

LOOKING TOWARD THE NEXT MILLION ACRES



2019 ANNUAL REPORT



OUR MISSION



The Montana Land Reliance (MLR) partners with private landowners to permanently protect agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open space.

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The immediate accomplishments of MLR's conservation work are measured in miles of streambank preserved and acres of land protected.

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The lasting benefits of MLR's work are the perpetuation of a lifestyle and an economy that rely on responsibly managed private land and the increasingly valuable Montana open spaces that will continue to nourish the spirit of future generations.



THE NEXT MILLION ACRES

The Montana Land Reliance (MLR) is looking to the future. Protecting the first million acres took 40 years to achieve, and we are looking to conserve the second million acres over the next 20 years. To accomplish this task, we will be innovative, we will enter into more and diverse partnerships, and we will bring a younger generation into our fold. MLR is adapting and incorporating ideas that will result in conserving working lands and strengthening our relationships with donors.

In 2019, MLR hired Managing Director, Jordan Vana, Eastern Manager, Brad Hansen, and in 2020, we plan to hire two new staff in development and stewardship. Prior to MLR, Jordan worked with a number of leading conservation organizations in the West, including: Colorado Open Lands, Colorado Conservation Trust, and the Green River Valley Land Trust in Wyoming (now part of the Jackson Hole Land Trust).

For the past four years, Brad worked at the Montana Historical Society as a grant manager and historian. In 2018, Brad published the book *Nothing Like Riding a Good Horse in New Country: Memoirs of a Woman Outfitter in Montana* based on the life of Mary Faith Hoeffner, one of the earliest female outfitters in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Two thousand nineteen was truly a banner year for conservation. At over 66,000 acres this past year alone, MLR and committed landowners protected more acres with more conservation easements

than in any single year since 2007. This past year provides MLR with the exact kind of momentum needed to protect another million acres!

Also in 2019, as many of you know, MLR published *A Million Acres: Montana Writers Reflect on Land and Open Space*, an anthology of essays and short stories celebrating MLR's conservation of one million acres of agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open spaces. If you haven't picked up a copy yet, I'd encourage you to visit Riverbend Publishing's website or your local bookstore. They make great gifts and your dollars will support the work of MLR.

As we look to the next 20 years, MLR's board and staff feels ready to take on the conservation challenges of the future. We are staffed for this purpose and ready to move forward helping Montana farm and ranch families continue farming and ranching. The mission won't change, but as we may see fewer donated conservation easements, our methodology must evolve. We have to be alert to new tools and strategies such as Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) that use federal dollars to protect the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses.

In this report you'll hear from Abby Christiaens and Kari Berg, who are both members of multi-generational ranch families. Both Abby and Kari, with their families, ranch properties placed into conservation easements by their parents.

They share an extraordinary appreciation for agriculture and a deep love for the land.



I'm also excited for you to meet our conservation award winners, Garry King and John and Cheryl Dale. Garry is the recipient of MLR's 2019 William F. Long Conservation Award – an award given to landowners who have worked to permanently protect significant bird habitat. Garry, with the help and support of his neighbors in Denton, Montana, planted over 85,000 trees in 10 years to improve upland bird habitat. It makes me tired just thinking about it.

John and Cheryl Dale are the recipients of MLR's Conservation Award. John and Cheryl's property on the North Fork of the Blackfoot River helps protect the Crown of the Continent, one of the only places in the nation that has all the original flora and fauna that it had 400 years ago.

When I look back on my life there is nothing that makes me as proud as working to conserve the lands of Montana with MLR. I'm excited about the future and I can't wait to look around the next corner and see what it holds for us.

– George Olsen, MLR Board President

We will be innovative, we will enter into more and diverse partnerships, and we will bring a younger generation into our fold.

SINCE 1978

The Montana Land Reliance has worked with private landowners all across Montana to meet their conservation goals, including the protection of major watersheds critical to agriculture and wildlife habitat.

1,137,062 acres of ecologically, agriculturally, and historically important land, and 1,829 miles of streambank, are now protected under MLR's 897 conservation easements.

Crop/Hay/Pasture	187,044
Range/Forest	950,018
Elk Habitat	584,423
Wetlands	44,652
Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem	309,857
Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem	20,089

