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PRIVATE LANDS AT DEVILS TOWER CONSERVED IN PERPETUITY

DEVILS TOWER -- An agricultural conservation easement on almost 5,000 acres south and west of Devils Tower has been completed by the Driskill family and the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust. The primary purpose of the conservation easement is to protect the agricultural values of the property; additionally, the easement will conserve the wildlife and open spaces enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of annual visitors to the nation's first national monument, designated by President Theodore Roosevelt on September 24, 1906.

The conservation easement was made possible by the generosity of the Bear Lodge Cattle Co. and Ogden and Zannie Driskill who contributed a significant portion of the value of the conservation easement. No stranger to supporting conservation, Ogden Driskill stepped off the Board of Directors of the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust prior to making application for the project. More recently, he served on the Board of Directors of the Land Trust Alliance, a national organization of more than 1,600 land trusts throughout the United States. Driskill also served as Chairman of the Partnership of Rangeland Trusts until 2014 and continues service on its Board.

"I can't think of a better legacy to leave for future generations than to keep a ranch in production forever," said Driskill. "In an era where nothing is permanent, it gives me great pride in knowing that the ranch will continue providing clean water, wildlife habitat and food and fiber for generations to come."

Significant funding for the project was received from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), through the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. Kim Berns, Director for Easement Programs for the NRCS, thanked the Driskill family for their commitment to voluntary conservation. "Keeping large landscapes intact

across a mosaic of ownership – federal, state and private – can only be achieved through voluntary conservation efforts. NRCS, in concert with our partners, the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust, thank the Driskill family for their commitment to the conservation of working land.”

Wyoming’s Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust contributed match dollars to the project in recognition of its special significance according to Bob Budd, “The viewshed around Devils Tower is iconic for all of us. Most of us learned about our first National Monument in the fourth grade, and there is something incredibly spiritual about this place. This easement maintains those values, and along with them, the rich agricultural and wildlife heritage of Crook County and the Black Hills.”

Additional contributions were received from individuals across the state and from the Stock Growers Land Trust’s Cultural Landscape Fund in memory of Alvin Wiederspahn, former Land Trust chairman and an enthusiastic champion of the project.

The capstone contribution to the project was supplied by The Conservation Fund, which made a grant available through its Northern Great Plains Conservation Initiative. “Native grasslands are disappearing at an alarming rate, and innovative conservation efforts like this can both protect important ecological resources and maintain the economic value of ranches,” said Gates Watson, Northwest Director with The Conservation Fund. The Stock Growers Land Trust stated that the project could not have happened without this final critical funding component and the support of each of the project partners.

"Conservation easements can be effective and appropriate when landowners, conservationists and others work cooperatively for and agree on the benefit," said Wyoming Governor Mead. "They can help to preserve our agriculture heritage, protect natural resources and contribute to the open spaces that attract visitors to our state."

The conservation easement is on land which is part of a larger livestock operation known as the Campstool Ranch, one of the oldest ranches in northeast Wyoming. The first of the Driskill family to settle in Wyoming was William Walter “Tobe” Driskill who first came to the region with his brother Bud when they trailed cattle from Texas to northeast Wyoming in 1879.

The Campstool Ranch was purchased by Jesse Driskill in 1910 at a sheriff’s auction. Since that time, the Driskill family has added numerous former homesteads to the operation, some of which were the earliest homesteads in Crook County, Wyoming.

The Driskill family honors these early settlers by naming ranch pastures after them, including Anderson, Shields, Gordon, Currycomb and Walsh.

The Driskill family is known to have had the first grazing permit on forest land in the United States on a large portion of the Black Hills Forest Reserve which is speculated to have been issued in the early 1900's.

"Link" Driskill was part of the contingent of "Rough Riders" organized by famed Deadwood Sheriff Seth Bullock that were the hit of President Roosevelt's inaugural parade.

