



Chris West (who directed CCALT up until May 2015), left, celebrates conservation progress at the Yust ranch with Jay and Jim Yust, and CCALT's Carolyn Aspelin, who worked closely with the family to close this important conservation easement. Photo courtesy of Deborah Richie with SGI.

The recent conservation easement on the Yust Ranch in northwestern Colorado represents not only the preservation of a five-generation ranching entity, it also illustrates the vitality of partnerships that expand federal programs and initiatives aimed at protecting wildlife habitat, particularly for species of concern.

The Yust family partnered with USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) and [Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust](#) (CCALT) to enroll 955 acres of land near the confluence of the Blue and Colorado rivers into a perpetual easement, held by CCALT. NRCS contributed \$715,000 through the NRCS-led [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) (SGI) and the former Farm and Ranch Land Program (FRPP). The 2014 Farm Bill merged FRPP with other easement programs to form the new [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP).

"Securing this easement was a priority for the agency," said Clint Evans, NRCS state conservationist in Colorado. "The property encompasses prime sagebrush-steppe, which is habitat for the greater sage-grouse."

The [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) designated greater sage-grouse as a candidate for listing under the [Endangered Species Act](#), spurring NRCS to accelerate conservation efforts to restore and protect habitat for bird. Optimal habitat for greater sage-grouse is also good for ranching, resulting in a win-win situation.

The Yust family has been on the ranch since 1884, and the family partnered to protect it for the long term. A conservation easement offered the ideal solution. SGI aims to conserve intact and thriving sage grouse habitat while providing matching funds to help purchase development rights and ensure lasting and productive ranchlands.

"Conservation easements are significant in Colorado, especially in the northwest portion of the state," said Dawn Jackson, NRCS assistant state conservationist in Colorado. "NRCS contributed to almost 70 easements in that area. This, only the second easement of its kind in Grand County, represents the introduction and expansion of protection for the sage grouse in targeted areas."

NRCS' commitment to protecting wildlife habitat has resulted in an investment of more than \$23 million between 2010 and 2014 to purchase easements in Colorado alone. Through SGI, more than 1,200 ranchers in 11 Western states have enhanced more than 4.4 million acres of habitat for sage grouse through easements and other conservation improvements.

Learn more about [NRCS' sage grouse conservation efforts](#).



The Yust ranch in Colorado harbors both important sage grouse habitat in the