

Stranahan was 'home' on the range as reflected by announcement of more conserved land

Guest ranch developer valued working ranches, too

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Tom Ross



Sunset over Sand Mountain.

William Hayes

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Steve Stranahan, who died Jan. 7, 2019, was known to many in Steamboat Springs and Routt County as the owner of the Home Ranch, a luxury dude ranch on the edge of Clark in North Routt.

But Stranahan was no mere “dude.” His legacy here goes much further than entertaining guests at the well-kept property.

Rancher Jay Fetcher said Stranahan was more interested in the lush hay meadows where fat cows and their calves graze in the Elk River Valley than he was in golf courses, for example.

It was Stranahan, in the mid-1990s, who helped to spark a ranch conservation movement that has seen many working family ranches here strengthened and passed onto a younger generation. It was accomplished with the help of voter-backed conservation easements that allows ranchers and farmers to take cash out of their land without having to give it up.

So, the announcement in December 2019, shortly after the news that the Home Ranch had been sold, that Stranahan’s survivors had closed one more easement with the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, has special meaning throughout the region.

In addition to the 2,000 acres of their own land already conserved and spared from development in perpetuity, his family closed on an easement, on the 436-acre Fisher Meadows Ranch straddling Routt County Road 62 near Steamboat Lake State Park, in Stranahan's memory. A tributary of the Elk River flows through the ranch.

"This agriculturally productive valley is incredibly scenic and close to many recreational properties, making it desirable for residential development," Cattlemen's Land Trust spokesperson Megan Knott said. "Fisher Meadow was a critical gap in the conserved landscape. The commitment this community has to make conservation happen at a landscape level, hand in hand with agriculture, is worthy of national accolades."

At a glance

To date, Routt County's voter-approved purchase of development rights for agricultural lands has completed 67 projects representing a total of 50,102 acres. The fund contributed \$475,000 to the recent the Fisher Meadow Ranch, in addition to the contribution by the Stranahan family.

Fetcher said it was Stranahan, who befriended his Fetcher's late father John Fetcher and neighboring rancher Mary Moser, giving them the courage to close on easements that would forever protect their property from development.

"It was a remarkable relationship," Fetcher said. "Steve said, 'OK, I've got this fancy guest ranch, but if I can ensure the views will always be there, my clients will want to be here. I want this valley to look the way it does.'"

Taking a leap of faith

Fetcher said Stranahan gave his father the confidence needed to go forward in 1994-95 to close an easement with the American Farm Land Trust.

The key, he added, was the ability of easements to provide ranch families with a buffer against estate taxes, thus increasing the odds that ranches could be passed to the next generation.

Stranahan also encouraged Jay Fetcher to go public among the agricultural community and describe the benefits of easements.

"It led to the Routt County Open Lands Plan," Fetcher said.

And residents of the Yampa Valley have shown they value the conservation of ag lands.

Twice, in the past, Routt County voters have agreed to establish and renew a modest tax on their own property, to help conserve the ranch lands that define the upper Yampa Valley.

Tom Ross retired from the Steamboat Pilot & Today in 2018 after 36 years in the newspaper business. He continues to write a regular column for the paper.