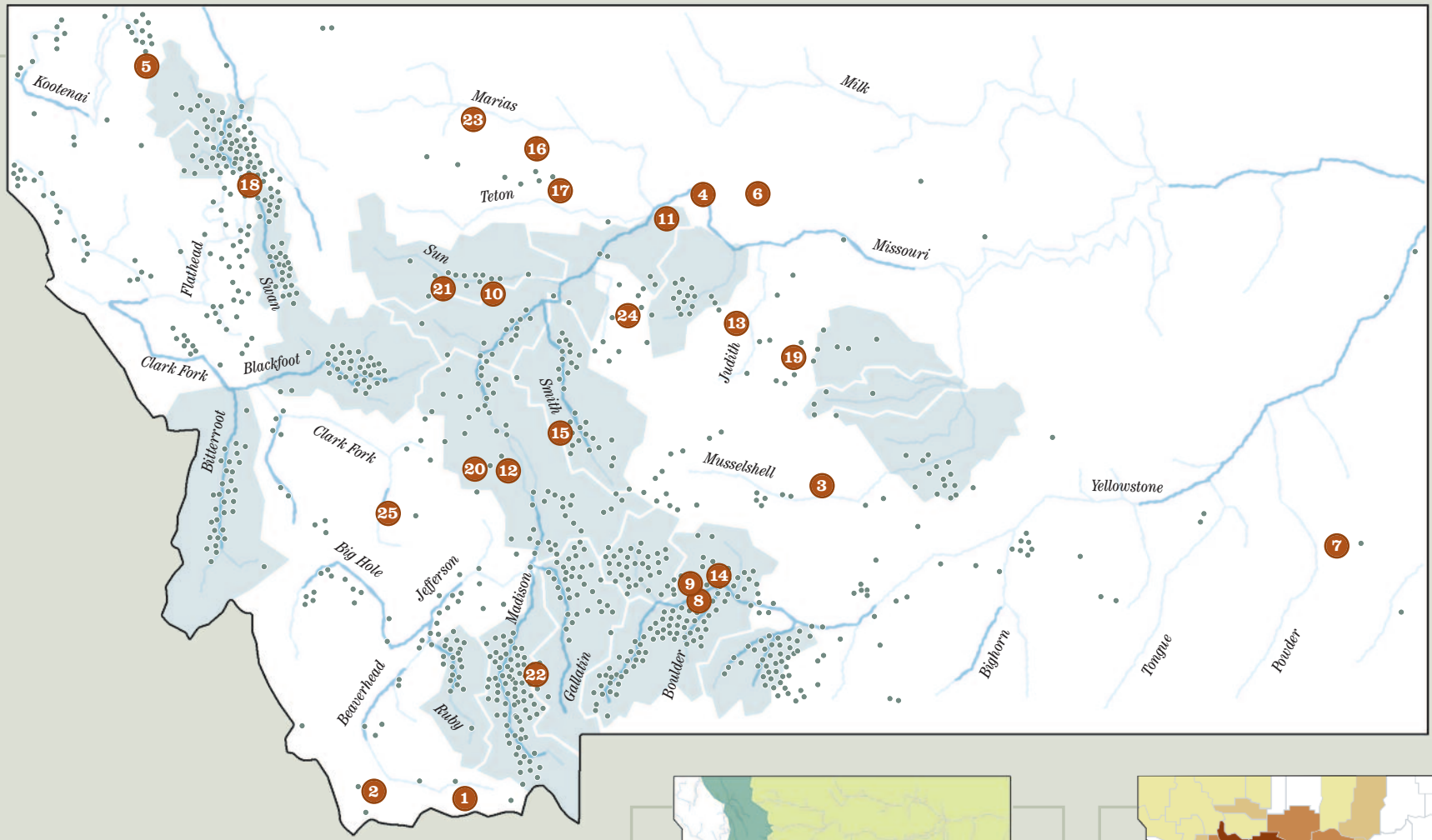
1,137,062 ACRES

2019 EASEMENTS

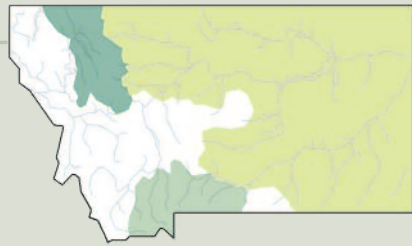
1 Taft Property	160
2 Smith (Troy) Property II	289
3 Raths Livestock	11,230
4 ABN Ranch	5,335
5 Schaub Property	238
6 Weaver (Stan) Property	9,871
7 Ringling Ranch III	19,195
8 Engwis I	3,768
9 Engwis II	1,774
10 Boyle Property	120
11 Tall Grass Ranch	490
12 Masolo Property	1,452
13 King (Garry) Property*	742
14 Cosgriff Property	625
15 JLR & C Ranch LLC	218
16 Circle S Ranch IV	753
17 Perry (Joe) Property II	639
18 Kellogg Property	16
19 Henderson Property	2,088
20 McEvoy Property III	8
21 Kenyon Property	41
22 Moonlight Territory Holdings	2,463
23 Thayer (Ross) Property	389
24 Wheeler (Pat) Property	1,284
25 Dry Cottonwood Creek Ranch	3,396

*see story on page 16

66,584 ACRES

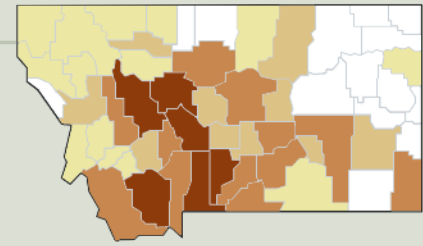


- MLR EASEMENT
- ⬜ MAJOR WATERSHEDS
- BLUE AND RED RIBBON TROUT STREAMS



ECOSYSTEMS

- Northern Continental Divide
- Greater Yellowstone
- Northern Great Plains

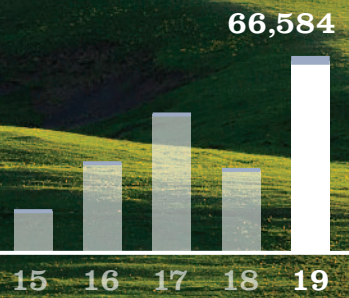


CONSERVED ACREAGE BY COUNTY

- 1-10,000 acres
- 10,001-25,000 acres
- 25,001-50,000 acres
- More than 50,000 acres

LOOKING TOWARD THE NEXT MILLION ACRES

TOTAL ACRES
PROTECTED
ANNUALLY





Jason Savage

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, The Montana Land Reliance (MLR) hired me to take photos of their conserved properties throughout the state. I spent weeks driving around and hiking on ranches with my camera in some of the most beautiful places in Montana.

I know, right? How did I get so lucky? Don't tell anyone at MLR, but I probably would have done the job for gas money.

MLR supplied me with a GPS app on my phone with maps of the conservation easements so I could find my way around. Frequently, I'd pull off the highway as I was driving to a ranch when something would catch my eye so I could take photos; the clouds, an eagle on a roadkill deer, a silhouette of a horse off in the distance, or pronghorn grazing in a field. If you've ever driven somewhere in Montana with a photographer, you know that it takes us a little longer to get places.

No matter where I was in the state, the GPS app would inform me that I was either right next to property protected by MLR, or very close to one. Often, there would be an entire contiguous block of ranches in easements, usually connected to a significant chunk of public land.

If only people could see this map as they drive across the state! They would be able to see that the breathtaking working lands, wildlife habitat, and wide-open spaces they were admiring were protected. They would feel at ease knowing that their kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids would be able to gaze out their windows at the same gorgeous view. They would realize that private land conservation is inextricably connected to the way of life that we all cherish in Montana.



MLR can rattle off a list of numbers that speak to their accomplishments over the last 42 years. Protecting over one million acres in conservation easements is the most striking achievement; one million acres of open space and agricultural land is now protected in perpetuity for future generations. MLR has now blown by the million acre mark and has conserved over 1.1 million acres only two years later.

