, a cattle operation, and key wildlife habitat.

Relatively unchanged since its creation, the Box Elder Ranch has a rich history. The ranch lands were a gathering place for many Native American tribes and then settlers during the homesteading of Montana. It is believed that the ranch was established by William Fergus, an immigrant from Lanarkshire, Scotland, and the brother of James Fergus, the founder of Fergus County. William's daughter Ellen married O.J. Romundstad, and the Romundstad family owned and operated the ranch until the 1950s when Vernon Taylor Sr. purchased it.

Over the years, the ranch passed down through the Taylor family, with Vernon Jr. eventually selling to his niece Sara in 1997; who then partnered with MLR in 2010 to protect the property with a conservation easement.

After working with the family to honor Sara's wishes and the ranch's history, MLR conducted a lengthy search to find the Box Elder's new owner, one who will honor the commitments to keep the property intact and operating as a working ranch.

Sara's legacy will live on in the landscapes that have been forever protected and within agricultural families across the state. This remarkable gift creates an increase in funding for MLR's mission and will help to forever protect Montana's wide-open spaces for all future generations.

MLR always has and always will rely on families and landowners to sustain its vital work to protect agricultural lands, critical habitat, and unparalleled open spaces from development. The Box Elder Ranch estate gift and sale proceeds will help MLR keep its promise to steward in perpetuity over 1.2 million

acres of Montana working lands – and significantly supports its goal of protecting two million acres by 2040. This critical mission requires major investments, and the Campbell family hopes it will inspire other landowners to make a legacy gift to protect Montana forever.

Gifts of this magnitude are not workable for everyone, but legacy gifts of any kind will help MLR meet and exceed its conservation goal to keep Montana, *Montana...* forever.

Planned gifts to MLR may come in all sizes and different forms including property, gifts from individual retirement accounts, charitable gift annuities, and more. Please consider a legacy gift to The Montana Land Reliance and ensure your commitment to Montana lasts long beyond our years. Call us at 406-443-7027 to discuss your legacy.

MLR would like to extend sincere thanks to Sara's family for allowing us to share her story and legacy with MLR's friends and family.



MLR STAFF IN THE FIELD

Matt Bell, Tracking Bat Health

The Montana Land Reliance's GIS Coordinator Matt Bell has been mapping easements and managing MLR's geospatial data since 2013.

Matt's mastery of complex software and geospatial data systems is impressive. But it's Matt's volunteer work identifying bats by their acoustic signals and advising MLR easement landowners on ethically and effectively removing bats from ranch structures that keeps his phone ringing.

"Bats are one of the most important wild animals when it comes to agriculture in North America," Matt said. "The insect control bats provide saves agricultural operations in the U.S. an estimated \$3.7 billion annually, according to a recent USGS study."

Matt has been a volunteer educator with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Landowners like Denny and Kitty Kellogg of Bigfork recognize the benefits of having bats on their property and are eager to assist in efforts to protect the species.



Thom Bridge

Find out more about the study Matt and Mark are assisting with at the North American Bat Monitoring Program online at nabatmonitoring.org.

Acoustic monitoring allows Matt to determine the species and number of bats in specific locations.

for the past 11 years and has led bat education programs and bat walks across the state. When bat biologists asked for help collecting data on bat species at risk of decline due to white nose syndrome four years ago, Matt jumped at the opportunity to help.

This work includes setting up acoustic monitoring stations to record bat echolocation in specific locations across the state. Matt, with the help of MLR's Mark Schiltz (Bigfork office), identified which MLR easements were close to these locations and reached out to landowners to gauge their interest in participating. After four nights of recordings, the monitoring stations are retrieved and the recorded bat calls are analyzed to determine the species and relative number of bats. This effort will continue annually to identify changes.

With the recent popularization of commercially available, low-cost bat detectors, anyone can now listen to echolocating bats in the night sky. With handheld monitoring devices such as a tiny microphone plugged into an iPad, Matt can walk around a pond at night, listen to bat echolocation, and compile a list of bat species in the area.

Most landowners recognize the benefits of having bats on their property and are eager to assist in efforts to protect the species from threats like white nose syndrome, a fungus caused disease responsible for decimating entire bat populations when infections occur.

The only annoyance Matt hears in the field is when bats choose a human home to roost in. Old ranch houses and barns make for comfortable places for bats to sleep during the day and raise their young.

"Bats and humans should live in different houses," Matt says. "I'm always happy to offer landowners advice on effective bat exclusion techniques that keep both landowners and bats safe."

When pressed to pick just one bat as his favorite, it's the less common spotted bat with giant pink ears and a plumage resembling a skunk that ranks number one. This bat prefers open, undeveloped habitat and enjoys Montana's open landscapes. Being the only bat you can hear echolocating with the unaided ear makes it particularly special.

Matt encourages all Montanans to take a keen interest in this often misunderstood but agriculturally important group of mammals.



TRUSTED LAND MANAGEMENT ADVISER

Pat Flanary, MLR Land Steward

Pat Flanary is a Montana Land Reliance Land Steward in Eureka, monitoring conservation easements in the northwest corner of the state for the past seven years.

Pat's job description calls for annual monitoring visits to MLR easement properties to assess and record compliance with the conservation easement. But Pat's 32 years of silviculture expertise as a forester with the U.S. Forest Service in Montana and Alaska regularly pivots him from monitor to trusted adviser.

With only a few agricultural lands in his monitoring portfolio, Pat is largely responsible for stewarding easements MLR holds on large forested parcels, many in prime locations near Glacier National Park and down into the Flathead Valley.

Pat takes great satisfaction helping landowners understand the big picture of managing their forested lands. And he is even more satisfied when a landowner takes a keen interest in stewardship and engages with MLR to keep forests healthy.

"What's going on with my trees and what should I do about it?" is a question Pat hears regularly and working towards resilient forests is his specialty.

"I coach how to treat the forest as a whole, as a dynamic environment where you can gain insight into how it's functioning," Pat says. "I help landowners understand what they have and to appreciate that forests are seldom the same from year to year. They are constantly changing."

Pat's field knowledge is in high demand as property owners are taking a greater interest in actively managing their forest ecosystems during drought conditions with increased insect activity. In addition, many landowners are interested in how they can mitigate wildfire risk on their easements.

"MLR's stewardship program is about a lot more than monitoring and compliance," said Will Trimbath, MLR Stewardship Director. "We form a forever partnership with landowners and our partners in Lincoln and Flathead counties get invaluable help with forest management planning when they turn to Pat."

At the end of the monitoring season, Pat's most proud of the hours spent advising landowners on their plans to keep forests healthy and putting these plans into action.



"I coach how to treat the forest as a whole... I help landowners understand that forests are seldom the same from year to year."

—Pat Flanary

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