

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST

LEGACY



Bringing the Bitterroot Community Together Over Shared Values for 25 Years (and counting!)

This is a special year here at the Bitter Root Land Trust. We are celebrating 25 years of partnering with local families and our community to conserve the water, wildlife, and working lands of our beloved Bitterroot Valley. And what a first 25 years it has been.

From humble beginnings and the vision, passion, hard work, and perseverance of our all-volunteer founding board back in 1997, the Land Trust has, with your steadfast support, grown into a professionally staffed, expertly board-guided community partner capable of making a lasting, positive impact on the things we value most.

You are the reason for this long-term success. Thank you to donors, volunteers, landowners, community partners, elected officials, teachers, students, and business sponsors. It takes all of us working together to leave a legacy of open lands, farms and ranches, healthy fish and wildlife, scenic beauty, and recreational access in the Bitterroot for future generations.

And what an incredible start we have had to 2022. By the time you read this newsletter, you will have made the following possible:

1. Over 2,000 acres of newly conserved Bitterroot Valley farm and rangeland – the most ever in a single year!
2. Opening of the new C. Ben White Trail in Conner – adding 1.5 miles of new trail in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Bitterroot National Forest
3. The successful launch of a community-wide effort to renew the Ravalli County Open Lands Program during the November 8, 2022 general election; and
4. Community engagement and connection around shared values, which we celebrated at our Barn Dance at Sutherlin Farms in July

The durability and importance of these connections has never been so evident for me than at this year's Barn Dance. I want to give a huge thanks to the entire Sutherlin Family and all the attendees, volunteers, sponsors, and donors that made the event such a success. For the first time in 3 years, 325 community members were able to connect and see conservation first-hand, understand what it means for local farm and ranch families to leave a legacy of agriculture in

the valley, and recognize that the values we share make us stronger as a community.

This November we have a chance to launch the next 25 years of conservation by voting as a community to renew the Ravalli County Open Lands Program. First approved by voters in 2006, our Open Lands Program has been a critical partner, making it possible for local farming and ranching families, like the Mielkes, Lewis', and Beadles (who you can read about in this edition of "Legacy"), to realize their conservation dreams, as well as creating exciting new opportunities for community recreation (like Skalkaho Bend Park and C. Ben White recreational site). Let's come together to continue building this Bitterroot conservation legacy for years to come.

Together with you, this year we will protect more land than ever, help our community prepare for the next decade of local conservation, and connect old-timers and newcomers around our shared love of the Bitterroot. Thank you all for valuing the Bitterroot, each other, the incredible stewardship of local landowners, and the enduring work we all do together to protect this amazing place we call home.

Here's to the next 25!

– Gavin Ricklefs
BRLT Executive Director





Op-Ed by Alan Maki, Board Chair, Ravalli County Right to Farm & Ranch

Preserve Working Farms & Ranches

It doesn't matter if your family has lived in the Bitterroot for generations or if you're new to the valley, we can all see change occurring. Ravalli County is one of the fastest growing places in Montana, and we understand why. As farmers and ranchers, it offers some of the most productive land in Montana, not to mention pristine landscapes that offer endless hunting, fishing, and recreation opportunities. That's why it's so important for us to preserve the Bitterroot's working farms and ranches and make sure that the generations that come after us have access to the same valley that we do.

Every month, Montana loses another 1,500 acres of open land to developed uses. Growth like that especially impacts families who farm and ranch in this area, who make up the long legacy of folks who make their living off the land. Our operations are a pillar of our local economy and rely on healthy, open landscapes that have clean water and good soil. To keep that a reality for us and the generations that will come after us, our community needs to renew the Ravalli County Open Lands bond this November.

The Ravalli County Open Lands Program is a voter-approved, landowner-driven, voluntary open land

conservation program designed to manage growth, preserve open lands, protect water quality of streams and the Bitterroot River, maintain wildlife habitat, and protect drinking water sources. Since its inception in 2006, the Open Lands Bond Program has funded 38 projects across the Bitterroot Valley, conserving more than 10,367 acres, a majority of which has gone to protect family farms and ranches. Passing this bond honors our past ancestors who worked so hard to give us what we have today, our current generation that has worked so hard to keep it, and our future generations that will certainly cherish it!

Calling Ravalli County home means living and working in one of the most beautiful places on earth. The Ravalli County Open Lands Program is our local tool to protect the Bitterroot Valley we all love and pass on a legacy of our local values. It's about preserving the rural characteristics that make our community so special. It means knowing that no matter how much the rest of Montana changes, by voting "Yes" on November 8, our special way of life in Ravalli County will be carried on today for the benefit of tomorrow.

Paid for by Yes to Ravalli County Open Lands, Treasurer Loyd Rennaker, PO Box 83, Corvallis, MT 59828



Triple D Ranch: Something to Work for

Conservation Brings Young Ranching Family's Dream to Life



As soon as fifth generation Bitterroot rancher Drew Lewis was old enough to move out on his own from his family's commercial dairy farm in the Bitterroot Valley, he was ready to pursue a new avenue that he was certain wouldn't include farming.

