



Wyoming Land Trust. Balancing the needs of ranchers and wildlife

At a Glance

Location:
Pinedale, WY
Founded:
2000
Employees:
5
Specialty:
Land conservation

Above: The Corridor Conservation Campaign fence crew runs wire on a soon-to-be-modified fence in Wyoming.

AS COMMUNITIES EXPAND in the west, wildlife-conservation issues arise. Although communities need growth to survive, community members often worry about stabilizing this growth. Over a decade ago, ranchers, teachers, and small business owners in Sublette County, Wyoming, formed a private, nonprofit land trust to stem the loss of Wyoming’s private land and help ranchers conserve their agricultural and natural resources. In Sublette County, there are more than 250 working ranches, and of these, more than 100 are recognized by the state of Wyoming as centennial ranches—ranches owned and operated by the same family for over a century. This territory is also used by migrating herds of elk, moose, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and white-tailed deer. The pronghorn migration route from Grand Teton National Park to southern Sublette County, for example, is the third longest non-avian migration route in the western hemisphere.

“The Wyoming Land Trust offers a way to conserve what landowners love about their land—agricultural viability, wildlife habitat, open space, and scenic view,” says Jordan Vana, director of conservation. “We do this through conservation easements that restrict or prohibit certain types of developments in order to conserve the property’s agricultural and natural values. It’s a voluntary, incentive-based way for landowners to convey some or all of their development rights in perpetuity.”

With five full-time employees and a board of 16 directors, the Wyoming Land Trust has already conserved 28,564 acres of ranch land. These easements can be donated or bought, and they follow survey boundaries (not geographic or geological landmarks). On average, these easements are from 1,000 to 2,000 acres, but some have been as small as 40 acres or as large as 5,000 acres. “We don’t talk about our work in terms of protecting or saving land; we talk about conserving the land,” Vana says. “We



Above: The Wyoming Land Trust is working to modify 500 miles of existing fences in key western Wyoming wildlife-migration routes to make them passable for wildlife and workable for ranchers at no cost to landowners. Right: The Corridor Conservation Campaign fence crew measures wire spacing on a fence brace in Wyoming.



conserve land for our communities, our families, and for our grandkids.”

In 2009 Wyoming Land Trust began the Corridor Conservation Campaign, also known as the Wildlife Friendly Fence Program, to modify fences that facilitate wildlife migration. The Trust does not construct or tear

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JORDAN VANA, DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION

down boundary fences but modifies the existing barbed-wire fences to make them wildlife friendly. The bottom wire is removed and replaced with smooth wire 16 inches from the ground. Fences are also checked to make sure they are no taller than 42 inches, with 10-12 inches

between the top two wires. The smooth bottom wire allows antelope to scoot under the fence, and the lowered height allows mule deer to hop over. If fences are too high, migration is restricted, and if the two top wires are too close together, animals become trapped and die. When elk and moose become tangled in the fence, they can rip it out, which increases the risk of livestock escaping. “By the end of 2010, wildlife will find 280 miles of previously prohibitive fencing now passable, and ranchers and landowners will have 280 miles of modified fence that won’t impede their operation,” Vana says. “We modify these fences at no cost to the landowner, and if they agree, we hire a qualified contractor through a bid process to go out and do the work. The landowner agrees to maintain the fence in good condition for typically 20 years. It’s our organization’s responsibility to pay the contractor and the landowner’s to maintain the fence.”

The project has garnered support from many non-traditional groups such as oil and gas companies, federal agencies, environmental groups, hunters, and sportsmen. All these see the project as a common-sense solution to a problem. The Corridor Conservation Campaign is specific to Sublette County and was designed to be a five-year project to modify 500 miles of fencing. With permission from landowners, the Wyoming Land Trust hires surveyors to identify key migration routes and to make an inventory of all existing fences within that route to determine whether fences impede migration. Since phase one of the project started in 2009, over 107 miles of fence has been inventoried, and 82 miles has been modified. For phase two, Wyoming Land Trust is in the process of modifying fences for the mule deer migration route, which covers over 86,000 acres at the foot of Wind River Mountains. — *Joyce Finn*