Often times, numbers are hard for our minds to fully comprehend. Numbers are abstract. What does one million acres look like? I Googled it and a million acres is about the size of Rhode Island. It is almost the size of Grand Canyon National Park. If the land MLR protected was put together into a national park it would almost make the top ten list based on size.

“When I return home, it is with love and longing, needing to hear the hush of the prairie and see the calm of the trees, the silent journey of the hawk floating above me in the pasture, the breeze that brings the wheat stalks to life until the waves in the field resemble the sea.”

—Janet Skeslien Charles,
“My Father’s Cathedral,” *A Million Acres*

In terms of acres conserved, MLR is the largest land trust in Montana, the largest agricultural land trust in the country, and after hitting the one million acre mark in 2017, MLR became the largest state-based land trust in the nation.

MLR has partnered with over 900 landowners to protect 1,829 miles of stream and river frontage, 584,423 acres of elk habitat, 44,652 acres of wetlands, 950,018 acres of range and forest land, and 187,044 acres of hay, crop, and pasture land. These conservation numbers are truly remarkable.

Numbers matter, as Kelly Ramirez, Bozeman resident and member of MLR’s Future Montana Committee (FMC), a volunteer group of young professionals committed to MLR’s mission and who are helping MLR reach a younger generation, points out. It is just as important to answer these questions: What do those numbers feel like? What is the story behind them? How do we put a million acres into words?

“The answer to these questions gets us closer to the meaning of the work that MLR does every day. It is the connection and the emotional ties to the land that drives MLR’s work and motivates private landowners to put their land in a conservation easement,” Kelly told me. “It also brings in people who care about land conservation but aren’t necessarily landowners.”

One of the ways that MLR has put those numbers into words over the past year was through the creation of *A Million Acres: Montana Writers Reflect on Land and Open Space*, an anthology of essays, memoirs, and short stories from 20 Montana authors together with photographs published in partnership with Riverbend Publishing in Helena.

I might be biased, but Montana is not only blessed with some of the most striking landscapes in the world, but also blessed with some of the most talented writers. These storytellers are able to capture what numbers could never convey; the shared emotions and values that bring us together to protect our most precious resources.

The stories capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Authors describe the devastation of losing the family land, the terror of a death on a river, the joys of landing a big fish, the unlucky backcountry encounters with grizzly bears, and an out-of-stater’s happiness at making Montana her home. Even the stories that recount some of the hardest life experiences reflect the fundamental nature of what philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “In difficult times, carry something beautiful in your heart.”

For many of us, what we carry in our hearts is our love for this place, whether we were born here, moved here, or visit when we can.

“I think almost every Montanan I know feels relieved when they return to Montana, when the plane touches down, or your car crosses the border. There is a visceral connection, regardless of where you were born,” Kelly explained as she talked about her return to Montana after seven years away. “Helping people understand that the reason we have that connection is that generations of landowners made a commitment to protecting that open space.”

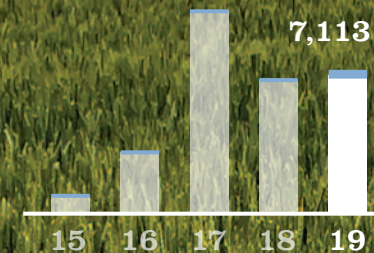
When Kelly was speaking, I was reminded of my many trips home to Billings from college in Spokane and graduate school in Denver. The minute I saw the Montana state sign indicating I was about to cross the border, my throat would tighten, and I’d have to hold back tears. That feeling has never gone away.



Alexis Bonogofsky

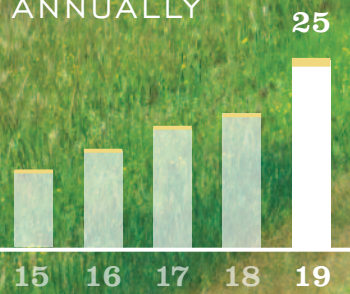
Wheat field east of Billings

CROP/HAY/PASTURE
ACRES PROTECTED
ANNUALLY





NUMBER OF
EASEMENTS
ANNUALLY



Abby Christiaens rode around in the front seat of the pickup with her dad as a little girl every day to check cows and told me she had the perfect childhood.

“When you grow up doing it, you have it in your soul,” she said. I heard her throat catch. “Sometimes when I have a hard time falling asleep at night, I envision myself driving around the ranch. I can see home in my head. I can close my eyes and see every corner of this place. It’s just...the being here. It’s necessary for me.” I asked her if she always knew she wanted to return after college. “It was the only game plan,” she said.

Abby is the daughter of Jeff and Bea Raths, third-generation Montana cattle ranchers and winners of MLR’s 2018 William F. Long Conservation Award; an award given to landowners who have worked to permanently protect significant bird habitat. Abby and her husband Robin are the fourth generation to ranch on their property in the beautiful sagebrush country west of Roundup, Montana.

It’s that sagebrush country that sticks in my heart too. I was reminded of Janet Skeslien Charles’ essay in *A Million Acres* when she wrote, “Montana is known for its majestic mountains, but I prefer the plains.”

As I talked to Abby I could immediately tell she was her father’s daughter. I spent quite a bit of time at Jeff and Bea’s coffee table the year before to interview them about their award. Abby had an easy laugh and there was no hesitation in her voice. I had accidentally called her parents’ house during our scheduled interview time and ended up shooting the breeze with Jeff for quite a while.

“I thought you were gonna come out and watch the sage grouse last year,” he said.

“This year,” I told him. “I’ll make it happen this year.”

I asked Abby if she likes to watch birds as much as her mom does, remembering my conversation with Bea about all the different types of birds she sees on their place.

“Well...I wouldn’t go that far,” she laughed, “Mom’s kind of a fanatic but I do enjoy getting out there. We get up at the butt-crack of dawn and go out to the sage grouse leks every year.”

The conservation easement on the Raths property exemplifies the new tools that MLR is using to protect more agricultural land in Montana as the number of donated easements decline.

