

LANDS ADMINISTRATION BRANCH

The Lands Administration Branch is committed to addressing the WGFD's property rights objectives for improved habitat conservation, increased hunting and fishing access, and monitoring of current property rights. Branch personnel continued to work on a variety of habitat related property rights projects around the state guided by goals and objectives of WGFD regulations, Commission policy, the Strategic Habitat Plan, and other administrative guidelines. Significant gains in habitat conservation through acquisition of several conservation easements were among the Branch's accomplishments.

Conservation Easements

Despite Wyoming's abundant natural resources and low population density, wildlife habitat and open spaces are threatened by increases in human activities. Millions of acres of farm and ranch land throughout Wyoming and the west are being lost or are expected to be lost in the near future to various forms of development. As farms, ranches and other open areas are converted to home sites, subdivisions, roads and other types of development, wildlife habitat becomes fenced and fragmented. Habitat fragmentation is one of the greatest threats to wildlife resources and is one of the WGFD greatest concerns.

Habitat enhancement and lands conservation strategies have been developed and refined by the Department to take advantage of opportunities to curtail habitat fragmentation and to improve wildlife resources in the state. Conservation easement acquisition, through purchase or donation, is one strategy that improves wildlife resources and benefits private landowners.

North Fork Ranch Conservation Easement

The conservation easement project on the North Fork Ranch was finally completed. The easement prohibits any significant development on approximately 1,400 of private lands near Lander. The easement conserves quality habitat for numerous wildlife species including mule deer, elk, pronghorn, sage grouse and other wildlife. The property is located about a mile east of the Department's Mexican Creek Conservation Easement. There is no public access associated with the easement, but the Hansen family may consider a Hunter Management arrangement.

This conservation easement was made possible by contributions and assistance from several conservation organizations. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked closely with Department personnel and also provided significant funds and technical support. The Commission received considerable financial assistance from the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) administered by the NRCS, and the WWNRT Board. Other key contributions were made by the Rocky Mountain Elk Fountain (RMEF), Bowhunters of Wyoming (BOW), the Tri-state Chapter of the Safari Club International, the Wyoming Governor's Big Game License Coalition (WGBGLC), and the Wildlife Heritage Foundation of Wyoming. In addition, the Hansen family donated a significant portion of the easement's appraised value.

Red Butte Conservation Easements

The presence of the Mexican Creek Conservation Easement and the recent success of the North Fork Ranch Conservation Easement helped a coalition of landowners decide to donate conservation easements on approximately 1,100 acres of private lands in the Red Butte area near Lander (Figure 1).

- Commission Owned Conservation Easements
- Laramie Peak
- Billy Miles
- Medicine Lodge
- Breteche Creek
- Flying S Ranch
- Deer Creek Ranch
- Mexican Creek
- Riverbend Ranch
- North Fork Ranch
- Red Butte – Cook Trust
- Red Butte – Mexican Creek Ranch
- Red Butte - Krall
- Red Butte – Kalgren
- Red Butte – Paulson
- Red Butte – Welch
- Red Butte – Wilson/Faruki

The group of six conservation minded landowners were also concerned with encroaching development and resulting fragmentation of private lands in the area. Easement donations by these landowners provided a land corridor connecting the Mexican Creek and North Fork easements.

RMEF provided technical assistance and helped negotiate easement donation terms with the landowners. Lander regional personnel also provided invaluable assistance with the Red Butte and North Fork Ranch easement acquisitions.

Riverbend Ranch Conservation Easement

Services Division administrative personnel negotiated and completed a donation of approximately 5,760 acres of private lands near Laramie. The donation provides conservation of high value riparian habitats with mature cottonwood stands. The easement limits development in an area under intense pressure for small tract home-site development. Another result of the generous donation were significant federal income tax reductions available for the landowner.



Figure 1. Red Butte Conservation Easements

Breteche Creek Conservation Easement Amendment

An additional 40 acres were added to the Breteche Creek conservation easement. The easement, located near Cody, was acquired with highway mitigation funds in 2003. The property owners decided to donate the 40 acre parcel that is adjacent to the original easement. The easement prohibits development of approximately 640 acres of quality elk and mule deer habitat.

Flying A Ranch Conservation Easement

Negotiations continued for the Flying A Ranch conservation easement during the past year. These private lands have been included in the Department's Private Lands Public Wildlife, Walk-in Access Program for several years. Discussions between local game wardens and the Britain family led to a conservation easement project on approximately 3,000 acres of private land in the southern Big Horn Mountains. The landowners also understood the need for hunter access for elk management in the area, and have agreed to include seasonal public access in the easement. The easement's private lands will provide access to thousands of acres of state and public lands. It is anticipated the project will be completed in the very near future.

Currant Creek Conservation Easement

Currant Creek Ranch CE is approximately 1,400 acres. The ranch is generally located about 35 miles south of Rock Springs in the Little Mountain area about 3-5 miles east of Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Legal location is portions of: T.15N. R.107W, T.14N. R.107W.,T.14N. R.106W.,T.15N R.105W.,T.14N. R.105W. This ranch contains habitat for a wide variety of wildlife species. Several Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) species are found within the ranch. The owners of the ranch have decided to restrict development and improve habitat conditions through a conservation easement. The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, with its emphasis on funding for sensitive species conservation, may help fund the project.

Petersen Conservation Easement

The Petersen family has decided to place a conservation easement on approximately 500 acres of private lands near Mt. View (Figure 2). The area is experiencing a rapid transition from traditional farms and ranches to small parcel second home developments. The Petersen property supports high value sage grouse, pronghorn, elk, mule deer, and moose habitat. The proposed conservation easement will permanently prohibit any development.



Figure 2. Petersen Conservation Easement

LaBarge Area Ranch Conservation Easement

Negotiations have been initiated for a conservation easement on approximately 3000 acres of extremely high quality wildlife habitat located between Big Piney and LaBarge (Figure 3). Private lands considered for the easement support sage grouse, pronghorn, moose, elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer habitat. Valuable migration corridors and crucial parturition areas are also present on the property. A variety of funding sources recognize the quality of the project and are generously providing support for the proposed conservation easement. These potential partners include the FRPP, the WWNRT Board, the WGFD Habitat Trust Fund, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and others.



Figure 3. LaBarge Area Conservation Easement – WWNRT Board Tour.

Whiskey Basin Conservation Easements

Several landowners in the Whiskey Basin area near Dubois requested information about the Department's conservation easement program. Concern for encroaching development of surrounding private lands and the desire to assist area wildlife resources were primary motivating factors for the landowner interest. The private lands under consideration for conservation easements provide quality wildlife habitat, and important buffer zones for the Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep herd. The WGFD will cooperate with the Jackson Hole Land Trust and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep on these easement acquisitions.