



**2024
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.

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

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



Todd Klassy

Dear Friends,

AS WE REFLECT ON THE PAST YEAR, one thing remains abundantly clear: Montana's landscapes hold an enduring value for all of us. Whether you are a lifelong resident, a newcomer drawn to our state's beautiful scenery, or a visitor discovering its charm for the first time, Montana's open spaces and agricultural landscapes offer something for everyone.

Our shared appreciation for protected places will remain constant as Montana continues to grow. From the working lands that define our agricultural heritage to the mountains and rivers that inspire recreation and reflection, the land is the cornerstone of our way of life. With development pressure increasing, the importance of preserving our open spaces cannot be overstated. Productive landscapes not only feed families and fuel our economy, but also offer us all the opportunity to connect with something larger than ourselves.

I am pleased to report that 2024 was MLR's second-best conservation year ever! MLR partnered with 30 families to complete conservation easements on 68,799 acres.

These completed easements bring the total acres conserved by MLR to 1,388,496, keeping us on track to realize the long-term goal of conserving two million acres by 2040. The completed projects span the state, from lands bordering Glacier National Park in the west, to vast expanses of prairie grasslands in the east.

Our work is not just about protecting acres. Every conservation easement represents a partnership – a shared vision for the future of Montana. In this annual report, you'll be inspired by the stories of landowners who have chosen to protect their lands, ensuring that their contributions to Montana's heritage will endure.

We are grateful to you – our supporters, landowners, and partners – for making this work possible. Thank you for your commitment to MLR as we look to another exciting year of partnering with private landowners to permanently protect agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open space.

Sincerely,

–Shane Colton, Board President

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



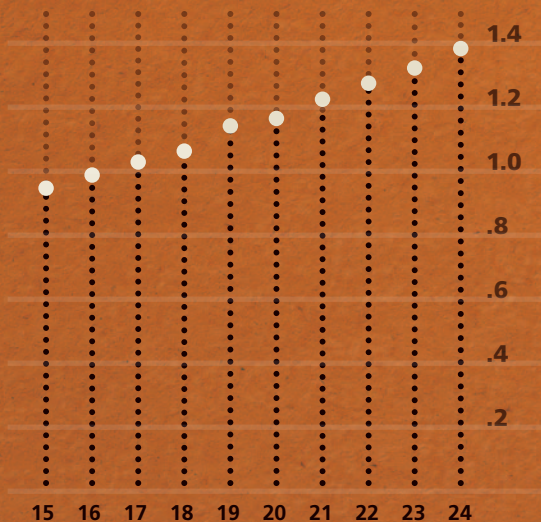
Every conservation easement represents a partnership – a shared vision for the future of Montana.

PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

Sixty-four million acres in Montana are privately owned, and 90% of those are in agricultural production. Private lands are home to valuable habitat and represent a large part of the state's water resources and forests. Forever protecting these important open spaces is a lasting benefit for future generations.

TOTAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT ACREAGE, 2015-2024

MILLIONS OF ACRES



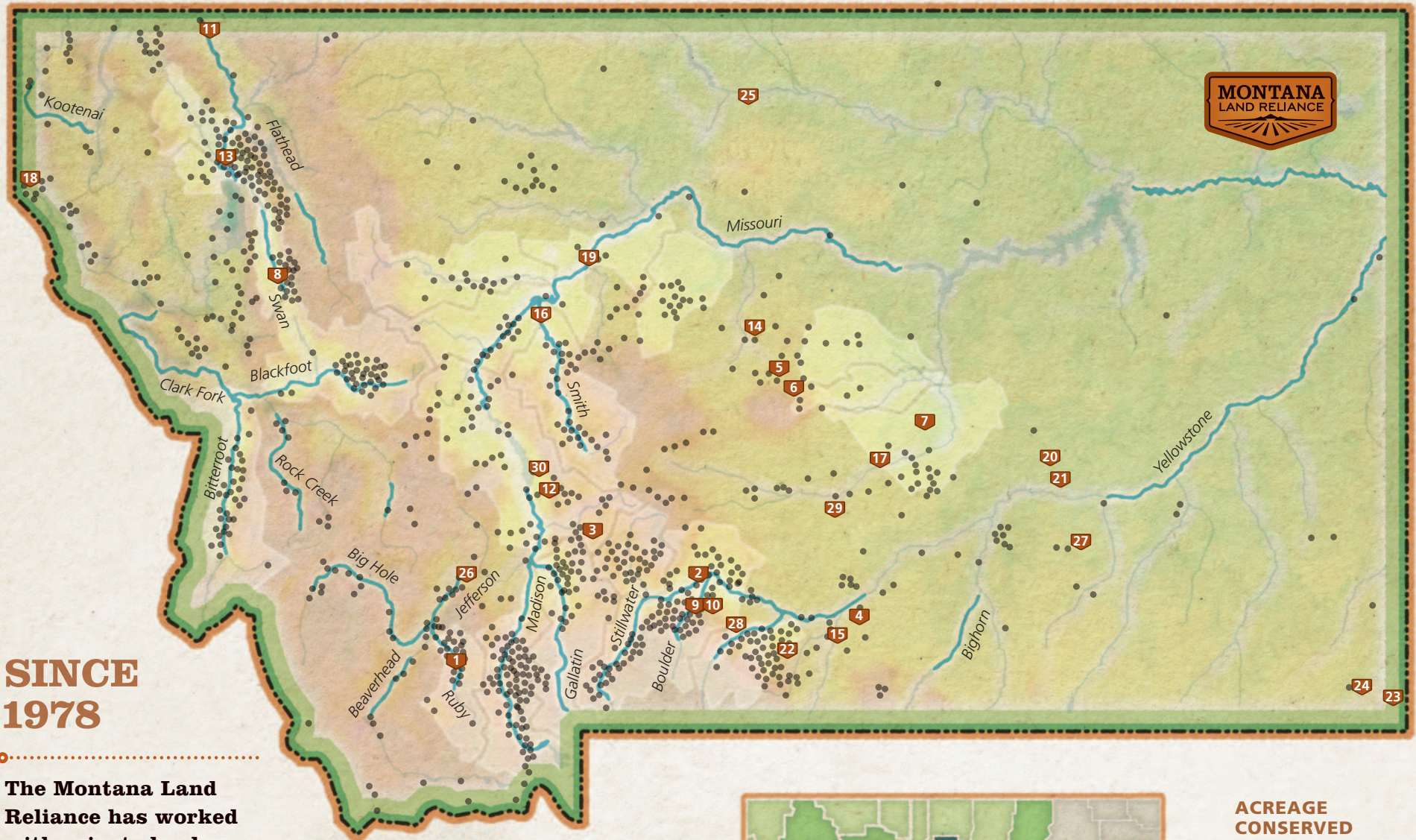
IN 2024

- 30** conservation easements
- 68,799 acres** total
- 64,850 acres** of range/forest
- 25,735 acres** of elk habitat
- 1,101 acres** of wetlands
- 41.3 miles** of streambank

