MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

*Protecting Montana's Open Landscapes*

NEWS WINTER 2025

# A THANK YOU TO THE LAND

**When Ruth Lott decided to conserve River Ranch, the first thing she did was call her neighbors.**

"I hosted a gathering at my home so everyone could hear what Chad had to say," she said, referring to MLR's Southwest Manager. "I'm hoping my decision to conserve this place will have a domino effect."

Originally from the East Coast, Ruth witnessed firsthand how rapidly things can change. "I watched my very rural part of Chester County, Pennsylvania become swallowed by development almost as dramatically as Bozeman has," she said. "You have to live it to understand how quickly the land can vanish." The experience inspired her to conserve her place in Pennsylvania – Snapfinger Farm – before she moved west.

That small meeting seems to have planted a seed. Her neighbor, whose property lines up with Ruth's across the river, has made plans to conserve her land. Together, the properties will create a haven of nearly 400 acres for moose, deer, turkeys, sandhill cranes, herons, and countless other wild neighbors, protecting both banks along roughly a mile of the Jefferson River.

Conservation is often thought of in terms of numbers – acres of land, miles of streambank, populations of wildlife – but what's harder to calculate is the community it supports and strengthens.

*"Being connected to the land has given me a great life. Conserving it is how I say thank you."*

In this area, neighbors look out for each other. The young rancher who grazes his cows on River Ranch in the summer also manages the irrigation of the pastures, and another friend makes sure the hay Ruth puts up for her horses is cut, baled, and stacked.

She was delighted by the flexibility of the plan MLR offered her, noting that conservation easements don't restrict all use. In fact, they help sustain local economies and a rural way of life.

In many ways, the decision to protect her land was simply another expression of the way Ruth has lived her life. She believes in rolling up her sleeves and asking how things can be better – not just for herself, but for everyone.

"Change is hard. Growth is hard," she said. "But when people come together around a shared vision, amazing things can happen."

Community is at the heart of her story. From helping improve the local grocery store's offerings ("Cowboys eat quiche now," she joked) to supporting the arts, her actions are rooted in a consistent ethic: communities thrive when people care enough to contribute, and to collaborate. "It's about raising your hand in a happy way," she said.

That belief in doing more than what's expected is one she returns to often, referencing a blog post by Seth Godin on the idea of "unreasonable effort." As an example, she mentioned a chamber music concert that she handmade note-shaped chocolates for – 422 of them – so there would be two on every seat. "All I did was make chocolate," she recalled with a smile, "but everyone loved it." That kind of effort isn't sustainable all the time, she admitted, but sometimes, going the extra mile creates joy and connection in a way that lasts.

That same spirit shows up in her involvement with the arts. As a board member of Montana Chamber Music and one of the founders of Gold Junction Presents, she sees a lot of value in bringing the arts out into rural communities. She introduced Montana Shakespeare in the Parks to Whitehall and was relentless in persuading Gold Junction Presents to host classical music concerts in her community. She believes art and conservation share common ground: they both unite people around something worth preserving.

At 80, she's still working hard and looking ahead. Her land has given her a great life, and conserving it felt like the right way to give something back. Today, she shares her appreciation with three beautiful horses, Henry the rescue pig, Buddy the Jack Russell, Tigger the cat, Rowdy the Golden Retriever puppy, eight unnamed chickens, and the wildlife that feel safe enough to wander by her back deck – all alongside her wonderful neighbors and community.

"Being connected to the land has given me a great life," she says. "Conserving it is how I say thank you."

# Paying It Forward: One Angler's Legacy for Montana's Open Spaces


**Dan Keifer is someone who forms deep connections with the places that move him.** A lifelong outdoorsman, he found joy early on in camping, fishing, and exploring wild landscapes across the country. But when he first visited Yellowstone National Park in 1999, he knew that Montana's wide-open spaces would be part of his life from then on.

That first visit sparked a pattern. A fishing trip with a friend turned into annual visits – time spent chasing trout and soaking in the unbroken vistas that define the state. His love of fly fishing eventually led him to the Madison Valley, where he began to notice how quickly development was changing the views he loved.

"As much as I like fishing and river corridors, they lose their beauty and relevance when the surrounding landscape gets chopped up," he said.

A webinar on large mammal migration became a turning point. Until then, Dan hadn't fully understood the role that private, working lands play in keeping Montana's wildlife on the move. "It's the ranches that keep those big landscapes intact," he said. "They're the connectors between all that public land. They're the winter range."

That discovery – paired with his own research and conversations with friends in Montana – led him to The Montana Land Reliance, and eventually to a planned gift to help protect the very places that have shaped his life. What makes Dan's generosity especially meaningful is that he has never lived in Montana and doesn't own property here. From his home in Pennsylvania, he feels a deep responsibility to give back to the landscapes that have given him so much.

"It's a way to pay it forward," he said. "Montana wouldn't be the same without those vistas, that open space, the wildlife, the riverfronts. I want to help keep that intact."

*"A planned gift lets you plant a stake in the ground for the future."*

He has seen too many places elsewhere become loved to death – crowded, fragmented, or stripped of what once made them special. Planned giving, he believes, offers a powerful way for anyone who loves this state to contribute. "There are always hurdles to charitable giving. But when something matters to you, you ask, 'What can I do?' A planned gift lets you plant a stake in the ground for the future."

For Dan, supporting Montana's ranching families is essential to keeping the state's iconic landscapes whole. Their work, he says, is the thread that ties together the rivers, the mountains, the wildlife, and the open valleys. His gift honors that work.

MLR is deeply grateful for Dan's vision and generosity. His commitment helps ensure that long after his many trips to the Madison, the places that moved him will continue to move others. It is, in his words, simply paying it forward.

