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Balancing act

County sheep, cattle rancher recognized for conservation, political activism

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Courtesy photo

Paradise, O'Toole style. Patrick and his grandson, Tiarnan Lally. O'Toole says that the valley the ranch occupies is rich with wildlife and remains much the same as when early explorers passed through the area.

By Trudy Balcom

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SAVERY — A lifelong rancher, public servant and conservationist from Carbon County will be honored next week at the Roundup Barbeque, an annual event hosted by the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust.

Each year, the organization honors the conservation efforts of a Wyoming rancher with the Kurt C. Bucholz Award. The award is named in honor of another former Carbon County rancher and conservationist from the Saratoga area.

On Aug. 26, the award will be presented to Patrick O'Toole of the Ladder Ranch.

The Ladder Ranch includes 12,000 deeded acres straddling the Wyoming-Colorado line in the Sierra Madre Range, and includes the watersheds of the Little Snake River and Battle Creek.

In addition to utilizing their own acreage, the Ladder Ranch runs about 800 cattle and 7,000 sheep on U.S. Forest Service and BLM lands from northern Colorado to the Red Desert near Wamsutter in a seasonal operation that uses rotational grazing. The sheep are raised for both meat and wool.

O'Toole's operation focuses on balancing between the needs of the ranching operation and the needs of wildlife for habitat and clean water.

"That's what we try to do — balance conservation and production," he said.

That search for balance seems to define most of the things O'Toole does — in his ranching operation, his politics, even the physical setting of his family's ranch — balanced between two states and between mountains and desert.

O'Toole, who is originally from south Florida, attended Colorado State University in the early 1970s, where he met his wife, Karen Salisbury, who was raised on the Ladder Ranch. Karen and

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Patrick's children and their families also help to operate the ranch, carrying on the family tradition.

Politics outside the box

O'Toole served in the Wyoming State Legislature from 1986 to 1992, elected as a Democrat in a county (and state) where the party is a distinct minority.

He was later selected as the only rancher handpicked by President Bill Clinton to serve on the Western Water Policy Review Commission in 1997.

But O'Toole condemned the commission's findings, published as "Water in West," in 1998, as anti-agriculture and questioned the commission's recommendations to turn more power over the West's water resources to the federal government:

"...I believe holding together the states' constitutionally given rights and working together with the local infrastructure we've developed over the years is a more effective way to deal with these very, very complex governance problems," O'Toole wrote in an essay that appeared in "High Country News," in June 1998.

Instead of unwieldy, top-down federal regulation, O'Toole favors working cooperatively at the local level to solve problems on-the-ground, and that's what he's done on his ranch.

O'Toole has remained politically involved in the issues of the surrounding ranching and conservation. He currently serves as president of the Family Farm Alliance, a non-profit that advocates for irrigated agriculture in the West.

Partnerships benefit conservation

Working with local representatives of U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management and other agencies a rancher must deal with, he has worked to improve the habitat on his ranch for fish, birds and wildlife.

Instead of having an antagonistic relationship, O'Toole has focused on building partnerships and solving problems.

"We're just never going to be successful without partnerships," he said.

A recent article published about the ranch was entitled: "The Polar Opposite of the Bundys," referring to the ranch uprising and occupation of a national wildlife refuge staged by another famous western ranching family.

"This valley is one of the most remarkable examples anywhere in the U.S. of what can be accomplished," he said.

"People are realizing it's agriculture that's going to do conservation," he said.

The Ladder Ranch was recognized in 2014 by the Sand County Foundation as the Leopold Conservation Award winner. O'Toole has also been lauded for voluntarily enrolling portions of the ranch in the Sage Grouse Initiative, preserving the bird's habitat on his ranch. Ladder Ranch has also been recognized by the Audubon Society and named as an Important Bird Area.

Carrying on the tradition

O'Toole is also a longtime member of the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association and the Stockgrowers Land Trust, which was started by Carbon County ranchers about 10 years ago. The Trust seeks to protect Wyoming's historic working ranch landscapes from development to preserve ranching traditions and the ranching economy.



Courtesy photo

Patrick O'Toole regularly addresses conservation groups and has testified before Congress and the state legislature advocating for agricultural issues dozens of times.



Courtesy photo

Patrick O'Toole with his grandson McCoy O'Toole, the next generation to be raised on the Ladder Ranch.

O'Toole knew Kurt Bucholz personally, saying that Bucholz succeeded him in the state legislature. He praised Bucholz's deep understanding of the North Platte River's ecosystem, and the water issues surrounding irrigation.

"Kurt was just a tremendous water guy, really," said O'Toole said.

"It's a tremendous honor for me, really, he was a genius."

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