

LANDS ADMINISTRATION BRANCH

The Lands Administration Branch is committed to addressing the Department'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 Department regulations, Commission policy, the Strategic Habitat Plan, and other administrative directives. Significant gains in habitat conservation through acquisition of several conservation easements were among the Branch's accomplishments.

Conservation Easements

With the assistance of a supportive Commission and Administration, the Department has developed an active conservation easement program that rivals any in the state. Progressive landowners continue to contact the Department to discuss conservation easement possibilities. Awareness of the program, and understanding of property rights issues, including conservation easement purposes by local Department personnel have greatly aided the Branch. Relationships fostered with landowners by Aquatic and Terrestrial Habitat Biologists, Wildlife Biologists, Game Wardens, and Habitat and Access Specialists have greatly enhanced easement opportunities and have assisted negotiations in many instances.

Conservation Easement Funding

Landowners throughout the state have become more interested in conservation easements during the last several years. Genuine desire to retain family run agricultural enterprises and favorable income tax laws are reasons most landowners consider conservation easements. Landowners must decide if federal income tax benefits associated with easement donation best fulfill their easement objectives, or if the easement needs to be sold. Many landowners find it necessary to sell conservation easements to organizations like the Department, or other entities like the Upper Green River Valley Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), the Wild Turkey Federation (WTF), the Jackson Hole Land Trust (JHLT), Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust and others. Most landowners and easement holding organizations agree on discounted, or bargain sale, purchases of conservation easements where landowners donate a portion of the value of the easement.

While opportunities for purchased conservation easements are increasing throughout the state, funding remains extremely limited. Department and Commission funds generally provide start-up money for easements, but due to high easement costs, these funds are rarely sufficient to cover all costs. The Department must therefore compete with other organizations for limited funds from other sources. Several private, state, and federal funding sources are available. The Department's emphasis on conservation easements characterized by quality fish and wildlife values greatly improves our funding opportunities.

Figure 1 depicts fund raising results for two recent conservation easement acquisitions (Hansen's North Fork Ranch and Britain's Flying A Ranch) and for three pending easements (Diamond H Ranch, Currant Creek Cattle Company, and Petersen Place). This example demonstrates positive leverage of Commission funds either already spent to acquire, or expected to be spent for easement acquisitions. Commission funds amount to less than ten percent of the total value of conservation easements.

- **Conservation Easement Funding and Assistance Partners
- Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust Account Board.
- Wyoming Governor's Big Game License Coalition.
- Heritage Foundation of Wyoming.
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program - NRCS.
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.
- The Nature Conservancy.
- The Mule Deer Foundation.
- Bowhunters of Wyoming.
- Safari Club International.
- Johan Interagency Office.
- Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative.
- The Conservation Fund.
- Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.
- Landowner Donations.
- Wyoming Game and Fish Department Habitat Fund.
- Red Butte – Wilson/Faruki

The success of leveraging Commission funds with outside partners results partially from quality projects, detailed grant applications with biological and scientific information provided by local personnel, and from visionary landowners who recognize the importance of wildlife resources.

The Commission has also shown support for easement purchases by other organizations by donating funds for easement projects.