IN TOTAL

- 1,015** conservation easements
- 1,388,496 acres** of agriculturally, ecologically, and historically important land
- 2,035 miles** of streambank

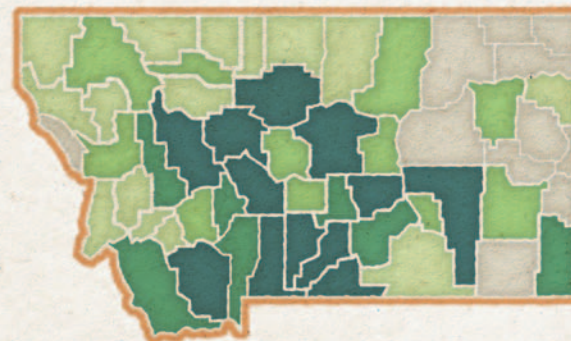
1	Barnosky, Neil & Gloria	200
2	Beley Whitetail Ranch, LLC	3,620
3	Berg Family Ranch at Hatfield Mountain, LLC	2,080
4	Big Spring Ranch	2,403
5	Bowen, Ronald E. & Connie R.	164
6	Boyce, Inc.	1,771
7	Brewer, Clyde, III, & Cynthia	5,550
8	Brown Bear, LLC	158
9	William T. & Rochelle Brownlee Revocable Trusts	1,233
10	William T. & Rochelle Brownlee Revocable Trusts	513
11	Chrisman, Allen Bond & Charlotte Lewis, Kari Ann & Timothy A. Wiley	310
12	Martin & Margaret M. Clark, LLC	210
13	deYong, Ronald A. & Deanna D.	318
14	Elison Joint Living Trust	159
15	Grewell, Michael V. & Cassidy	1,644
16	Hastings, Matthew H.	4,266
17	High Ridge Land, LLC	2,157
18	Hutchins, Judith	138
19	James, Pietro N.	400
20	Johnson, Bruce Evan	2,381
21	Johnson, Dan R. & Mary Ann	6,955
22	Lazy AO, LLC	195
23	Lesh, Bret & Kimberly	2,530
24	Lesh, Bret & Kimberly	4,461
25	Lieberg, Richard Harris & Patricia Ann	152
26	Ruth H. Lott Family Trust	195
27	Middle Fork Land & Livestock, Inc.	15,788
28	William and Janice Mytton Family Trust	706
29	Team 17 Ranch, LLC	7,864
30	Thompson, James B. & Peggy R.	278



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.

- EASEMENTS IN 2024
- EASEMENTS 1978-2023
- MAJOR WATERSHEDS
- BLUE-RIBBON TROUT STREAM



ACREAGE CONSERVED BY COUNTY

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

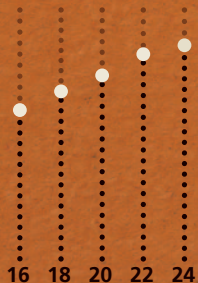


Jason Savage

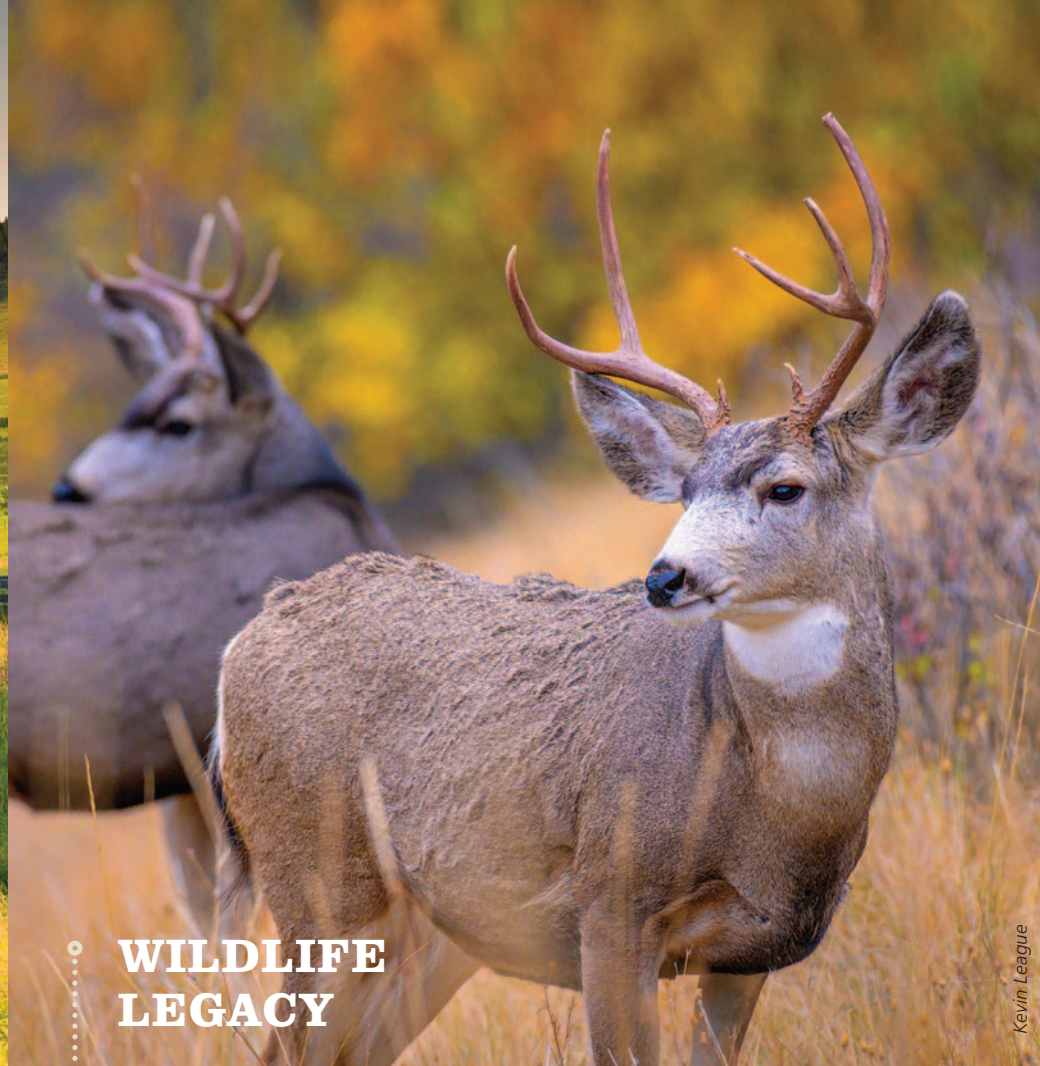
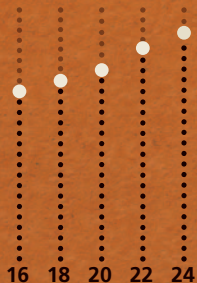
AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE

Fifty-eight million acres of Montana's lands are in agricultural production. The protection of these working farms and ranches is critical for the preservation of the state's rural communities and agricultural economy.