The easement on their ranch was the culmination of a five-year process that the Raths and MLR Managing Director, Kendall Van Dyk will readily say was long and sometimes arduous, but rewarding. The easement was accomplished through the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program and Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) Program. It protected 11,230 acres of the Raths’ property in a sage grouse conservation easement. The ranch is literally ground zero for the large bird’s habitat. There are 22 leks on and around the property including one of the largest leks in Montana.

When I asked Abby what she thought of the easement, she told me that it opened up a lot of opportunities because it allowed them to have more freedom with the funds available and helped them stay in ranching. “It lets us keep operating the way we always have. It keeps the land free and being used for agricultural purposes. It’s a win-win. There isn’t a downside.”

I asked her if she hoped her son would be the fifth generation to ranch; Abby is pregnant with her first child. “It’s a lot of pressure to come back. I don’t want him to feel that, but if he decided to, that would make us very, very happy.”

Another remarkable woman who is taking over her family ranch came to mind as I was talking to Abby. Kari Berg Marks and her husband Charlie are the fifth generation to ranch on her family's place along the south fork of the Musselshell in central Montana near the town of Lennep. Their kids, Claire and Kellen, will hopefully be the sixth generation to ranch this land.

I met Kari a year before when I interviewed her parents, Rick and Gayle. To ensure that the ranch stays intact, the family put it under conservation easement with MLR in 2006.

“When the last person is gone who grew up crunching across frozen mud with the slap of winter in her face, and who knew from girlhood the scent of a thunderstorm about to break, how the ground creaked when it was thirsty, the fear of a lost cow in the far pasture – when there are no more childhoods like this, humanity will have been struck a blow that will change it forever.”

– Antonia Malchik, “Nothing More than Everything,” *A Million Acres*

Kari has a wide smile, an easy laugh, and she loves cows. When I asked her some of her fondest memories of growing up on the ranch she also brought up riding around in pickups.

“My best and most vivid memories were when we were on the winter schedule. It was a little bit slower go of things. I would go out feeding with my dad almost every morning,” Kari said. “I spent a lot of time looking at cows. Still do.”

I love how much Kari loves cows. She talked about how her family ranch felt so huge as a kid. Even though she was only a hundred yards from the house she felt like she was so far away, in her own world.

“The house that we live in now was my grandparents’ when I was little. I would walk out to the end of the shelter belt that I can see from my window right now. I felt like it was my own special place. I would bounce on branches and the yearlings would all come and check me out,” Kari told me.

The Berg Ranch is breathtaking. The Castle Mountains rise up in the distance and the south fork of the Musselshell River meanders through the valley. The best combination of the mountains and the prairie that you can imagine.

You feel like you might be going back in time when you take the left-hand turn off of Highway 12 and onto Highway 294.

It's a valley you could easily imagine being carved up into smaller and smaller chunks until the wide-open spaces become sliced up by roads, houses, and more traffic. We've all seen it happen in places we love. I remember Kari's mom Gayle telling me about the sense of place in the valley.

“We see all the changes happening in Montana. A valley like this is irreplaceable,” Gayle told me when I visited in 2019.

Kari and her family understand the importance of private land conservation and Kari spends quite a bit of time educating Montana urbanites about the importance of private land conservation. For the last five years, in her position with the Montana CattleWomen, Kari has organized the Montana Ranch Run, a 25-mile race, which takes participants through three ranches in Meagher County. The race serves as a bridge to connect people who never get out in ranch country with rural Montana.

“We get to reach a new audience and spread the message about the importance of agriculture and

private land stewardship. They get to see how we are taking care of the land,” Kari said.

The race moves through the varied landscape of the region and seamlessly links public land and private land. And you never step foot on asphalt.

The desire to keep the valley as intact as possible was passed down to the Berg girls, just like it was passed down to Abby Christiaens. The ranch staying how it has always been, wide open and in agriculture, is the most important thing to the family.

Kari never questioned the conservation easement her parents put on the property.

“To be honest, I’ve been very thankful for it. Some people have that outlook that it limits your opportunities. For us it’s always been like having a financial cushion or insurance policy. Helps us be a little bit braver with our decisions. Every year isn’t quite as stressful for us,” Kari said.



