

**Testimony of Ogden Driskill
Before the House Committee on Agriculture
Cheyenne, Wyoming
May 4, 2010**

Chairman Peterson, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss conservation and the new farm bill.

I am a working, 6th generation rancher. Our family began ranching in Texas in the 1850s and trailed cattle into Wyoming by 1871. Love for the land and livestock has kept our family with a keen sense of the values of intact ranchland.

I am a member of the WY Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust Board of Directors. I also serve on the Board of the Land Trust Alliance, a national trade organization dedicated to establishing guidelines for quality conservation as well as ethical transactions and organizational oversight.

From these perspectives, I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of voluntary, conservation incentives on private lands, particularly those that protect our working ranch lands, permanently.

Thank you for some of the positive changes gained in the 2008 Farm Bill which provided:

- Generous funding of the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program;
- Reauthorization of the Grasslands Reserve Program;
- Elimination of the need for the federal government to be a co-holder of conservation easements but rightfully acknowledges the United States as funder;
- Recognition of the importance of land trusts as 3rd party entities that can hold, manage and enforce easements on private working landscapes; and,
- The ability to count a landowner donation of a portion of the conservation value as match.

Why is the conservation of private ranchland in Wyoming important?

- 43% of the land in Wyoming is privately owned. 93% of the private land is in agricultural production. We rank 1st in the nation for the average size of ranches and farms: the av. size is 3,600 acres with 80% of farms/ranches operating on 5,000 acres or more).
- Farm and ranch lands are the most productive in the state, agriculturally as well as from a broader biological perspective. They encompass much of our riparian lands, often buffer national parks and forests, and tend to be in the transition areas linking mountains and plains. Highly sought after by developers and trophy landowners, once

these lands are converted to other uses, they will no longer produce food and fiber or wildlife habitat for many species threatened with extinction.

- Nationally, about 40 million acres of land were newly developed between 1982 and 2007, bringing the national total to about 111 million acres. The American Farmland Trust describes the current rate as one acre every two minutes.
- Population growth in the Intermountain West has stimulated competition between exurban developers and agricultural producers for the allocation of land and other natural resources.
- The average price of a ranch in Wyoming increased by more than three times on a production-unit basis from 1993-1995 and 2002-2004, and the average price for irrigated meadowland in Wyoming nearly doubled.
- 8.7 million acres of agricultural land in Wyoming are managed by operators 65 years-of-age and older. What happens when they retire? These funds can help enable a new generation of producers by providing much needed capital and helping to keep ranches at ag value.

Why are the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and Grasslands Reserve Program Critical to Conserving Wyoming Ranchlands?

- Wyoming's wide open spaces and working ranchlands define the Cowboy State. There is a culture here which is clearly separate from the more urban areas of our country. The land use patterns of our state preserve this uniquely western culture, and also provide wildlife habitat – particularly winter range, breeding grounds and uninterrupted migration routes. They enable our second-largest industry, tourism, and co-exist with our first – the production of energy.
- WY ranchers are hit hard with regulatory programs – voluntary, incentive programs like FRPP and GRP have the potential to do far more good in the long run, at less cost.
- FRPP dollars leverage millions of dollars – from private individuals and foundations as well as state investment. The Trust for Public Land has determined that for every dollar spent on private land conservation, \$6 is returned in natural resource benefit, including forage for both livestock and wildlife and other ecosystem services.

How can we build and improve these programs?

- This year, \$6 million will be allocated to WY projects. There is at a minimum, a \$50 million backlog according to our state NRCS office – but just submitted projects. Every

land trust in this state has even more projects in the pipeline, without any advertising whatsoever. Please keep FRPP and GRP fully funded. Take the long view. The benefit of conservation easements does not produce instant gratification. They are an investment in our future. Keep these important tools in the 2012 Farm Bill. They provide the most efficient bang for our buck.

- Private land trusts are community based! And, they provide conservation benefit through the protection of private lands far more efficiently than the federal government! Enable private land trusts with the right tools. I offer two suggestions which would make our federal investment go many times further:
 - Reduce or eliminate the required cash match with FRPP. Allow third-party easements the same benefit of no cash match required as the federal government receives with GRP. Match dollars are difficult to raise and the need exponentially increases each year.
 - Consider funding the transactions costs for donated easements.

- Also, please stay clear of using these funds for the benefit of single species management. The best thing we can do for species like the sage grouse (and Wyoming has more than half of the existing population because of our open spaces!) is to keep large open lands unfragmented, sparsely populated, and available for the production of natural resources. And, this can only help other species as well.

What is working?

- Private land conservation groups that are geared specifically to working farms and ranches are making huge strides at protecting large critically important lands from development or conversion. They have the trust of the agricultural community as well as the expertise to write, document and enforce easements.

- PORT (Partnership of Rangeland Trusts), consisting of agricultural land trusts in Wyoming, California, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Nevada, Kansas and our newest member, Texas, has conserved over 1.7 million acres of ranchlands in the last 15 years, making it the fastest growing conservation segment in the country today. As of 2008 PORT members held 1 in 6 privately held easements in the United States.

- FRPP and GRP are great programs -- all they are lacking is slight refinement and increased funding. Effective conservation can happen on private lands. It is also the

most cost-effective. Keep land in private lands, under private ownership and on tax rolls. Let the oversight be taken on by private, community-based organizations.

Thank you for the opportunity to make agriculture remain viable into the next century. With your help now, we can ensure America's natural resources for the use and enjoyment of generations to come. Thank you for coming to hear from Wyoming and for all of your good work.