TOTAL CROP/HAY/
PASTURE ACREAGE
PROTECTED
231,915



TOTAL FOREST/
RANGE ACREAGE
PROTECTED
1,156,581

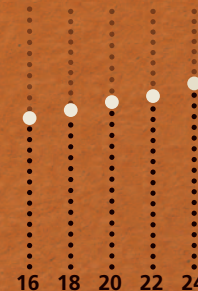


Kevin League

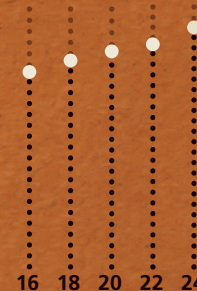
WILDLIFE LEGACY

The preservation of private lands in Montana is key to protecting vulnerable habitat that allows for the diversity of wildlife you can only find in Montana.

TOTAL WETLAND
ACREAGE
PROTECTED
49,518



TOTAL ELK
HABITAT ACREAGE
PROTECTED
658,630



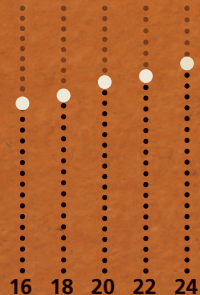


Little Blackfoot River

WATERSHED PROTECTION

Private lands make up 62% of Montana's watersheds. Conserving watersheds supports family farms and ranches, a vibrant recreation industry, wildlife habitat, and miles of rivers and streams.

TOTAL MILES OF STREAMBANK PROTECTED
2,035

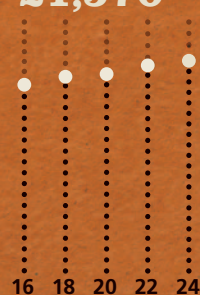


ECOSYSTEM PROTECTION

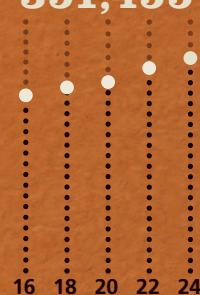
Private lands contain some of the best habitat found in Montana. Conserving these places is vital to ensuring our ecosystems remain healthy and intact.



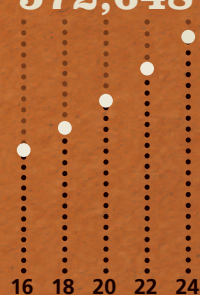
A NORTHERN CONTINENTAL DIVIDE ACREAGE PROTECTED
21,570



B GREATER YELLOWSTONE ACREAGE PROTECTED
351,455



C NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS ACREAGE PROTECTED
572,648



THE LAND THAT BINDS US

*Working together
to honor the past
while embracing
the future*





Ilona McCarty Open View Photography

VAST PRAIRIES, TOWERING MOUNTAINS, WINDING RIVERS: Montana's landscape draws people in, like a moth to a flame. But there's more to these scenic vistas than meets the eye. Here, agriculture is still king, being a good neighbor is integral, and people's connection to the land is bone deep. For generations, farm and ranch families have built their livelihoods on that connection to the land, and their good stewardship has had beneficial impacts reaching far beyond their own fence lines. Even in a place as timeless as Montana, however, change is inevitable.

Montana has found itself at a crossroads in recent years, as a wave of new residents and growth has caused a seismic shift in many areas of the state. And as Montana changes, so too does the way people interact with the land, and with each other. Ensuring that the land stays open and productive, that communities remain tight-knit, and that Montana keeps its unique character is a difficult challenge.

Ultimately, it will take all of us working together to find a way to honor the past while embracing the future.



THE MONTANA THAT WAS: A COMMUNITY ROOTED IN THE LAND

“It’s difficult to explain the connection I feel to my family ranch,” said fourth-generation rancher, Katie Pribyl. “The work can be relentless and is often unrecognized. On cold nights during calving season, I sometimes ask myself why anyone chooses this life – but there’s an undeniable pull that brings me back.”

“The people and their relation to the landscape and to each other is what drew us here in the first place.”

Pribyl’s description of reliance on the land and her generational connection to it reflects Montana’s history, when families homesteaded farms and ranches, relying on their own grit and the help of their neighbors. For many, land wasn’t just property, but a legacy to be preserved and passed on. This heritage is fully evident in today’s Montana, where agriculture forms the backbone of the state’s economy and is one of the top industries for total revenue, with livestock and crop production contributing over \$4 billion each year. Agricultural roots are intricately woven into the state’s history and culture.

This deep connection to the land built a culture of mutual reliance, resilience, and small, tight-knit communities. People knew their neighbors and depended on each other, regardless of background. There was a sense of respect for the land, for the wildlife, and for other people. “What I loved about Montana is that I could check out my Silicon Valley persona and just be a neighbor and a friend,” said Greg Avis, a self-described ‘recovering venture capitalist’ who has been in the state for over thirty years. “The people and their relation to the landscape and to each other is what drew us here in the first place.”



Bear Paw Mountains

Todd Klassy

THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY TIES

These days, some fear that those shared values are fading as the state’s population grows. Montana experienced a dramatic demographic shift as the COVID-19 pandemic and the popular TV series, *Yellowstone*, accelerated an already growing trend: people moving to Montana for its beauty and open spaces. For a place so deeply defined by its heritage, this breakneck pace of change has created concern about honoring the state’s agricultural roots and the ethos of respect for the land and one another.



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At the same time, in this predominantly digital era, we have lost the places to have an exchange of ideas. Social media and online communications, while convenient, have replaced face-to-face conversations that once built trust among neighbors. Instead of meeting at the fence line or at a town hall, people now take to the anonymity of the internet, furthering divisions rather than fostering understanding. “We don’t have as many authentic, in-person interactions anymore,” said Avis. “We’ve lost a lot of that opportunity to break down our differences and treat each other as people.”

As the internet has come to shape our everyday interactions, more local, pragmatic concerns have been eclipsed by national ideological divides – but there was a time when political differences didn’t stand in the way of cooperation. “Back then, we had discussions and the capability to proceed with dispassionate judgement and careful analysis,” said Marc Racicot, former



Blaine County

Governor of Montana. Leaders focused on what was best for the people and the state, weighing decisions based on their long-term impact rather than short-term political gain.



Montana is best served when the politics are removed

The rise of internet discourse has only fueled this, as political debates play out online where outrage spreads faster than credible information. The focus has moved from solving problems to scoring political points, making it harder to find common ground on issues like land use, conservation, and economic growth. “It seems like now every decision is politicized, but Montana is best served when the politics are removed,” noted Glenn Marx, retired Executive Director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts.

Instead of working together to address Montana’s challenges, politicians and citizens alike are caught in a cycle of grievance and division, further eroding the cooperative spirit that once defined the state. “History has proven that where people make purely individualistic decisions, it’ll lead to significant degradation in the long run,” said Avis. “Our society is very confrontative now and we are not oriented towards collective action, that has to change.”

AGRICULTURAL HEADWINDS

In tandem with these cultural shifts, the rapid demographic change in Montana has also made it increasingly difficult for agricultural families to sustain their way of life. One of the biggest challenges is the soaring cost of land driven by the influx of new buyers. “The price for an acre of pasture has made it impossible for a young ranching couple to buy land and pay for it with cows,” said Pribyl. While previous generations could expand their operations and pass land down to their children, today’s families struggle to do the same without being burdened with significant taxes and debt.

