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Ag Partnership Conserves Historic Stock Drive in Big Horn Mountains

Cheyenne, Wyoming – Cattlemen, woolgrowers, anglers, hikers, and hunters will continue to enjoy Beartrap Meadows in the Big Horns thanks to a conservation easement completed by the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust with the support of Johnson County ag organizations, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The project conserves a historic stock rest in western Johnson County that has been used by agricultural producers for almost a century. Located high in the southern Big Horn Mountains near the headwaters of Beartrap Creek, ranchers in the region rely on the area as a stopover for rest for their cattle and sheep while driving them to summer grazing pastures. More than 20,000 head of livestock trail through annually, benefitting from the area's plentiful water and forage. Under the terms of the agreement, the land and the stock rest will be conserved in perpetuity.

The appeal of Beartrap Meadows extends beyond agricultural uses. According to landowner Bruce Pheasant, a Kaycee rancher, hundreds of recreational users from the U.S. and abroad enjoy the landscape each year, including its remarkable trout fishing. Through the "bargain sale" of a conservation easement, the Pheasant family will preserve the property in its current and historic use as a stock rest. The Pheasant family generously donated a significant portion of the fair market value of the conservation easement and the partners listed above contributed to the reduced purchase price. In addition, the family has worked out an agreement with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department that allows the public to continue to fish on the property.

"It's a little piece of paradise," Pheasant said. "The easement is going to help so many people in so many ways." Beartrap Meadows is about 30 miles from Kaycee and is accessed by roads from Kaycee, Buffalo, Tensleep, and Casper.

The project brought together a unique set of six partners. In addition to the in-kind contribution from the Pheasant Family, contributions from the following made the project possible: the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, the Johnson County Wool Growers, the Johnson County Cattlemen, and private donations.

Dale Graves, president of the Johnson County Cattlemen, said the easement serves a vital role for producers who rely on Beartrap Meadows for the movement of their livestock – a "connecting link" for cattle drives on that part of the Big Horn Mountains. "Without it, moving livestock between these different drives and pastures would be very difficult if not impossible," he said. "For years it has been a mainstay offering a place to water, graze and rest livestock that are on trail."

President of the Wyoming Wool Growers Association Peter John Camino said wool producers in Johnson County are glad that such an important part of the stock trail is secure. "We don't have to worry about losing that portion of the trail to development and we can keep our trailing system

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alive. If houses had been built there, it would have stopped us. It's a critical intersection," he said.

Wyoming State Treasurer Mark Gordon grew up on a ranch that adjoins Beartrap Meadows. As a kid he trailed cows and calves to summer range through the meadows, which sit about 8,000 feet above sea level. "It is not only a crossing for livestock, but a corridor for wildlife, a place to fish, and a place where at least one dude outfit offers summer rides," Gordon said. Once, during a June snowstorm, Gordon and his sister found welcome shelter in a shepherd's wagon.

Gordon said the partners involved in the project have "preserved a historically important thoroughfare as well as a culturally significant and beautiful part of Wyoming, thereby assuring its use for generations to come."

Beartrap Creek is a tributary of the Powder River. It is surrounded by grasslands that feed a rich array of resident wildlife during seasonal migration. It is not unusual to see moose foraging in the rich meadows along with elk, mule deer, and red fox that inhabit the area.

Seasonally, the property provides breeding, nesting and brood-rearing habitat for sandhill cranes, Canada geese, mallards and other waterfowl. Raptors frequent the property, including red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, and bald eagle.

The area was first settled by Pheasant's grandfather in the early 1900s. Five generations of the Pheasant family have been involved in the sheep-ranching operation, with the sixth generation preparing to carry on the business.

"This land plays such a central role in so many peoples' lives," Pheasant said. "The conservation easement is not just for me or my family. It's for everyone to enjoy."

Director of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department Scott Talbott noted the benefit for anglers. "This easement will secure a publicly accessible stream fishing opportunity in an area of Wyoming where public stream fisheries are few and far between," he said.

Added Gordon, "The easement represents a truly appropriate and visionary purpose for a conservation easement and I commend all those who brought it to fruition."

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About the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust

The Stock Growers Land Trust is dedicated to conservation through ranching. Based in Cheyenne, the non-profit organization serves the entire state and is Wyoming's only agricultural land trust. Through partnerships with ranch families, the Stock Growers Land Trust holds and stewards conservation easements on almost 200,000 acres of land on ranches and farms throughout Wyoming. Founded in 2000 by the 140-year-old Wyoming Stock Growers Association, it is one of the largest among the 1,659 regional land trusts in the United States. For more information, visit www.wsgalt.org.