"Everything is easy compared to dairy farming," says Drew with a laugh. "When I graduated and started my own fencing operation, I moved entirely away from ranching. I was ready for something new."

It wasn't until he met his wife Kaci and started a family of their own that they realized they missed the ranching lifestyle after all, with a shared dream of having their own cattle and land someday. They started to explore ways that would make it possible for their dream to become a reality.

But, it wouldn't be that easy. Land values in the Bitterroot Valley have skyrocketed over the past few years just as they have all over Montana, making it nearly impossible for young people to enter the ranching industry on their own.

"Growing up here, you take all the open space and this way of life for granted until you realize that opportunity might not be available for you

"We held true to our vision to conserve the ranch over the past few years, during a time when land values are incredibly high and we could have made more money selling the land to someone else."

anymore," says Drew. "The ag world seems to be vanishing, and we were determined to find a way to be able to afford something of our own, especially now that the valley has such high land prices."

After learning more about the conservation easement tool through extensive meetings with the Bitter Root Land Trust, Drew and Kaci made the decision to purchase a 420-acre ranch in the Burnt Fork area of Stevensville with the goal to conserve the property always at the forefront.

Thanks to critical funding received from the Natural Resources Conservation Services's Agricultural Land Easement Program and the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond, the Lewis family officially conserved Triple D Ranch in partnership with the Bitter Root Land Trust in the summer of 2022.



Named Triple D Ranch in honor of their three young children – Dash, Diem and Denali – the land consists mostly of hay and pasture ground that supports the family's cattle operation, Skyline Angus. The ranch also serves as a wildlife corridor to a variety of different native species including elk and deer, adding to more than 7,000 protected acres of family farms, ranches and wildlife habitat in the Burnt Fork neighborhood alone, many of which were also made possible thanks to the funding support of the Agricultural Land Easement Program.

"We held true to our vision to conserve the ranch over the past few years, during a time when land values are incredibly high and we could have made more money selling the land to someone else," says Drew Lewis. "Our motivation to work with the Bitter Root Land Trust to protect this place was in large part for the benefit of our kids. They all have their own cows that they are responsible for, help with chores and have come to love the ranching lifestyle. We want this to still be here for them and our grandkids someday."

Thanks to the vision of the Lewis family, 420 acres of prime farmland is now protected forever.

Haywire Flats: Preserving an Original Bitterroot Homestead



“We have been entirely too efficient at destruction; we have left our souls too little space to breathe. Every green natural space we save saves a fragment of our sanity and gives us more hope we have a future.” –Wallace Stegner

When Carola (Carol) Woolsey-Mielke’s parents Vernon and Maria Woolsey first started leasing the ground that is known today as Haywire Flats in 1948, the property consisted largely of sagebrush. They started working to clear off the bench area and, after many late nights and weekends with the help of their family, transformed the land into productive farmland which would eventually come to produce wheat, barley, and oats. The Woolsey family purchased the ranch in 1959 and it has remained in

Carol’s family ever since, owned today by she and her husband Ed.

After Vernon passed away in 2006, the property was not used for agriculture again until several years later when Carol and Ed’s son-in-law Lance Brown expressed interest in farming the land. Unfortunately, with the shape it was in, it wouldn’t be that easy.

Since the ground was last farmed, bull thistles and other aggressive weeds had taken over. Fences were in bad condition, with a majority having to be replaced. It



took time and energy to revive the ground, but eventually the family was able to get the job done. After turning the soil, piling and reworking the ground, wheat was able to be planted once again.

“In respect for all the hard work my mom and dad did on this land, we figured out a plan to reclaim the bench property and were able to turn it back into usable land again,” says Carol. “Just as my dad would have wanted.”

Today, the property is continually sprayed for weeds to keep them from infringing back on the property. The property carries up to 40 pairs of cows and calves each year during the summer, leaving ample grazing for elk and mule deer and open space for other wildlife that frequent the property in the winter months.

“This piece of beautiful Bitterroot land has always been a part of my life,” says Carol. “My mother and father instilled in me the love of the land – especially the Sapphire Mountains. My mom was a Holocaust survivor, and she was very much a lover of the land and believed it was your responsibility to take care of it.”

And, by making the decision to place the 258-acre Haywire Flats into a conservation easement, the Mielkes have taken care of the property and its future, forever. Made possible with funding from the Ravalli County Open Lands Program, Heart of the Rockies Initiative and the Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg Foundation, the Haywire Flats conservation easement was the last piece of the puzzle that created a 7,150-acre contiguous link of open land

preserved by numerous landowners in the Burnt Fork neighborhood for wildlife, agriculture and future generations that begins on the foothills of the Sapphire Mountains and runs to Logan Lane on the outskirts of Stevensville.