“Most people don’t realize the sacrifices it takes to make a living from the land,” Pribyl added. Even when land remains in the family, the financial burden of keeping it operational can be overwhelming. Beyond land prices, the rising cost of inputs like fuel, equipment, and feed has further strained agricultural operations. Ranches that once sustained multiple families can now barely support even one. The consistent challenges have made it harder for farms and ranches to stay afloat, leading young people to question whether continuing in agriculture is really what they want to do.

Taken as a whole, we see a landscape where we’ve lost our opportunities for connection and understanding, where once-productive

Lynn Donaldson





Near Winifred

farmland is being sold, subdivided, and developed. We're losing both land and a way of life at the same time – both critical components at the core of what makes Montana so remarkable.

A TOOL FOR A BALANCED FUTURE

Amidst these challenges, conservation easements emerge as a powerful tool in maintaining Montana's heritage. These voluntary agreements enable landowners to thoughtfully decide what protections they want for their property, ensuring it remains as scenic, open space while still allowing for agricultural use. "When we put our place into an easement, there were two primary reasons," said Pribyl. "First, to keep that land in agriculture. Second, to make it easier to pass down to the next generation without the burden of unreasonable taxes and debt."

When conservation easements emerged in the 1970s, they were met with skepticism by a population that fiercely protected their private property rights. "Easements were hard-earned and sparingly granted in the beginning," recalled Racicot. "But over time, the culture and the mentality changed, and people realized they had an obligation to preserve something that all of us universally value." Once the first conservation easements were put in place, landowners started to see the benefits of protecting their legacy and their

future. "It was a chance for landowners to partner with non-profits to conserve and maintain what makes this state such a special place," added Marx.

Despite strong demand from landowners today, conservation easements still face political opposition. Lawmakers have made multiple attempts to eliminate perpetual easements, arguing they limit future landowners' rights. Marx disagreed with this sentiment. "Every day, somebody somewhere is converting agricultural land to industrial, residential, or commercial use, which is also a very permanent, perpetual decision," he said.

Amidst the challenges, conservation easements emerge as a powerful tool in maintaining Montana's heritage.

In this sense, easements are a preventative measure – keeping agricultural land open and undeveloped, preserving heritage and habitat, forever.

Today, as it was in the 70s, the defense of private property is of extreme importance to Montanans. "The right to determine what happens to your property is the ultimate exercise of a constitutional right, and it



also happens to be in alignment with the ethos of the people of Montana” noted Racicot. At their core, conserved properties perpetuate what makes Montana, *Montana*. These protected places provide invaluable ecosystem services and protect wildlife habitat and open space. They produce food that feeds the state, the country, and the world. For some agricultural families, nothing fits better for their operation than a conservation easement. It’s an effective mechanism that helps them expand the ranch or ensure it can be transferred to their children.

Many new residents are drawn by the state’s iconic landscapes without realizing that the scenic vistas they enjoy are conserved private lands. “Land trusts and landowners partner to play an essential role in cultivating and maintaining the character of Montana,” said Marx. “Organizations like The Montana Land Reliance are more important now than ever.”

BUILDING CONNECTIONS IN A CHANGING MONTANA

The common denominator throughout all of this is the land. “The land can be such a uniter, but there’s also nothing fiercer than disputes over land,” said Avis. “Either it creates conflict, or it can be a source of great harmony and unity. That’s both the challenge and the opportunity we have.”

Private land conservation alone is not enough; it must be paired with community-building efforts that ensure the state’s deep-rooted values of stewardship and community resilience remain intact. Today, it is more important than ever to create spaces where people can come together to discuss land use, conservation, and the shared responsibility of preserving Montana’s heritage. “For people who want to be part of this special place, I would encourage them to ask questions,” said Pribyl. “Learn about their neighbors and try to understand what it’s like to make a living from the land.”



Land trusts and landowners partner to play an essential role in cultivating and maintaining the character of Montana.

Bridging the gap between Montanans is an essential part of our path forward. Education about agricultural traditions and the challenges of rural life can help build respect and a shared understanding of Montana’s history, values, and character. “We need to reconnect with the fundamental agreement we have with each other: to live in peace and harmony and to live in moderation,” said Racicot.


And while community-building and conservation easements might seem like disparate topics, they’re highly interconnected. If we rebuild our relationships with each other, we will understand that keeping agricultural land open and in production isn’t just about preserving a tradition reserved for landowners. It’s about ensuring Montana maintains the characteristics that made many of us put down roots here in the first place.

OPTIMISM ROOTED IN MONTANA'S RESILIENCE

Montana's landscapes and its communities are both its identity and its future. It is our job to focus on what unites us – the land and the values we hold dear – instead of what divides us. “There’s a veneer of incivility caused by this rapid change in values,” said Avis. “But there are amazing people in this state, and if you stay humbled by the landscape and by all that’s around us, you can connect over our shared love for this place and pierce that veneer.”

Change can feel threatening, and our differences as people and as a society sometimes seem insurmountable. But if we cannot conceive of a path forward, we resign ourselves to a future full of anger, distrust, and resentment. It is our responsibility as citizens, as community members, and as neighbors to try to see each other as people. Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to mean loss.

Glimmers of hope and resilience persist. Despite the challenges facing producers across the state, many young people are

 ***With the right tools, Montana can maintain its character even as it evolves, and the ethos of Montana can endure.***




Pintler Mountains

kenterphotography.com

making the decision to return to their family ranches, determined to keep their agricultural heritage alive. Conservation easements continue to be a valuable tool for these families, ensuring that their land remains open and available for agriculture, wildlife, and the viewshed. “Landowners help Montana’s economy, and they also enhance the character of what Montana is and what we all hope it will be in the future,” said Marx.

Organizations like The Montana Land Reliance remain committed to supporting agricultural families while also working to spread the word

about the wide-ranging benefits of private land conservation. With the right tools, Montana can maintain its character even as it evolves, and the ethos of Montana can endure.

“Montana is full of ravines, rivers, mountains, and the glorious capacity to be enchanted by the place you live in,” reflected Racicot. If we choose to act together, we can ensure that this Montana endures as a place where agriculture, community, and conservation thrive for generations to come. How we navigate the changes we face – together – will define Montana’s future. 

MIDDLE FORK LAND & LIVESTOCK

BRENT & LORI SALMOND grew up ranching along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. Their families ran cattle and sheep where grizzly bear sightings were common, and wilderness was only a few steps out the front door. They went to the same school in Choteau but never spoke to each other. Brent, being shy at the time, recalled, "Lori was the prettiest girl in school. Every boy wanted to date her."

After high school, their paths crossed one evening at the Choteau House Bar. Lori was playing pool with her cousins, and Brent happened to be at the bar with friends. "For some reason, at that point, I had enough courage to speak to her," he recalled. "Or, maybe I'd just had too much to drink!" The rest, as they say, is history.

