

Conservation easement enables former ranch manager to purchase former Pearce ranch on White River

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Lex Collins purchased the Pearce Ranch, now known as the E Lazy S Ranch, with the help of a conservation easement. The easement permanently protects the ranch's unique habitat and wildlife.

COURTESY PHOTO

RBC | Anyone who has talked to Lex Collins knows how much the E Lazy S Ranch means to him. For years Collins stewarded its landscape with former landowners, Tom and Ruth Pearce, and their daughter Denise. The ranch's productive hayfields combined with spectacular scenery and a mile of White River frontage make it easy to see why Collins cares so deeply about this landscape. As of July 25, 2019, with leadership from Collins and in partnership with Hal and Christine Pearce and multiple conservation organizations, the E Lazy S Ranch was permanently conserved, ensuring that it will remain undeveloped forever.

Sandwiched among three existing conserved ranches, the E Lazy S Ranch was one of the largest remaining unprotected properties along the White River in an area known as Agency Park. Conservation of the ranch conserved 562 additional acres and tied together a 4,492-acre block of conserved land in the heart of the valley. The landscape is highly visible from County Road 8, also known as the Flat Tops Trail Scenic Byway, and makes up a portion of the view shed for travelers on State Highway 13.

The ranch's meadows and forests provide crucial habitat for local elk and mule deer herds for which northwest Colorado is renowned, as well as coyote, bald eagle, greater sandhill crane and numerous small mammals. The riparian areas along the property contain a box elder-narrowleaf cottonwood/red osier dogwood forest—a forest type unique to the Yampa and White River basins of northwest Colorado.

While the E Lazy S boasts spectacular conservation values, its story of ownership and generational transfer make it unique. Formerly known as the Pearce Ranch, the E Lazy S Ranch was owned by Tom and Ruth Pearce who purchased the ranch in 1961. Tom and Ruth ran a successful agricultural operation and were honored as the commercial breeders of the year by the Colorado Hereford Association in 1987. For many years, Lex Collins managed the ranch with Tom, Ruth and their daughter Denise. In 2014, after both Tom and Ruth had passed, the ranch was left to their three children: Denise, Hal, and Christine. Tragically, Denise passed away in 2015, but not before leaving her share of the ranch to Collins. It was the goal of Hal and Christine to honor the legacy of their family by keeping the ranch intact as an agricultural entity, and they were able to work together with Collins to develop a plan to allow him to become the sole owner of the ranch, using a conservation easement as the primary mechanism to generate revenue.

"I'm trying to carry on what Denise Pearce invested her life in: the Pearce Ranch. The conservation easement is the only way that is possible. I thank everyone involved for enabling this ranch to continue forward with its true heritage," Collins said when asked about the conservation project. Now that the E Lazy S ranch is conserved, he plans to continue to raise cattle and hay on the property, and eventually his daughter, Macy, plans to take over the agricultural operation.

"GOCO is proud to partner in this project, helping to conserve forever a ranch that contributes to a large block of conserved rangeland in the area, which is important wildlife habitat, and which also protects amazing, wide open views for those traveling along the Flat Tops Trail Scenic Byway, and State Highway 13," said GOCO Executive Director Chris Castilian. "Our sincere thanks to all who made it possible, especially Lex Collins and the Pearce family."

Conservation of the ranch was also supported by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). "Conserving working agricultural lands is one of the NRCS's highest priorities," said Clint Evans, NRCS Colorado State Conservationist. "The Agency's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program provides the much needed opportunities to forge and maintain valuable partnerships between organizations and landowners that make it easier for NRCS to help people help the land." The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited were also important partners for the project, providing funding to help offset the transaction costs.

“Few people have the opportunity to leave a perpetual legacy,” said CCALT’s Molly Fales, “but that is what Mr. Collins has done here. By conserving the E Lazy S Ranch, he has ensured that the Pearce family’s ranching legacy will remain, and he has cemented his own conservation legacy in the valley.”

Hal Pearce echoed these sentiments saying: “It may no longer have the Pearce name attached to it, but it’s still home. In the end it’s about the land and is really bigger than any of us.”

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