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Major working ranch conservation easement protects vital sage grouse habitat in NW Colorado

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The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust recently completed a conservation easement on one of the largest working ranches in Northwest Colorado. Multiple partners contributed to the protection of 16,000 acres of key sage grouse habitat on the Cross Mountain Ranch in Moffat County, close to Dinosaur National Monument.

"This easement demonstrates the power and leverage the new conservation programs in the farm bill can have to benefit sage grouse. It's the locally driven conservation efforts like these that can help prevent the need for an endangered species listing," said Sen. Michael Bennet, who championed passage of the conservation title of the farm bill in 2014.

Chris West, executive director of CCALT, points out that the Cross Mountain conservation easement is a key piece to a broader conservation strategy in this landscape.

"The Cross Mountain Ranch easement connects three large private family-run ranching operations that have been secured via conservation easements in the past two years, assuring that these lands will continue to produce food and fiber for our growing population and permanently remain undeveloped," West said.

Half of the funding for the conservation easement comes from the Sage Grouse Initiative, via farm bill dollars administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This project represents the single largest easement purchased under the Initiative.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife, through funding provided by the lottery-supported Great Outdoors Colorado, is also a major funder of the easement. Gov. John Hickenlooper has supported the project from its inception in 2011. The easement is part of a larger effort championed by the governor, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, SGI, local conservation groups and local landowners to conserve habitat for the grouse and preserve local economies.

"Thanks to the family of Cross Mountain Ranch and their neighboring ranch families, we're seeing the power of voluntary conservation to keep the vast sagebrush lands intact where it matters most in our state and nationally," Hickenlooper said.

This important conservation project would not have happened without the foresight and vision of Ron and Kitty Boeddeker, who installed a deep

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conservation ethic and love for America's rich western heritage in their family. Kitty stressed that her husband, the late Ron Boeddeker, a deeply spiritual man, felt he was at home on the ranch and often reminded his friends and family that he was "simply a steward of the land and its legacy."

Moffat County supports an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 sage grouse, the largest population remaining in Colorado. The largest elk populations in Colorado also rely on this breathtaking expanse of sagebrush and bunchgrasses, as do mule deer and pronghorn.

"When you put together private working ranch lands interspersed with the Bureau of Land Management and Dinosaur National Park public lands, we now have more than a quarter million acres that are conserved forever in the heart of greater sage-grouse country," CICALT's West said. "That's an area more than twice the size of the city and county of Denver."

The number one threat to sage grouse is the fragmenting and degradation of its habitat. Sage grouse are birds of large landscapes, often called an umbrella species, because of the more than 350 kinds of wildlife that share its range.

Rex Tuttle, manager of Cross Mountain, and owner of a neighboring ranch that he has also protected with a conservation easement, is a strong supporter of both wildlife conservation and passing on a ranching legacy that's integral to the culture of Colorado.

"For ranch families like mine and others out here, our future depends on keeping our lands together, something that's harder and harder to do in today's economy," Tuttle said. "The Cross Mountain easement is more than important financially. It's about keeping an irreplaceable landscape together for future generations."

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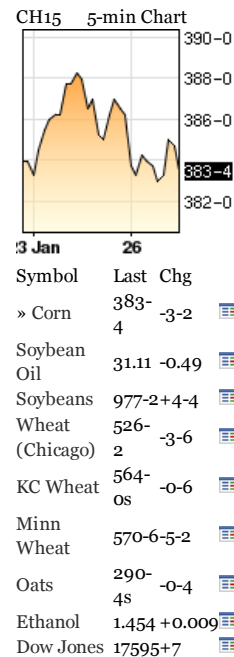
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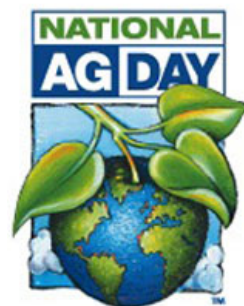


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