The couple married in 1990 and worked on the family ranch along with Brent's brothers. The ranch at Choteau was pieced together by Brent's parents and grandparents. It was originally a 1,000-cow operation but had been divided several times. When Brent and Lori took over, they inherited the land along with a substantial debt. "There was a lot of debt, then drought hit," Brent said. "It was only the first of May, and we were out of grass. We were down to selling cows or finding somewhere to go."



The family started considering other options. "There was not much opportunity along the Front, so we looked east," Lori said. "We were interested

in the openness, lack of development, and the potential to expand." Brent leaned on an old college friend who knew of an opportunity in Rosebud County. The friend connected the Salmonds with an ornery old rancher named Gene Ashenhurst who was looking to lease grass along the Middle Fork of Trail Creek.

MOVING EAST

"We left Choteau at 3 am and made the drive to meet with Gene," Lori recalled. "We had no money, but we had faith things would work out." The meeting went well, and Gene was impressed with the Salmond's knowledge of cattle and their Montana roots. "Gene was a no-nonsense kind of guy," Brent said. "His business sense wouldn't allow him to lease to a non-rancher."

Ashenhurst explained that he was interested in leasing the grass for a few years and then wanted to sell the ranch. Brent recalled Gene had had offers from out-of-staters who tried to buy the place, but they were more interested in the ranch for its recreation qualities. Gene shared with Brent an interaction he'd had with a potential buyer, which summed up how he felt about out-of-staters. Gene told the buyer, "Here's the price...cows go with the ranch. If you don't want my cows, you don't want my ranch, and you can go to hell."

Brent and Lori, and their growing family of two sons (Elliot and Emmet) were a perfect match for the lease at Middle Fork. They knew cattle and fit with what Ashenhurst wanted for the property. Gene and his wife, Dorothy, were invaluable resources for the family and helped them find their footing.



The first year on the ranch tested the family's resolve. "That first year, the grass was green and tall, but by August, the grasshoppers had taken everything, even the leaves off the sagebrush," Brent said. Snow came early that year, and by November, the ground was frozen, and the Salmonds were out of cash. "Cows were rough, walking death," Brent said. He called a friend and explained the situation. With no hay and little money on hand, the family was looking at a situation like they had faced on the Front.



Rosebud
County

When her boys were little, Lori would load them in the old Suburban and drive to wherever they were moving cows for the day. “I’d set up a card table in the back of the truck and lay out some snacks and raw cookie dough for the boys,” she said. “I’d be on horseback for hours with Brent.” Emmet recalled that he and Elliot were always disappointed that the orange snacks packed in their lunches were carrots instead of Cheetos!

Working together, the family grew with the ranch and ultimately purchased the property from Ashenurst. They implemented rest rotations and grazing programs designed to put pressure on invasives. The rotations were based on Brent’s experience with Forest Service leases along the Front. “When I was growing up in Choteau, we did a rest rotation with the Forest Service,” he said. “At first, everyone was opposed to it, but it ended up being a good thing. The rest periods reset the range and provided better grass in the long term.”

Emmet described how the grazing programs have been important on the ranch. “Cheatgrass and Japanese brome can absorb two inches of rain,” he noted. “By getting rid of the invasives, you get more water into the soil. More water in the soil means better grass. We’ve seen excellent return on our grazing program and heavier weights on our cows.”

In addition to grazing improvements, the family invested in water resources. Emmet pointed out that one of the challenges in eastern Montana is that reservoirs built in the 1960s and 1970s are now silted and don’t hold as much water as they used to. “They lack the depth to keep water cool

during the summer months,” he said. The amount of money and time it would take to clean out these reservoirs isn’t practical, and there are negative ecological impacts on the landscape. “A lot of reclamation work needs to take place after you fix a reservoir,” he said. “We’ve found that it’s a lot less impactful on the ranch to drill wells and put in pipelines. We’ve put in a lot of stock tanks. Solar has been important to us.”

With improvements to the land came success and the opportunity to expand. The family purchased a neighboring ranch when it came up for sale, bringing their holdings to 40,000 contiguous acres. While the acquisition fit the family’s long-term plans, the winter of 2018–2019 did not. Spring 2019 proved to be one of the coldest and snowiest on record. Across Montana, February temperatures didn’t rise above zero, and three feet of snow fell in March, with drifts up to ten feet high. Cattle, unable to get to food and water, starved. Ranchers saw record losses across the state, with many losing everything.

Middle Fork Land & Livestock was not immune. “We really stubbed our toe, big time,” Brent said. “The 2018–2019 winter was the worst we’d ever seen. We took a big hit buying feed and losing cows to pine needle abortions. We had land payments due and not nearly the cows we needed.”

The protected landscapes that define Montana are the product of private landowners who have chosen a Montana where cattle and cowboys, wildlife and working lands, persist long into the future.



The friend advised them to fill a grain bin with cake and feed it, so they fed cake all winter, and the cows ate whatever they could find, including the silver sage. “They didn’t look good that spring,” Brent said, “but cows and humans survived.”

Those early years on the ranch were a back-and-forth of thriving and surviving. “We lived in a cabin with no running water, but we had a plan and faith that things would work out,” Lori said.



CONSIDERING OPTIONS

With the variability of Montana weather and a lackluster cattle market in 2019, the family took time to consider all their options. Lori recalled, “We knew we needed more stability and wanted to protect what we had worked so hard for.” That year, they made plans to put up more hay and look for farm ground to supplement their operation in times of drought and harsh winters.

At its most basic level, a conservation easement is an exercise of a private property right.

As part of that discussion, the family considered a conservation easement.

Growing up along the Front, conservation easements were a fixture on the landscape.

“I knew the ranches that did easements with MLR, The Nature Conservancy, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the 1990s,” Brent recalled. “Those places were still in business, with most of the same families on the ranch.” The Salmonds saw a conservation easement as a potential tool to create the stability they were looking for.

At its most basic level, a conservation easement is an exercise of a private property right. The easement is a voluntary agreement between a private landowner and a qualified land trust that articulates what can and cannot happen on a property. The deed is an expression of the landowner’s intentions for their property in perpetuity. “We thought about all our options as a family and decided this was a good decision,” Lori said. “It would be hard to make this work unless the conservation easement aligned with our morals and goals for the ranch. We are just stewards of the land. Our job is to do our best without being greedy or abusing things.”

After discussing options with MLR, the family agreed that a conservation easement was a good fit. As Emmet put it, “We were already running the place as if there was a conservation easement on it, so it made a lot of sense to take advantage of the financial and other benefits of protecting the ranch.”

PLANNING FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

One of the biggest hurdles for any family in agriculture is succession. Emmet described the challenge facing young producers. “When one generation wants to take over, there aren’t many good options,” he said. “If you don’t have the money to buy someone out, you have to sell out and buy something different.” “It only takes one generation to fail, and the entire ranch fails,” Emmet explained. “We have no plans of failing, but we can’t compete with out-of-state money. If we can’t take over the family ranch, we’re likely not going to stay in ranching.”