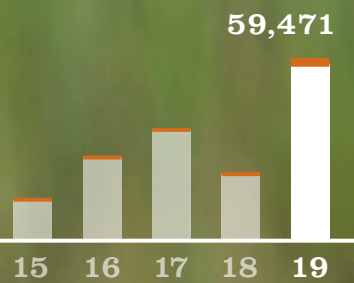
Snow geese

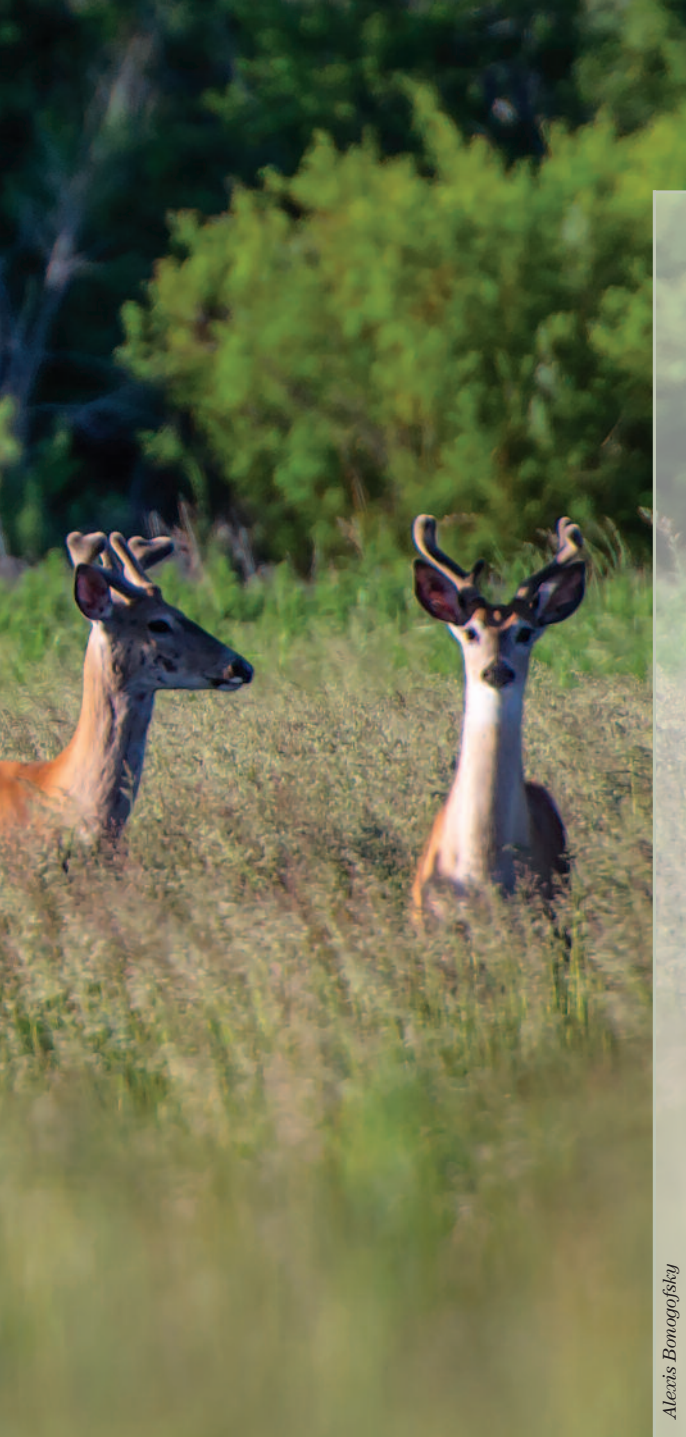


Jason Savage



RANGE/FOREST
ACRES PROTECTED
ANNUALLY





Alexis Bonagorsky

THE NEXT MILLION ACRES

The first million acres is just the start. MLR is looking to the future and MLR's staff and board of directors plan to protect another million acres in the next 20 years. The clock is ticking.

According to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana is losing (on average) more than 34,000 acres of rangeland to development on an annual basis. While some of that rangeland is turning into pastureland, more than 13,000 acres a year is being developed for other uses, most commonly, housing subdivisions. More than 14,500 new subdivisions were approved by local governments over the past 10 years, resulting in more than 1.1 million acres of new development, much of which used to be agricultural lands. Current projections estimate that 200,000 more people will declare Montana home in the next 20 years with more than 100,000 additional homes built in western Montana by 2025.

That's enough to make my heart stop, and not in a good way.

The work MLR does, and does so well, is needed now more than ever. That's why the work that MLR's Future Montana Committee (FMC) is

doing to bring a younger generation into private land conservation is so important. The committee is comprised of young professionals across Montana and the United States who are leaders in their fields, and together, represent a cross-section of Montana's future land-use stakeholders. The members of the committee are working to expand MLR's network of landowners and donors by creating a community of young leaders to build MLR's brand and expand the protection of Montana's unique open spaces.

As MLR looks toward the next million acres, there is a recognition that the landscape of private conservation easements is changing and that compelling storytelling needs to help inspire new and innovative methods of protecting open space.

Errol Rice, a fifth generation Montana rancher and member of FMC, attended an event for MLR in Bozeman in the summer of 2019. He looked around the room and observed that despite diverse backgrounds and differing political ideologies, everyone cared about the same thing: keeping open lands open and keeping agricultural lands in agriculture. That commonality is enough to move mountains.

“I found my people,” Errol said after. In four words, Errol said what we all feel when working on behalf of MLR. Errol and the FMC are very focused on bringing in people who wouldn’t necessarily think they would want to be, or even could be, involved with private land conservation.

Our livelihood, lifestyle, and landscape – the things that make our heart stop – are connected to generations and generations of land stewardship. Connecting those dots and telling those stories will be what helps MLR protect the next million acres.

MLR is mindful that the work carries important obligations of stewardship for each of these second million acres, while at the same time

Our livelihood, lifestyle, and landscape – the things that make our heart stop – are connected to generations and generations of land stewardship. Connecting those dots and telling those stories will be what helps MLR protect the next million acres.

taking a proactive, entrepreneurial, forward-facing approach to protecting agricultural lands, habitat, and open space.

MLR’s twin guiding principles, the perpetual stewardship of the one million acres already under conservation easement, and the critical need to continue to protect the second million acres of agricultural land and open space will require ever-increasing financial resources.

I, for one, look forward to being a part of the next million acres and telling the stories of the landowners, donors, partners, and supporters that keep MLR being the most effective land conservation organization in the country.

Every time I stop along the side of the highway to take photos or sit on the tailgate of my pickup to watch the sunset or the sunrise over my home state, I know that I’m able to do that in part because of MLR’s laser focus on keeping Montana, *Montana*.



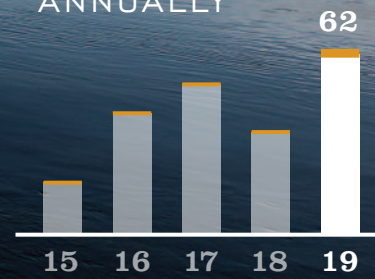
Madison River Valley

Alexis Bonogofsky





MILES OF
STREAMBANK
PROTECTED
ANNUALLY





GARRY KING



When Garry King told me how many trees he had planted on his ranch near Denton, Montana, in a period of ten years, I asked him to repeat himself.

“Eighty-five thousand,” he said again.

At first, I thought he said eight thousand, which still seemed like a hell of a lot of trees to me. I tried to imagine what it would be like to plant 85,000 saplings on my farm. I couldn’t quite wrap my head around that number let alone the time and effort a project like that would take.

“It took us ten years, working pretty hard at it eight months out of the year,” he said. “It was a full-time job.”

Garry’s first trip to Montana was in 1981. It was, he tells me, the year the Bighorn River opened up for fishing. After a couple of weeks fishing his way across Montana he returned home and made a decision. The minute he was able, he was going to move to Montana – the people were great, the fishing and hunting were great, and he could see no reason to live anywhere else.

