

Conservation easements approved for ranches north of Hayden



Story by Tom Ross

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Steamboat Springs — The Routt County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously this week to commit a little more than \$1 million of dedicated property tax revenue to place large conservation easements on a pair of western Routt County ranches whose history is woven into author Dorothy Wickenden’s best-selling nonfiction book “Nothing Daunted.”

The first property is Elkhead Ranch, where 1,560 acres of agricultural land will be conserved in the foothills of the Elkhead Mountains about 16 miles north of Hayden. The ranch is visible from Routt County Road 56.

The second is the Agner Mountain Ranch, where 1,337 acres of conserved agricultural land and wildlife habitat will be added to the 1,237 acres already under easement. The southern two-thirds of the ranch is typified by rolling hills covered in a mix of gambel oak and sagebrush. Calf Creek runs through the valley below, and Buck Mountain is a nearby landmark.

The Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust will hold the conservation easements.

Funding for the county’s purchase of development rights program comes from 1.5 mills of voter-approved property taxes that were renewed most recently in 2006. The purchase of development rights program is intended to give landowners an economically attractive alternative to selling land for development by instead compensating them for the development rights they agree to put under a conservation easement. By giving up those future development rights, the owners typically donate more than half of the appraised value of the land.

Ownership of the property remains with the landowner, who can use the land for purposes — often agriculture — that are in keeping with the terms of the easement.

Wickenden’s book is about Rosamond Underwood and Dorothy Woodruff, two single women from upstate New York who set out on a grand adventure in 1916, when they agreed to become schoolteachers at the frontier Elkhead School.

The schoolteachers lived on what now is the Howe Ranch, owned by Cal and Penny Howe, which is in close proximity to Agner Mountain Ranch and Elkhead Ranch.

Elkhead Ranch, originally known as the McKinley Homestead and established in the late 1800s, is among the oldest operating ranches in Routt County. It became the center of the Elkhead community and was home to the now-famous Elkhead School as well as the post office and store.

The Land Trust wrote that current ranch owner Heather Stirling recognized the need to protect the historic ranch with the initial conservation of 645 acres in 2009 and again this year with the final 1,560 acres of the ranch.

Agner Mountain Ranch, owned by James Spitzley, historically was part of Elkhead Ranch, and the ranches still are managed as one unit, though they are under separate ownership.

“The protection of this place is something that we will all treasure, and it’s my hope that our grandkids and future generations of Routt County residents will thank us for doing this,” Stirling was quoted as saying in a news release.

“The history and sheer beauty of the Elkhead Valley is truly amazing,” Spitzley was quoted as saying. “The unique nature of the landscape makes it stand out as a place unlike any other.”

The conservation easement on Elkhead Ranch was appraised at \$2.48 million. The landowners’ contribution of \$1.28 million, or 51.6 percent of the appraised value, is combined with the purchase of development rights program’s contribution of \$600,000, or 24.2 percent, and the balance of 24.2 percent is funded by the Grassland Preserve Program of the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, according to documents on file at the county.

The new easement on Agner Mountain Ranch was appraised at \$1.52 million, more than twice the original estimate of \$675,000. The landowners contributed 68.8 percent of that total, or \$1.05 million. The purchase of development rights program contributed \$475,000 to cover the remaining 31.2 percent.

The commissioners also agreed to devote as much as \$38,000 in purchase of development rights funds to cover transaction costs.

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