According to the Salmonds, the conservation easement helped with their succession planning by placing expectations on what would happen moving forward. “The option to sell out and subdivide isn’t on the table,” Emmet said. “It’s not something we have to worry about.” He feels this puts the overall operation on surer footing, and when it comes time to transition, there are guardrails in place for him and his brother, Elliot. “Our family is in step with each other on the long-term sustainability of the ranch, which is going to make things a lot easier for us,” he said.

Being a successful rancher is a source of pride for Emmet and Elliot. “I like to think of myself as five-foot-seven with a six-four attitude,” Emmet laughed. “People think that Millennials can’t ranch, but we’re here to prove them wrong!” Emmet’s wife, Emily, came to Middle Fork with a limited background in agriculture but has quickly become a major asset. “Most of the days are good,” she said. “It’s a lot to learn, but I am enjoying it.” She admitted that the work never ends, but preserving agriculture has become personal to her. “When we have success, it gives me the confidence and personal growth I need to keep going when the days aren’t as good.”

A CONSERVATION ETHIC

The Salmond family anticipates more good than bad days ahead. While the process of protecting the ranch took time, they found the stability they were looking for. “The conservation easement was a big part of that,” Brent said. “The easement funding was huge.”

Funding for the conservation easement came from the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Agricultural Lands Easement Program, The Conservation Fund, and the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and provided means for the Salmonds to purchase farm ground, where they now grow supplemental crops. The restructuring of their operation, which included paying off debt, has put cash flow where they want it. “It’s put us in a position where we can breathe a little easier,” said Brent. “We’re in a place now where we can help others.”

That opportunity to help arrived in the summer of 2024 when range fires burned large swaths of southeast Montana. The Remington Fire, which started in Wyoming and quickly moved into Montana, burned over 200,000 acres in Powder River, Big Horn, and Rosebud counties. The late summer fire took the grass and left no time for regrowth, leaving ranches with little to no forage heading into the fall. In response, the Salmonds offered to help. “We had more grass than we needed,” Brent said. “We took on cows from our friends burned out by the fire. It was our way of being good neighbors.”

For Lori, being a good neighbor also includes a commitment to the ranch’s wildlife. “My parents loved animals of all kinds, wild and domestic,” she said. “We had a raccoon named Randit the Bandit that lived in the house and would wash food in the toilet.” Lori grew up caring for wild ducks, rabbits, coyotes, swans, and hundreds of bum lambs, even a white-tailed deer. “I remember on more than one occasion waking up to my deer chewing on my hair,” she laughed.

That appreciation of wildlife influences how the Salmonds manage their ranch. Everything that is supposed to be there is there. “We need to protect livestock, but we also must have wildlife,” Lori said. “I feel that livestock and people and wildlife can live together. My religious beliefs tell me that at some point we will all lie down with the Lion.” For the Salmonds, extirpating wildlife isn’t the answer. Rather, they look for a balance.

FINDING BALANCE

Finding the right balance on the ranch begs the larger question of finding a balance between growth, development, and conservation in Montana writ large. As the state continues to grow, pressure on agricultural lands is increasing. The answer to the question of what Montana will look like tomorrow is in the hands of landowners today. Some may disagree with the perpetual nature of conservation easements. Their arguments often follow a faulty line of reasoning that suggests private landowners don’t know what’s best for their land and that decisions about the future should not be made in the present. That never landed well with Brent. “Subdividing and developing the ranch is also a permanent decision,” he said. “That’s not what we wanted. We chose to keep this place a grass ranch, and we’re happy about that.”

A recent University of Montana Tourism Study asked visitors what they most appreciated about their time in Montana. Top responses included “wide open spaces” and “undeveloped landscapes.” The protected landscapes that define Montana are not by accident. They are the product of private landowners, like the



Alexis Bonogofsky

Salmond family, who have chosen a Montana where cattle and cowboys, wildlife and working lands, will persist long into the future.

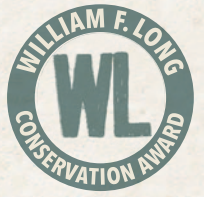
It’s difficult to articulate the value of 40,000 conserved acres in the heart of eastern Montana’s prairie. The appraisers and realtors can put a number on it, the biologists can emphasize wildlife benefits, and MLR can talk about a win for conservation, but the real value is left hidden somewhere between the lines. It’s best left to the landowners who decided to conserve their land to describe that value in a way that is authentic to them.

“We need to protect livestock, but we also must have wildlife. I feel that livestock and people and wildlife can live together.”

“It really hasn’t sunk in for me... what we have protected,” Brent said. “What I can tell you is that Gene Ashenhurst would be happy the ranch is going to remain a ranch. That’s all that he ever wanted, and that feels right.”



MATT HASTINGS



FOR GENERATIONS, the Hastings family has maintained a deep connection to agriculture, adapting to the times while preserving their roots. What initially began as a small family farm near the Great Falls airport has evolved into a much larger cow-calf operation that spans nearly 6,000 acres southeast of Ulm. Each generation brought new perspectives and innovations, beginning with Hugh Hastings' switch from farming to cattle in the 1980s, to the latest expansion of water development, fencing, and farm technology led by Matt Hastings and his son. While some aspects of their work have

changed, the foundation – managing the land with care and sustaining their family legacy – remains steadfast, fostering a sense of responsibility as the stewardship of the land is entrusted to the next generation.

Matt is managing for birds, livestock, and the grassland ecosystem as a whole, enhancing both the productivity of his operation and upland bird populations.

Growing up, Matt worked on the ranch with his father Hugh, but while attending college he questioned whether ranching was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. The time spent away ultimately gave him perspective to realize that carrying on the family legacy was a great opportunity. He came home and started the process of taking over the ranch, but was deployed to Iraq with the National Guard for a year and a half. By the time he returned, Hugh was dealing



with health challenges and was ready to retire. "I got back in November and my dad had a retirement party in December," Matt recalled with a laugh.

For a time, they managed the ranch together, with Matt taking over the day-to-day operations while discussing larger ideas and decisions with Hugh. Eventually, his father stepped back, and Matt began to forge his own path forward, purchasing the ranch from his parents in 2012.

Hugh had been a careful steward, managing conservatively to ensure the land was never overgrazed. Over the years, they installed seven miles of water pipelines across the property to sustain the cattle. "He made decisions based on what was best for the land," Matt recalled. These improvements, along with the careful management of natural resources, have resulted in healthy soils and resilient grasslands. "The native grasses hold protein so you can graze throughout the winter," Matt said. "That's been our main focus: working with nature and trying to build a system that works in this environment."

THE IDEA OF A CONSERVATION EASEMENT had been on the table since the 1990s, when Hugh first discussed it with Bill Long, a former Managing Director with The Montana Land Reliance (MLR). "I remember sitting at the table with my dad and talking about it," Matt said. "We liked the thought of conserving the land forever, but the timing wasn't right."