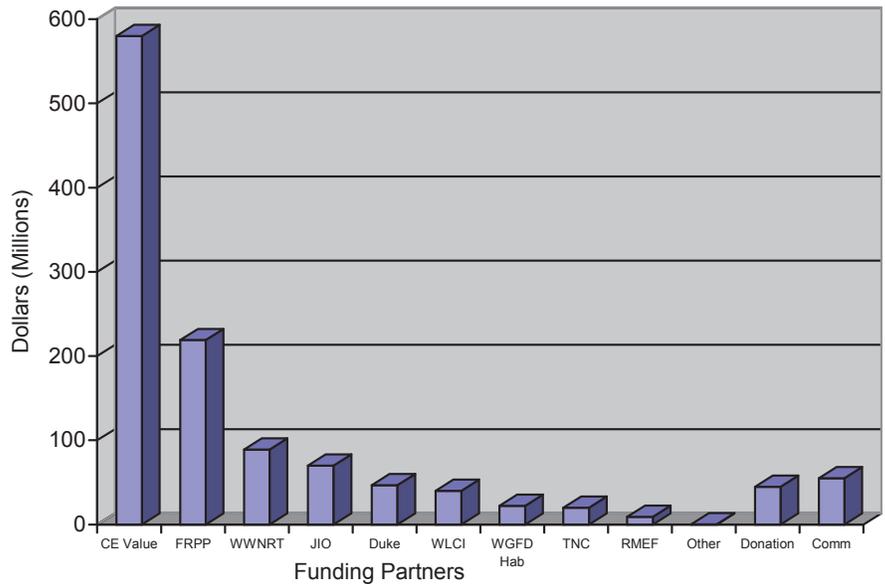


Figure 1. Conservation easement value and funding partner contributions.

LANDS ADMINISTRATION PROJECTS

Flying A Ranch

After many delays, the Flying A Ranch conservation easement project was finally completed. The easement was acquired on lands owned by Bob and Patsy Britain in a southern area of the Bighorn Mountains. The easement restricts development and allows access to licensed hunters on approximately 2,800 acres of private lands. The project also improves access to several thousand acres of adjacent public lands.

Petersen Conservation Easement

Work continues on the Petersen conservation easement on approximately 500 acres of private lands near Mountain View. 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. It will also help to demonstrate the value of easements for private land conservation in an area of the state where few exist.



Figure 2. Flying A Ranch conservation easement.

Currant Creek Conservation Easement

Fund raising efforts have been successful, and the Currant Creek Ranch conservation easement project continues toward a successful completion. The Currant Creek owners have made tremendous improvements to the riparian areas throughout the ranch, which included approximately 3,400 acres of private lands. The property consists of important habitat for a wide variety of wildlife species. Several unique reptile and fish species are found within the private lands on the ranch including midget faded rattlesnakes, pygmy rabbits, and Colorado River cutthroat trout. The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, with its emphasis on funding for sensitive species conservation, has agreed to help fund the project.

Diamond H Ranch Conservation Easement

Negotiations continue for a conservation easement on approximately 3000 acres of extremely high quality wildlife habitat on the Diamond H Ranch. 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 Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust Account Board (WWNRTB), the Wyoming Game and Fish Department Trust Fund (WGFD Trust Fund), the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Johna Interagency Office (JIO), the Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) and others.



Figure 3. Diamond H Ranch tour with the WWNRTB and landowners.

Ring Lake and Torrey Lake Conservation Easements

Several meetings were held with landowners in the Whiskey Basin area near Dubois to discuss conservation easements, and the Department's programs in the area. Concern for encroaching development of surrounding private lands and the desire to assist area wildlife resources were primary motivating factors for the landowner interest.



Figure 4 – Torrey Lake conservation easement tour with WWNRTB, FNAWS and JHLT.

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 and the JHLT agreed to help with easement activity. The JHLT recently opened an office and initiated their Wind River Program to help conserve lands in the Dubois area. The WGFD and the JHLT agreed these projects would be a tremendous boost to the Wind River Program, and JHLT has taken the lead in acquiring these easements. The Department will work closely with the JHLT and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (FNAWS) to help move these easement projects toward successful completion.

Springer WHMA

Recent fee title acquisitions have increased recreational opportunities at the Springer Wildlife Habitat Management Area by 946 acres. Purchases of lands previously owned by Howard Farms and the Thaler family will increase available habitat for pheasants and other wildlife.

Rawhide WHMA

The Commission acquired approximately 12 acres of private lands along the southern boundary of the Rawhide WHMA. In addition, boundary adjustments were made on the WHMA in cooperation with adjacent landowners.