



WYOMING STOCK GROWERS AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST

MJ RANCH EASEMENT

The Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust recently obtained an easement on more than 2,000 acres of a family-owned working ranch – known as the MJ Ranch – southeast of Boulder. The easement was completed thanks to the collaborative efforts of several public and private partners led by The Conservation Fund, and is the largest purchased conservation easement in the Green River valley.

The MJ Ranch easement protects sagebrush grassland habitat ideal for a variety of wildlife, including sage grouse, pronghorn antelope, burrowing owl, mountain plover, pygmy rabbit, sage sparrow and white-tailed prairie dog. The ranch also borders critical moose winter habitat along the East Fork River. The Jonah Interagency Mitigation and Reclamation Office (JIO), established to mitigate impacts of oil and gas development on the nearby Jonah Field, and the Wyoming Game & Fish Department identified the MJ Ranch as a top conservation priority.

“The MJ Ranch Project has great value due to its location, proximity to sagebrush communities and the diversity it provides in relationship to the riparian community, hayfields and future management,” said Dan Stroud, habitat mitigation biolo-



MJ Ranches near Boulder, WY

gist for Wyoming Game and Fish and representative of the JIO. “Proximity to adjacent sage grouse leks relates to its importance for nesting and brood-rearing for sage grouse.

WSGALT and The Conservation Fund worked with owners of the ranch to place the property under a conservation easement, while the Wyoming Game & Fish Department developed habitat enhancement plans for the land. WSGALT will monitor and enforce the easement, permanently preserving the ranch’s traditional agricultural operation.

“As an agricultural land trust we work to preserve and protect working ranchlands and their ranching heritage. The MJ Ranch has had two owners in its lifetime, which demonstrates that this is not only critical wildlife habitat, but critical agricultural land that has been productive for decades,” said

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Laura Dalles, project lead for WSGALT. “The MJ Ranch is extremely productive agricultural land with 600 acres of irrigated native hay and runs 250 cow/calf pairs. Having an easement on this ranch protects critical public land borders from development and fragmentation, an issue of great concern to public land managers.”



MJ Ranches near Boulder, WY

“Even though the ranch is paid for, there are operating costs on the ranch,” states owner Mark Jones. “Through the conservation easement we were able to pull together money for operational expenses which will help with keeping the ranch going. We saw the value in the land as a resource which we could use to keep the ranch going. Our goal is to keep the ranch in agriculture and this allows us to do that.”

The Natural Resource Conservation Service and the JIO provided the majority of the funding for the purchase of the conservation easement. Additional funding came from the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

“This landmark conservation deal preserves Wyoming’s legacy of ranching, with the added benefit of protecting land for wildlife,” said Luke Lynch, Wyoming field representative for The Conservation Fund. “We thank our partners for their efforts and for recognizing the value of this land.”

The Fund pioneered the use of JIO oil and gas mitigation funds for land conservation earlier this year with the purchase of a conservation easement on more than 1,000 acres of a working ranch near Daniel known as the Cottonwood Ranches.

“These oil and gas mitigation funds are an increasingly important tool for land conservation, providing capital during a time of economic uncertainty and alleviating pressures on public agencies’ budgets,” added Lynch.

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