Decades later, Matt revisited the idea, and everything came together. In partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service,

Matt received funding through the Agricultural Land Easement program to place 4,266 acres of the Hastings Ranch into a conservation easement. The protected acres are located on the Truly Bench, overlooking the lower Smith River Valley and containing nearly four miles of Goodman Coulee.

The ranch provides outstanding habitat for a variety of upland game birds, including pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge. Rotational grazing practices allow grass to recover and regrow, leaving cover on the soil that naturally provides habitat for birds while also improving soil quality and enhancing productivity. "We try to give our pastures recovery time and leave enough residual – it's one of those things that has layers of benefits," said Matt. In implementing good grazing practices, Matt is managing for birds, livestock, and the grassland ecosystem as a whole, enhancing both the productivity of his operation and upland bird populations.

The funding provided by the conservation easement allowed Matt to rebuild his herd of cattle. In doing so, he expects a significant boost in income and greater flexibility to align grazing practices with his goals for the land. "This will be our first year not having any outside cattle on the place in probably ten years," said Matt. "We'll be able to improve our grazing management the way we want to, and that's exciting."

Matt's current focus is on improving infrastructure, starting with upgrading exterior fences and adding interior fences to enhance his ability to manage grazing rotations.



The ranch provides outstanding habitat for a variety of upland game birds, including pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge.

Water development is another priority. While much of the water system is already in place, redeveloping springs by directing the water into tanks and fencing off the spring areas would improve water availability and keep the land in better condition.

These days, Matt is operating the ranch with his 21-year-old son Preston, who recently graduated from Air Force Basic Training and is serving in the Air National Guard. Having his son return to the ranch brought fresh energy and excitement and, together, they are pursuing opportunities

for growth and improvement. His son brings a unique drive to the operation that complements Matt's approach. "It works out nicely having him here because I prefer the cattle and the grazing while he's more into farming and knows all the details about equipment," said Matt.

MLR IS PLEASED TO RECOGNIZE MATT HASTINGS as the 2024 recipient of the William F. Long Conservation Award, which highlights a landowner who has gone above and beyond in conserving ranchlands and upland bird habitat in Montana. In a way, this award

is particularly fitting, because its namesake – Bill Long – hunts upland birds on the property and has been connected to the family ever since those first easement discussions with Hugh Hastings decades ago.

"My dad handed me something that was in great shape," said Matt. "I've made some mistakes, but I feel like I'm turning the corner. With the easement in place, we really have traction and can go in the direction we want to go. There's a lot of opportunity now."



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.

Their gifts will help sustain agricultural lands, fish and wildlife habitat, and open space for generations to come.

Learn more about the Forever Montana Society at mtlandreliance.org.



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The Montana Land Reliance thanks the individuals and organizations that have contributed to its success during the past year. MLR also extends thanks to those who have asked to remain anonymous.

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 Todd, Sarah C.
 Tsiang, Judith A.
 Tureck, Judy & Hugo
 Van Dyk, Kendall & Christina
 Van Syckle, Jennifer
 Vana, Jordan
 Vana, Judy
 Vashro, Jim & Sandi
 Vermillion, Clinton D., MD,
 & Margaret H.
 Vermillion, Dan & Lynn
 Vermillion, Pat & Jenny
 von Avis, Charlie D. & Emmiliese
 Walker, Mallory & Diana
 Waller, Amy & John
 Wallner, Fred & Mary Kay
 Walter, John & Wendy
 Wanders, Bill
 Ward, Rebecca
 Watson, Lorraine & Lorna Krause
 Weiss, Thomas
 Weissman, Irving, MD,
 & Ann Tsukamoto-Weissman
 Welch, Jeff & Kelly Niles
 Wellenstein, Michael S. & Cori E.
 Wentz, Anne Colston, MD,
 & Dennis K. Wentz, MD
 Wetsel, Malcom & Sally
 Wheeler, Col. James S. "Scott" & Jane
 Whitney, Arthur J. & Sandra L.
 Wilkins, Thomas & Betty
 Williams, Burton & Joan Brownell
 Wilson, Suzanne
 Wimberly, J. David
 Wissmath, Dusty
 Wortman, Kirk
 Wright, Theodore M. & Elisabeth H.
 Yackel, John P. & Eleanor R.
 Zackheim, Ivan
 Zaideman, Robert & Julie

1111 Foundation
 5 Spring Foundation
 Acts 20:35 Fund
 AGL Foundation
 AgWest Farm Credit
 Allen Family Foundation
 American Public Land
 Exchange Co., Inc.
 Atira Conservation
 Avis Charitable Fund
 Beartooth Billings Clinic
 Berg Family Ranch
 Anne & Alex Bernhardt Foundation
 Bibler Resources Company
 Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation
 The Bowling Family Foundation
 The Broadbent Family
 Foundation, Inc.
 Buchanan Capital, Inc.
 Buckridge Family Foundation at the
 Montana Community Foundation
 Carahsoft Charitable Fund
 Cinnabar Foundation
 Clarke Family Charitable
 Giving Fund
 Clausen Law Group
 Cote Family TGS Foundation, Inc.
 The Coulter/Weeks
 Charitable Foundation
 Coxe Family Fund
 Cromley Messina Foundation
 Crosby Analytics
 Davis Family Charitable Trust
 Denbury Resources
 Eaves Family Foundation
 Eddy Foundation
 Embrace Orthodontics
 Emmett Foundation
 Fanwood Foundation
 Fay Ranches, Inc.
 First Cornerstone Foundation
 First Interstate Bank
 Flying S Title & Escrow of Montana
 The Folley Family Foundation
 Geraldine C. & Emory M.
 Ford Foundation
 Robert & Michelle Friend
 Philanthropic Fund
 Front Range Law
 Gates of The Mountains Foundation
 Carl & Esther Gerstacker Fund
 Give Lively Foundation
 Fred Goldberg Family Foundation

Golden Eagle Construction
 Granger Ranches
 Great State Electric
 Grey Rocks Foundation, Inc.
 Gwilliam Family Charitable Fund
 Hall & Hall, Inc.
 Heaney Family Fund of the Oshkosh
 Area Community Foundation
 Heart of the Rockies Initiative
 Helena Home Team
 Susan Scott Heyneman Foundation
 Higgins Family Charitable Fund
 High Ridge Land, LLC
 Holdfast Collective
 James & Wanda Hollensteiner
 Foundation
 The Horn Foundation
 Huppert, Swindlehurst
 & Woodruff, PC
 James Family Charitable Foundation
 Johnson Family Fund
 The Willard T.C. Johnson
 Foundation, Inc.
 Robert A. Johnston Foundation
 Robin & Ron Karp Philanthropic Fund
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 Aaron & Annika Kennon
 Charitable Fund
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 D King J King Rev Trusts
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 Larsson Danforth Family Foundation
 Lechner & Stauffer, Inc.
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 Lovett-Woodsum Foundation
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 Montague's Jewelers LLC
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 Charitable Giving
 Moonlight Community Foundation
 Mott-Warsh Revocable Trust
 Mound Prairie Ranch LLC
 The Nalen Foundation
 National Fish and Wildlife
 Foundation
 Eric H. Newman Charitable
 Gift Fund

Nova Family Gift Fund
 Paul Odegaard Family Donor Account
 Odegaard Law Group, PLLC
 One Love Charitable Fund
 One Valley Community Foundation
 OnSite Energy
 Ox Bow Ranch
 Park County Community Foundation
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 Ranch Resources
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 Red Lodge Grizzly, Inc.
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 Foundation
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 Taylor Luther Group
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 Tordik Wildlife Foundation
 Toresdahl Giving Fund
 Two Meadowlarks Foundation
 Watson Irrigation Specialists, Inc.
 Matthew A. and Susan B. Weatherbie
 Foundation
 James Wellington & Family Gift Fund
 Wheaton Precious Metals
 International
 The Wildwood Foundation
 Williphila Foundation
 Zackheim Charitable Account
 Roy J. Zuckerberg Family Foundation

2024 FINANCIAL REPORT*

Thanks to the support of its generous donors, MLR continues to build on its conservation legacy by partnering with landowners to conserve significant new acreage across Montana.