# Your Donation Impact: Helping to Keep Montana, Montana

**Every donation to MLR supports our work of partnering with landowners to protect some of Montana's most productive, beautiful, and threatened lands.**

This year, we anticipate conserving a total of 75,000 acres, making 2025 our second record-setting year in a row. At the same time, we are achieving greater impact per dollar, as it costs MLR an average of just $39 to protect one acre of open space. And because MLR does not receive any federal funding for operations, we depend on the generosity of private donors like you to raise the entirety of our operating budget.

Your investment fuels more than acres conserved – it powers people, strategies, and innovation. Over the last two years, MLR has strengthened its team, streamlined its conservation process, and expanded outreach to landowners statewide. As a result, we're doing more conservation per dollar donated than ever before, keeping working ranches intact, protecting critical wildlife habitat, and ensuring Montana's landscapes remain open and wild for generations to come.

Interest among farm and ranch families in conserving their land is at an all-time high and continues to grow. As Montana faces rapidly increasing development pressures, your support will help ensure MLR can meet this demand efficiently and effectively in 2026.

Every donation, no matter the size, helps keep Montana, Montana. Make a gift today and you can help MLR stay ahead of rapid development and protect Montana's future acre by acre, family by family, before it's too late.

**Learn more about how you can support our work at mtlandreliance.org/SaveMTag**

# Thank You to Our Retiring Land Stewards

**As MLR wraps up another season of monitoring visits, we'd like to recognize and celebrate three seasonal land stewards who are retiring from the team this year.** These stewards have been an essential part of MLR's on-the-ground presence, visiting properties across the state, answering landowner questions, and helping ensure that each conservation easement continues to function exactly as intended.

While monitoring is central to these positions, the heart of stewardship lies in the relationships built over time. By returning to visit the same family properties year after year, land stewards become familiar, trusted faces – people landowners know they can turn to for guidance and support. Their work strengthens the long-term partnerships that make MLR's mission durable.

"Our stewardship program relies on people who can combine technical expertise with a genuine commitment to the communities we serve," said Stewardship Director Colin Cooney. "This year's departing stewards brought both in abundance. Their care for the land and their connections with landowners have been invaluable, and we are truly grateful for everything they've contributed."

MLR extends its heartfelt thanks to Andy, Cathey, and Kevin for their years of dedication!

*"My twenty years with MLR gave me work that meant a great deal to me. I felt honored to be a part of an effort that kept open space, wildlife habitat, and working lands healthy. The people I met left a lasting impression, and the time spent on Montana's landscapes brought moments I will always remember, including more than a few side-by-side rides and one unforgettable flight over an elk herd. I look back on those years with a lasting gratitude and more than a few stories that bring out a quiet laugh."*

**–Andy Darling**

*"I am deeply grateful to the landowners who have chosen to maintain conservation easements, their commitment has been vital to preserving this great place where we live. Getting to know each landowner has been a truly rewarding aspect of my work. It has been my pleasure to work with such a dedicated group of folks at MLR and I am grateful to have been part of this important work for the state of Montana!"*

**–Cathey Hardin**

*"My time with MLR has been very rewarding. The entire team is dedicated to protecting the open spaces across Montana, and it has been a pleasure working with them and the many conservation landowners."*

**–Kevin Suzuki**


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# NEWS
WINTER 2025

## LEAVE A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

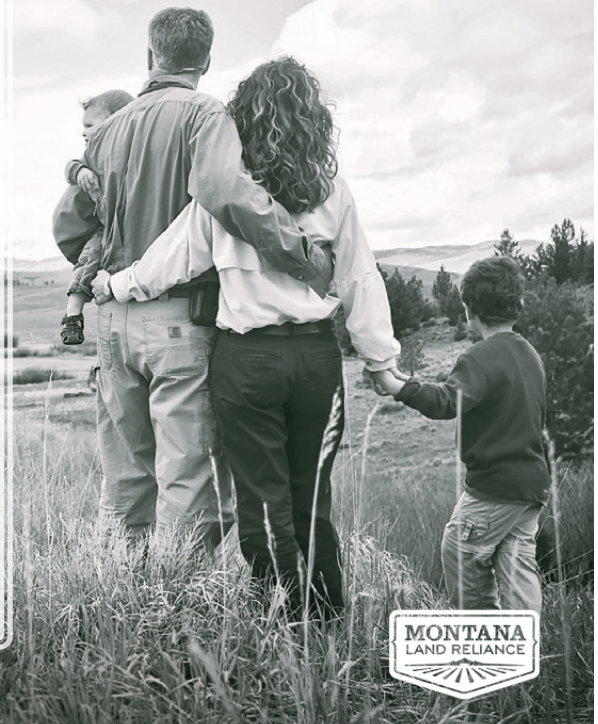
**It takes all of us** to keep MLR's promise of enduring protection of agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open space for generations to come.

MLR's work would not be possible without those who have included MLR in their overall financial and estate plans through planned gifts such as bequests, gifts of real and personal property, gift annuities, charitable trusts, life estate gifts, and more.

**You can leave a lasting legacy** of conservation with a gift of any size or type—with greater impact than you thought possible. Many types of planned gifts also qualify you for membership in the Forever Montana Society, which pays tribute to those who have helped MLR create an enduring legacy of conservation and offers special membership benefits. Providing lasting conservation through planned giving enables you to support MLR's work while providing yourself with financial benefits.

MLR welcomes the opportunity to work with advisors of donors who are considering planning a gift to MLR. We are happy to offer fully confidential expertise and assistance in finding the best fit for a gift that matches the donor's financial, philanthropic, and estate planning objectives.

**Please contact us** for more information or to start a conversation about how we can help during the gift planning process.




**Call 406-443-7027 or visit mtlandreliance.org**

*Lynn Donaldson*