It seemed natural. His background was in agriculture and he loved the outdoors. He grew up in upstate New York and all he did was hunt and fish as a kid. Garry received an agricultural economics degree from Cornell University in 1964 and was an executive in the coffee and tea

Ring-necked pheasant



industry for much of his career, the last 15 years as head of Standard Coffee Company in New Orleans. In 1992, Garry and his wife Leanne moved permanently to Montana.

Out of all of the places he had been and all of the states he had hunted in, I asked him why he picked Montana.

“Well,” he said, “Montana was unlike any place I’d ever been.”

Garry and Leanne spent nine years in Gallatin County, where he and his brother opened up The Bozeman Angler, a fly-shop on Main Street, which his brother and sister-in-law ran for 25 years. In 1992, he also started the Bozeman Pheasants Forever chapter. Even then, he could see Bozeman was growing, and soon started looking for some property to purchase.

Eventually, after visiting every county in the state, Garry acquired a small farm property in Fergus County near Denton that he had hunted on before. There was pretty good pheasant hunting on his place but he knew it could be better.

Then came the trees. Then came more birds.

Craig Roberts, president and founder of the Lewistown Pheasants Forever chapter, along with Larry Schweitzer, vice president, helped Garry on a plan to improve habitat for birds on his place.

Larry had been doing his own massive tree planting project. He planted 200,000 to 300,000 trees in the greater Fergus County area over many decades.

I had to have Garry repeat that number to me as well.

Assistance from Craig and Larry was instrumental in helping him figure out where to put the shelter belts, windbreaks, food plots, and nesting areas as well as choose what trees to plant that would survive and thrive in central Montana.

“There is no way I could have done this project without their help and encouragement,” Garry told me.

A neighbor lent him a tree planter he made years ago and he had to work fast every year within a three to four-week period to get the trees in the ground. Garry, with the help of his neighbors and the local rod and gun club, planted caragana, Russian olive, silver sage, and rocky mountain juniper. He didn’t have irrigation so he had to rely on Mother Nature bringing rain at the right time.

“You improve habitat for pheasants and you also see all the other animals come in – whitetail deer, mule deer, sharp-tails, and tons of other birds,” Garry told me.

“You improve habitat for pheasants and you also see all the other animals come in.”

The first season he owned the land in 2001, 20 birds were harvested from the property. Now, he says, they get 275 to 300 pheasants and around 60 to 70 people hunt his place every year.

Garry put his property into a conservation easement with The Montana Land Reliance in 2019.

Thirty years of living in Montana has made Garry appreciate the work that goes into taking care of the land and improving it for wildlife and agriculture and he values the ability of hunters to access his land and have a good result from his hard work.

“I don’t charge for hunting. The project was an investment for hunters and sportsman and it was great to do. I wanted to put an easement on it so all that hard work and effort wasn’t going to waste and it wouldn’t turn into a subdivision one day,” Garry told me.

It is because of Garry and people like him that Montana remains one of the best places for upland bird hunting in the country. Because of his efforts, the Reliance awarded him the 2019 William F. Long Conservation Award – an award given to landowners who have worked to permanently protect significant bird habitat.

When I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to say, Garry told me, “There is a heaven, and it is Montana. That’s the God’s honest truth.”



“Without love of the land, conservation lacks meaning or purpose, for only in a deep and inherent feeling for the land can there be dedication in preserving it.” – Siguard Olsen

John Dale was donating to conservation groups before he was even out of high school. A self-taught duck hunter, he understood at an early age the importance of open space and quality habitat for the waterfowl he loved to hunt, and all the other wildlife that shared the space.

“I was fishing before I was walking, literally. I grew up outdoors. I’ve always valued the outdoors. It’s ingrained in me,” John told me from his place in northeastern South Dakota.



His love for the outdoors never waned, and has only grown stronger. The big skies and open country of Montana drew John and his wife Cheryl to the state in the early 60s. They explored and camped in “every nook and cranny of western Montana, the Big Hole Valley and the Ruby Valley, Glacier National Park, the Beaverhead, we went everywhere.”

“The thing about Montana,” John said, “is that we still have the opportunity to preserve these open spaces. Once they are gone, you can’t rebuild them. In many places, especially east of the Mississippi, people don’t even have that option. But here, we do.”

In the late 80s and early 90s, John and Cheryl began looking for some land in Montana. They knew they wanted to spend more time here and wanted a place that exemplified the wild country they cherished. During that search, the first person they met was former MLR managing director Rock Ringling, and the first place they looked was in the Blackfoot Valley. After 15 years of searching throughout Montana in the mid-2000s, they found the piece of property they had been looking for their whole life.

“We looked for 20 years and then bought it in 45 minutes,” John laughed. “When you know, you know.”

Ironically, they ended up in the Blackfoot Valley not far from where they started their search.

Their ranch, which borders national forest and the Bob Marshall Wilderness, is an important piece of the Crown of the Continent, a place unlike any other in the nation. You go 110 miles north of their place and there are no roads. Wildlife still have the ability to move back and forth.

I asked John if he had any experiences on his property that really stuck out in his mind. After talking about watching grizzly bears roam in places he had just been minutes before, he said the thing that strikes him the most is that every time he visits the property, he loves it more than the last time.

“Far from growing used to it, every time I drive onto the road I’m in awe of the place. You can get accustomed to things and get used to them. Not this place though, I never get used to it,” said John.

All of the values that John and Cheryl hold close are epitomized in their place and they quickly put the ranch in a conservation easement with MLR. “It is still like it was 400 years ago and it allows for the movement of wildlife,” said John. “It’s not a postage stamp of habitat, and we want to keep it that way.”

The successful and innovative cooperative conservation efforts between landowners, land trusts, and government agencies in the Blackfoot Valley shows us a way forward for land conservation. The results in the valley speak for themselves, according to John.