REVENUE		
Grants for the purchase of conservation easements	\$ 18,214,000	70
Contributions, grants, and events	\$ 5,982,174	23
Program and other revenue	\$ 1,862,630	7
Total	\$ 26,058,804	

EXPENSES		
Conservation easement purchases	\$ 19,159,002	82
Program expenses	\$ 2,880,453	12
Management and general	\$ 810,060	4
Fundraising	\$ 521,962	2
Total	\$ 23,371,477	

*This financial information is unaudited. Final financial statements and accompanying auditor's report will be available on request from the Helena office after August 2025.

Jason Savage

Greater Sage-grouse
near Zortman

MLR and its support organization, Montana Land Reliance Foundation* (MLRF), diligently steward assets to support MLR's perpetual conservation efforts and stewardship obligations.

MLR and MLRF work with investment managers to steward investment portfolios in a conservative manner to ensure MLR's financial future.

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

THE MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

General Fund <i>Short-term operating reserves.</i>	\$ 6,104,704
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Land Acquisition Fund <i>Fund to purchase conservation easements.</i>	\$ 15,166,917
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MONTANA LAND RELIANCE FOUNDATION

Land Protection Fund <i>Defend and steward land already under easement.</i>	\$ 26,629,493
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General Fund <i>Long-term operating reserves.</i>	\$ 13,087,500
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Conservation Fund <i>Permanent irrevocable endowment.</i>	\$ 3,339,165
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Traditions Fund <i>Permanent irrevocable endowment designed to accept planned gifts.</i>	\$ 63,473
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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.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Group A: The Montana Land Reliance

George Olsen; Rock Ringling;
Kendall Van Dyk, Vice-chairman

Group B: Woodson Family

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Group C: Ruby Valley Community

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Dan Durham

Outreach Coordinator

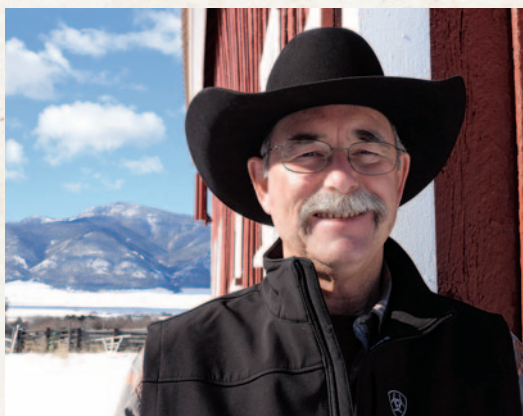
Dave Delisi

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

THROUGH THE YEARS, Ruby Habitat Foundation (RHF) has been not only very engaged in spreading the message of responsible use of our natural resources but also supporting the social makeup of the Ruby Valley and beyond. RHF is so fortunate to be located in a small rural valley that is in some ways removed from the busy-ness of the larger part of society. I feel this gives us an opportunity to provide a place for our guests to slow down and soak in the importance of maintaining open space for agriculture to operate, and, in turn, provide habitat for our wildlife and fish neighbors.

I think of a quote by Socrates, “True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us.” As each of us slows down some, we are better able to absorb new information and grow in our understanding of our natural resources. Sun, water, and soil is the basis for growing the nutrients that support animal and human life. RHF is positioned in just the right place for information to be shared and education to begin.

Each year RHF builds on the work of the years before, knowing that future years will be building on what is being tried now. I am always fascinated



by what is successful, but possibly even more so by what refinements need to be added, or at times realizing “this just isn’t going to be practical in this area.” Because of Craig and Martha Woodson’s generosity and that of our many partners, RHF is able to try new methods and ideas. Craig’s vision of the Woodson Ranch being a spot to appreciate the natural beauty of the area, to inspire each of us to be better resource managers, and even to be better at life, is continuing forward. Each year brings new challenges and new opportunities.

In looking forward, it is good to take lessons from the past. Gold was discovered in Alder Gulch of the Ruby Valley in the summer of 1863. One of the distinctive landmarks of the search for gold is what is known as the rock piles of Alder Creek, caused by the dredging of Alder Creek in the mining of gold. While the story of gold in the area is one of the most colorful in Montana, it has left behind the testament of short-term gain over long-term conservation of land. RHF is a support organization for The Montana Land Reliance (MLR). The two organizations complement each other in planning for long term preservation of open space and keeping working ranches operating into the future. I particularly like MLR’s slogan of “Cows not Condos.” The pressure of development in Montana is at an all-time high, so the message of resource accountability becomes more important each year.

I want to make sure our many generous partners know how much they are each appreciated. RHF would not be able to do the work that is being done without everyone joining together. Thank you.

—Neil Barnosky, RHF Chairman

The pressure of development in Montana is at an all-time high, so the message of resource accountability becomes more important each year.



RHF FINANCIAL REPORT

Income	\$	964,322
Expenses	\$	805,751
Net Income	\$	158,571
<hr/>		
Rural Heritage & Open Lands Fund	\$	133,382
Hill Education & Outreach Endowment	\$	192,381
Woodson Ranch Endowment	\$	9,986,494
General Fund	\$	176,581
Gilman Scholarship Fund	\$	116,463
Fixed Assets		
Improvements & Equipment	\$	376,781
Land	\$	9,074,831
Visitor Center & Art	\$	59,507
Total Assets	\$	20,116,420
		<i>as of 12-31-24</i>

Ruby River and Snowcrest Mountains

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McAllister, MT

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Monica Conrad Paoli
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Missoula, MT

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Freddy Avis
Bozeman, MT

Nick Bucklin
Mill Valley, CA

Augusta "Gusty" Clarke
New York, NY



HOW YOU CAN HELP

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

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

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



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 streamlined process in place through its investment team to assist donors to ensure a smooth, well-documented transaction.

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.



HELENA OFFICE

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406-443-7027 • info@mtlandreliance.org

SOUTHWEST OFFICE

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PO Box 452, Forsyth, MT 59327
406-580-8774 • mlrgp@mtlandreliance.org



Cover: *Upper Big Hole Valley*

Kevin League photo