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Collins Ranch Receives Colorado Leopold Conservation Award

DENVER, Colo. – The Collins Ranch of Kit Carson have been selected as the recipient of the 2020 Colorado Leopold Conservation Award®.

The Collins Ranch is owned and operated by the Toby and Amy Johnson family of Cheyenne County. The conservation practices that the Johnsons have implemented on their cattle ranch have improved the wildlife habitat, water quality and grass and soil health.

The award, given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, recognizes ranchers, farmers, and foresters who inspire others with their conservation efforts on private, working lands.

The Johnsons will be presented with the \$10,000 award on Thursday, July 30 at the Colorado Cattlemen's Association's 2020 Annual Convention held at the Colorado Springs Marriott in Colorado Springs.

In [Colorado](#) the award is presented annually by [Sand County Foundation](#), [Colorado Cattlemen's Association](#), [Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust](#), [Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association](#), and [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#).

“The 2020 Leopold Conservation Award nominees and applicants showcase the diversity of agriculture in Colorado and the dedication farming and ranching families have to the lands they steward, their communities, and their families,” said Erik Glenn, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust Executive Director. “These applicants featured an impressive array of families and operations from around the state. CCALT is proud of this year's recipient the Collins Ranch and the entire Johnson family.”

“Agriculture producers positively benefit the environment, our communities, and our economy while feeding a growing society through sustainable production practices that produce more by using less. This approach is the very backbone of stewardship that the Leopold Conservation Award honors,” said Steve Wooten, Colorado Cattlemen's Association President. “CCA warmly extends its congratulations to the Collins Ranch and the Johnson family on their well-deserved recognition, and for being leaders in Colorado's conservation and ranching industry.”

“The Collins Ranch demonstrates what’s possible through sound conservation efforts like rotational grazing and improved water distribution systems,” said Clint Evans, NRCS State Conservationist in Colorado. “The NRCS appreciates the Johnson family for their dedication to conservation and their accomplishments as land stewards.”

“Recipients of this award are real life examples of conservation-minded agriculture,” said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation President and Chief Executive Officer. “These hard-working families are essential to our environment, food system and rural economy.”

Among the many outstanding landowners nominated for the award were finalists: LK Ranch of Meeker in Rio Blanco County, and May Ranch of Lamar in Prowers County.

The Leopold Conservation Award in Colorado is made possible thanks to the generous contributions from Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Sand County Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, Stanko Ranch, American AgCredit, The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, The Nature Conservancy in Colorado, and McDonald’s.

Sand County Foundation presents the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 21 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation.

For more information on the award, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.

ABOUT COLLINS RANCH

Resiliency has defined Collins Ranch for more than a century. Under the same family’s management, the ranch has weathered the Dust Bowl, crippling droughts, volatile commodity prices and sizeable prairie fires.

Today, the ranch’s fragile grassland environment benefits from continued stewardship provided by Toby and Amy Johnson and their children: Brad, Haley, and Tess.

The Johnson’s cow-calf ranch on Colorado’s Eastern Plains consists mostly of shortgrass and sandsage prairie. The family believes they are grass farmers first and cattle ranchers second. They take pride in how well their grass grows in a semi-arid region.

They know overgrazing during a drought, or overstocking their herd when beef prices are high, could have devastating consequences for this brittle rangeland.

Transitioning to a rotational grazing system from grazing an area all season long has improved their soil’s health. Now each pasture is grazed for less than a week before the land gets a minimum of 100 days rest. Utilizing more, but smaller, pastures protects against overgrazing, allows for rapid range improvement, and achieves optimal nutrition for cattle.

By moving cattle to fields of corn stalks and wheat during the winter, native grasses and riparian areas have been protected. Likewise, switching the herd's calving season from late winter to May also proved beneficial to the health of cattle and grass.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service assisted Collins Ranch with 35 miles of underground pipelines to widely distribute water for livestock and wildlife. More than 50 water sources have been replaced or installed, with bird ramps placed in all water tanks. All water sources are located uphill to prevent erosion in meadows and riparian areas along creeks.

Among their other innovative conservation practices, the Johnsons released tens of thousands of beetles as a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly way to eradicate invasive and water-intensive tamarisk trees from riparian areas. They also work with Colorado Parks & Wildlife and a hunting outfitter to sustain the strong population of deer on their ranch, and they defer grazing and mark barbed wire fences to protect lesser prairie-chicken leks.

Tucked away on Colorado's Eastern Plains, Kit Carson (population 234) is what some would call flyover country. That compels the Johnsons to focus not only on the health of their ranch, but on the health of the community.

Amy is the chairperson of Kit Carson Rural Development, a nonprofit that works to fill the gaps that exist in a community without a department of public health, public housing, hospital, day care and recreational center. Since 2006 the group has built the town's only park and a business incubator, cleaned up a massive brownfield site, and created affordable housing for teachers and local families, by leveraged more than \$2.7 million in grants and contributions. Likewise, Toby serves on the local school board, which successfully sought a grant to build a new school.

The Johnsons are doing more than their part to keep this small town thriving so future generations will continue ranching and caring for Colorado's landscape.

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LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD PROGRAM

The Leopold Conservation Award is a competitive award that recognizes landowner achievement in voluntary conservation. Sand County Foundation presents the award in California, Colorado, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont).

www.leopoldconservationaward.org

SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

Sand County Foundation inspires and enables a growing number of private landowners to ethically manage natural resources in their care, so future generations have clean and abundant water, healthy soil to support agriculture and forestry, plentiful habitat for wildlife and opportunities for outdoor recreation. www.sandcountyfoundation.org

COLORADO CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Colorado Cattlemen's Association (CCA) is the state's only nonprofit trade organization exclusively representing Colorado's beef producers. Founded in 1867, CCA is the nation's oldest state cattlemen's association. www.coloradocattle.org

COLORADO CATTLEMEN'S AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST

Recognizing the need to help Colorado's ranching and farming families protect their agricultural lands, in the face of growing development and economic pressures, the Colorado Cattlemen's Association in 1995 formed the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT). To date, CCALT has partnered with hundreds of ranching families in the protection of more than 637,000 acres. www.ccalt.org

TRI-STATE GENERATION & TRANSMISSION ASSOCIATION

Tri-State Generation & Transmission Assoc. is a wholesale electric power supplier owned by the 43-member electric cooperatives and public power districts it serves. Tri-State generates and delivers electricity to its member systems that serve more than one million people across nearly 200,000 square miles of Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico and Wyoming. www.tristate.coop.

USDA NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

NRCS is a federal agency committed to helping private landowners care and make healthy choices for the land and water, while using them productively. Through voluntary incentive-based programs, the NRCS works directly with farmers, ranchers, forest owners and other land stewards to provide technical expertise and financial assistance to make conservation work on private lands. www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/co/home/