2019 CONSERVATION AWARD

“Some river valleys in Montana have been changed to the point where they look more like a suburb of Denver, that hasn’t happened in the Blackfoot Valley even though the potential for subdivision was very high,” said John. “The success in the Blackfoot should be used as a model for other places under population pressure.”

John believes it is vitally important for the future of conservation to continue working with private landowners and seeking win-win situations.

“Private land conservation is the future. If you can’t figure out a way to work with private landowners to have a win-win situation for landowners and wildlife, we all lose,” he said. “This is why MLR is truly unique in this space.”

John and Cheryl have helped many conservation organizations, including Ducks Unlimited and MLR, protect open space, agricultural lands, and wildlife habitat. They are leaders in efforts across the northern plains and northern Rockies in private land conservation and MLR is pleased to award the Dales the 2019 Conservation Award.

“If I have any sort of legacy at all in my life, it’s going to be promoting those values and keeping those open spaces,” John told me. “MLR wants to keep people on the land. They have been very good at doing just that.”



Blackfoot River



John Lambing

FOREVER MONTANA SOCIETY

The Forever Montana Society exists to honor those who have left a lasting legacy of conservation, and to inspire others to do the same.

With perpetuity in mind, the Forever Montana Society is open to all consenting MLR easement donors and to those who have provided for MLR's mission in their overall financial and estate plans, sustaining

agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open space for generations to come. This list recognizes those who have agreed to be listed as Forever Montana Society members.

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**Learn more about the Forever Montana Society
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Alexis Bonogofsky

MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

Thanks to the continued support of its generous donors, The Montana Land Reliance (MLR) had another banner year in 2019.

MLR's operations continue to be amazingly efficient, with expenditures for the year running under budget. Revenues for the year exceeded expenditures again this year – as they have for the past 35 years – resulting in a gain of \$736,591 in the General Fund.

MLR was able to make grants to the Montana Land Reliance Foundation (the Foundation) in the amount of \$716,885 in 2019. These grants allow for continued growth in the corpus of the Foundation's investment accounts.

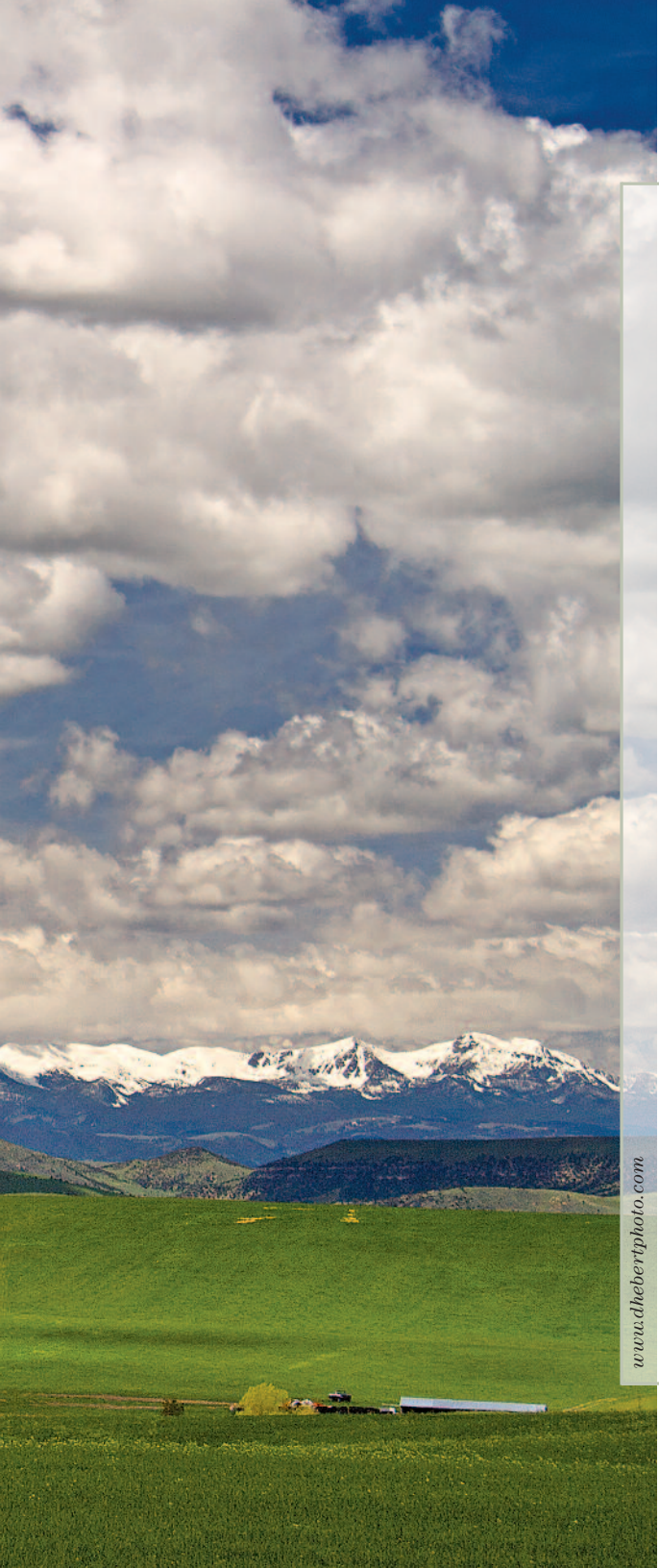
2019 FINANCIAL REPORT

Income	\$ 2,596,267
Expenses	\$ 1,859,676
<hr/>	
General Fund	\$ 2,801,404
Accounts Receivable/Payable . .	\$ (200,681)
Land Acquisition Fund	\$ 4,388,024
<hr/>	
Total Assets	\$6,988,747

as of 12-31-19

Tobacco Root Mountains





MLR FOUNDATION



The Montana Land Reliance Foundation* (the Foundation) was able to grow our investment portfolio during 2019 and continue to provide support to The Montana Land Reliance (MLR). The Foundation Board strives to manage the investments to ensure compliance with the investment policies and to enhance our financial strength. The Board takes its role as stewards of the Foundation’s investment portfolio very seriously, and works with MLR management and Morgan Stanley to balance protecting the investment funds for the future, earning income to support MLR’s operations and growth.