Today, more than 400,000 visitors a year come to Crook County, and Devils Tower is the main attraction. The Monument is an important economic development generator for the northeastern corner of the state and is a favorite stop for bikers and other travelers on their way to and from nearby Sturgis and Mt. Rushmore. Visitors to Devils Tower National Monument will continue to enjoy the scenic views of the Belle Fourche River conserved by the easement. In addition, portions of the property can be viewed from Wyoming State Highway 24 which passes east of Devils Tower.

Tim Reid, National Park Service Superintendent for Devils Tower National Monument, said, "The world-class viewshed surrounding Devils Tower is important to many people on many levels. This conservation easement is a testimony to family vision and collaborative partnerships coming together in protecting the singular natural, agricultural, historic and spiritual values that comprise this important landscape."

In the 1930s the importance of Devils Tower to many Plains Indians was recorded in first-person narratives. Called Matho Thipila, or "Bear Lodge," by the Lakota, the Tower rises almost 1,300 feet above the surrounding terrain. Most of the stories talk about how the Tower was created and feature a climbing bear using its claws to score the Tower's sides.

Devils Tower also has a devoted niche of climbers who ascend it each year according to schedules that protect important tribal ceremonies and the nesting season of peregrine falcons. There are numerous stories of early attempts to reach the top of the Tower using ladders, ropes and even a parachute. In October 1941, George Hopkins was stranded on top of Devils Tower after dropping from an airplane on a \$50 bet. Six cold days and nights later, a team of climbers summoned from the Tetons, Denver and New England brought him down.

For most Americans, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* introduced them to the spectacular formation of Devils Tower. The 1977 movie, starring Richard Dreyfuss, was Steven Spielberg's first critical and financial success.

This historic ranch provides important yearlong, seasonal, and transitional habitat for a variety of wildlife, including a substantial number of avian species such as bald and golden eagles, peregrine and prairie falcons, herons, grebes, osprey, egrets, terns, hawks, sharp-tailed grouse and Mirriam's turkey. The peregrine and prairie falcons that nest on Devils Tower find substantial hunting opportunities on the hay meadows and along the banks of the Belle Fourche River, or "beautiful fork" as named by French explorers.

Because it is situated so close to Devils Tower, the ranch is especially vulnerable to subdivision and development. Such development would eliminate the open spaces that are required for the local communities of birds of prey and severely limit or eliminate habitat for the ground-dwelling birds in the area.

Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust spokesman, founding board member Dr. John Lunt, described the work that had gone into the project, "I had climbed Devils Tower several years before the inception of the Stock Growers Land Trust, and had appreciated its uniqueness and beauty since that time. When I became involved with the beginnings of the Land Trust 15 years ago, I was delighted to learn that fellow founding Board member Ogden Driskill and his family owned and operated the historic and productive working ranch surrounding a good part of the Monument. Since that time we had dreamed and schemed how to protect this lovely place that frames the Tower, America's first National Monument. This dream became possible thanks to the Driskill family who donated a significant portion of the necessary funds to complete the project, Pam Dewell, Executive Director of the Stock Growers Land Trust, Kim Berns of the NRCS, Bob Budd of the WWNRT, and Luke Lynch of The Conservation Fund. Luke Lynch deserves special mention as he committed the final funds from the Conservation Fund necessary to complete the project. We continue to mourn his loss last May in a freak avalanche on Mt. Moran."

The Bear Lodge Cattle Company conservation easement project was featured in the Department of the Interior's "America's Great Outdoors" initiative. Honored as a Centennial Ranch by Wyoming's State Historic Preservation Office, the Campstool Ranch has been owned and operated by the Driskill family for more than 100 years. Conservation easements will help the family's succession planning as the 6th generation assumes ranch management.

Note: Media can find project area map and photos at the following site:
<https://wsgalt.egnyte.com/fl/bhaKieKWCl>

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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 approximately 223,000 acres of working land 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.