Investment earnings (including changes in market value) were \$4,924,984 in 2019 – averaging a 19% return on investments. The Foundation received \$716,885 from MLR and this along with the investment value increases and earnings grew the net assets from \$24 million to over \$29 million after reflecting grants to MLR and other expenses.

During 2019, the Foundation granted \$293,024 to MLR from the Land Protection Fund to support stewardship and easement monitoring. Additionally, the Foundation granted \$136,317 to MLR for education and outreach and \$20,000 for conservation activities.

The Foundation Board members – Karen Kress, Doug Mitchell, Jerry Townsend, Phil Rostad, Lee Freeman, and myself are honored to serve and oversee the investments of the Foundation and provide funding for MLR’s conservation efforts for many, many years to come.

– Kim Montag, MLR Foundation President

2019 FINANCIAL REPORT

Land Protection Fund	\$ 16,118,314
<i>The corpus is available to defend and protect land already under easement; income is used for stewardship projects, monitoring of easements, and completing easements for donors who cannot cover these costs.</i>	
Education & Outreach Fund	\$ 9,235,577
<i>Income finances conservation education and outreach to landowners and the public.</i>	
Conservation Fund	\$ 2,467,789
<i>A permanent, irrevocable endowment designed to accept gifts from individuals or direct gifts from corporations, partnerships, or estates.</i>	
MLR General Operating Fund	\$ 1,295,096
<i>Account used for day-to-day operations of MLR.</i>	
Traditions Fund	\$ 53,016
<i>A permanent, irrevocable endowment designed to accept planned gifts from individuals or direct gifts from corporations, partnerships, or estates.</i>	
Foundation Operating Fund	\$ 17,016
<i>Account used for day-to-day operations of the Foundation.</i>	
Total Assets	\$ 29,186,808
<i>as of 12-31-19</i>	

* a 509(a)(3) support organization to The Montana Land Reliance

RUBY HABITAT FOUNDATION

The Ruby Habitat Foundation* is dedicated to preserving and enhancing the natural resources and social and economic makeup of the Ruby Valley and southwestern Montana.

The Ruby Valley has always been a remarkable area. Sheltered behind a loop in the Continental Divide, the Ruby drainage is protected from extreme winter weather. Ol' Man Winter still seems to sneak in on occasion and remind us he is not fooled by a bend in a mountain range. The earliest mention of agriculture in the Ruby Valley that I know of is Johnny Grant using the area to open range graze cattle and horses as early as 1850.

2019 FINANCIAL REPORT

Income	\$	573,451
Expenses	\$	330,247
<hr/>		
Rural Heritage	\$	96,120
& Open Lands Fund		
Hill Education	\$	98,235
& Outreach Endowment		
Woodson Ranch Endowment	\$	7,823,931
General Fund	\$	261,262
Fixed Assets		
Equipment & Improvements . . .	\$	678,804
Land	\$	7,273,175
Visitor Center Building	\$	44,423
& Donated Art		
<hr/>		
Total Assets	\$	16,275,950
<i>as of 12-31-19</i>		

Much has changed in the valley since that time but agriculture continues to play a very important role in managing the natural resources. It provides open space and good habitat for the abundant wildlife and contributes to the social fabric of this rural Montana area.

Ruby Habitat Foundation (RHF) works to support agriculture and exhibit the importance of good stewardship by example on the Woodson Ranch.

A tour of the ranch is an experience that will long be remembered. The diverse projects that have been developed over the years, from pollinators to nesting areas, to wetlands to native grass stands, and much more, are all done in an ongoing agriculture setting. The growing of crops and rearing animals

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for food is an ancient practice. Science and technology have added an amazing amount of knowledge and expertise to basically harvesting sunlight. Our Heritage Apple Orchard project this year will be an attempt to preserve the 100 year old genetics but will be irrigated with a very modern irrigation system, combining the old with the new.

Agriculture in the Ruby Valley and southwest Montana remains strong and is vital to preserving our open spaces. But an understanding of management of our natural resources and good stewardship of them is understandably not familiar to many. Our science/education and general outreach visitors to the ranch were 41 percent of those who came to Woodson ranch in 2019. This brings me much joy that we are reaching out in such a positive way. This would not be possible without our many supporters. You are essential partners in all that continues to happen at RHF. I feel that together we are making a difference. Thank you.

– Neil Barnosky, Ruby Habitat Foundation President

“Agriculture continues to play a very important role in managing the natural resources. It provides open space and good habitat for the abundant wildlife and contributes to the social fabric of this rural Montana area.”

*a 509(a)(3) support organization to The Montana Land Reliance



Ruby Valley

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Lynn Donaldson

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Not pictured:
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*2019 Annual Report: Essay and award stories by Alexis Bonogofsky.
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Alexis Bonogofsky

HOW YOU CAN HELP

There are many ways that families, individuals, foundations, corporations, and organizations can provide financial support for MLR's conservation work.

Because MLR is a non-profit corporation, contributions made to MLR are tax-deductible. Planned gifts are one way to make a meaningful impact on MLR's mission, but there are many ways that families, individuals, foundations, corporations, and organizations can provide financial support for MLR's conservation work.

Stock gifts are welcome and MLR has a very good process in place through its investment team at Morgan Stanley to assist donors to ensure a smooth, well-documented transaction.

As you plan your charitable giving, MLR can assist you in helping determine the most suitable option for your financial needs. Contact us for more information.

Your gift goes directly to MLR's work with private landowners to protect Montana's open spaces and working landscapes.

How to Give

- Cash contributions
- Securities, land, vehicles, and other property

Gift & Estate Planning

- Bequests
- Gift annuities
- Charitable trusts
- Life estate gifts
- Life insurance policies
- Beneficiary designations
- Retirement assets

MLR's tax identification number is 81-0369262.

Staff can assist you in determining the most suitable option for your financial needs.

Call us at 406-443-7027 or visit mtlandreliance.org



Protecting Montana's
Open Landscapes



Jason Savage

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