“When I was growing up, my dad and I would go ride the fences and check cows,” says Carol. “We always ate our lunch in the shade of a huge old juniper tree, with Slocum Creek running close by. My dad would tell stories of growing up in the Bitterroot, and we would talk about life in general.”

In 2011, Carol and Ed hand-built a small dry cabin in that exact spot where they gather with their kids and grandkids often.

“It always seems that Dad is very close when I spend time there.”

Thanks to the decision of the Mielke family to honor past generations by preserving this beautiful piece of the Bitterroot, the generations of the future will benefit from this open space.



Rory R Ranch: Conserving an Enchanting Bitterroot Valley Ranch



The Bitterroot Valley draws people from all walks of life – each with their own backstory, passions, and unique reasons for calling this special place, “home.” But one commonality is prevalent across community members: a love for open land.

Gary Beadle was born and raised on a farm in the Midwest. He grew up learning to love everything that the farming lifestyle had to offer. When it came time for him to head out on his own, he landed in an urban area, with a career that placed him on the inside of an office – a complete opposite landscape from what he had always known.

“When I first met my husband Gary, he was working in a job that couldn’t have been different than how he grew up – always dressed for work in white shirt and trousers,” says Robin

Beadle. “But I knew he was a farmer from his past and loved hearing the stories he would tell me from life on the farm. I was enchanted by it – and that my husband had that value system of understanding the importance of agriculture, growing your own food and hard work. We felt we needed to move elsewhere to get back to those roots.”

After feeling an instant connection to the Bitterroot during a trip in the early 2000’s, they decided to jump in with both feet and were able to purchase a parcel in Victor, which they dubbed “Rory R Ranch.” During their early years in the valley, Gary and Robin quickly observed how the valley was changing. It concerned them.

“Coming from a large urban area like Chicago, over those 40 years, I saw such an explosion of



suburban development with people purchasing all of this valuable agricultural land in Illinois and seeing it be divided into subdivision after subdivision,” says Gary. “I knew if there was going to be this heightened level of development in Ravalli County, that preserving the ag land would be critical.”

When a large ranch went up for sale west of Stevensville in the Burnt Fork neighborhood, the Beadles jumped at the opportunity to protect it. Formerly known as the Groff Ranch and later the Mytty Ranch, they purchased a significant portion of it and instantly started to discuss the next steps, which would be to preserve the property for the future of agriculture in the valley.

“As soon as we bought the ranch in Stevensville, things really started to blow up here with land prices skyrocketing and more and more people moving to the valley,” says Robin. “The timing was perfect when we started talking with the Bitter Root Land Trust about the easement. It was almost meant to be.”

The Beadles were both very familiar with the concept of land conservation and the conservation easement tool when they began meeting with the Land Trust. It was something that they had been interested in doing from the very beginning with their Victor ranch, and what drove them to ultimately purchase the Stevensville ranch. After BRLT staff visited the property, there was no doubt that this project would be a perfect model for a conservation easement.

The property is comprised of two large tracts of land totaling 1,260 acres of open-space rangeland that includes sagebrush shrublands and montane grasslands, along with miles of ephemeral creeks and riparian habitat, all of which collectively support locally important species such as elk, mule deer, and fox, and “Species of Concern” - birds such as Brewer’s sparrow, evening grosbeak and sage thrasher. The shrublands and grasslands provide grazing opportunities for cattle, as well as scenic views of natural open

space that can be enjoyed by the public traveling along a number of significant valley roadways.

“I know personally when I go to the larger grassland parcel, I can go up there and just get lost,” says Gary. “You look around, and it’s just amazing to look to the west and to the north, the south and the east, and all you see are mountains, grassland, and wildlife. It’s as if you’re in the middle of heaven. No structures, no people – just wildlife and natural beauty.”

And now, thanks to critical funding support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Agricultural Land Easement Program and the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond, 1,260 acres of the ranch are conserved.

“We’re just so happy that we were able to put this property in an easement and preserve it for future generations,” says Robin. “People move here with different intentions. This is a special place, and if we don’t reasonably protect it, it will be gone. We just want to keep it this way the best we can, forever.”

LEAVING A LEGACY:

Bill Gabriel



“Bill’s successful career in resource management and prudent investments resulted in his ability to establish a lasting legacy of financial resources at both his alma maters and generous donations to a wide variety of conservation organizations in Western Montana, including our mutually-beloved Bitter Root Land Trust. He will be missed, but his legacy lives on.”

—John Ormiston, BRLT Board member

William “Bill” Gabriel was a lover of nature and a champion for conservation all his life. His experiences took him from fighting forest fires, to a stint in the US Army Mountain & Cold Weather Training Command, to a long career with the US Forest Service as an accomplished forester and map maker. Along the way he spent a year in Ecuador with the United Nations inventorying the tropical forest, served as a Corps of Engineers ecologist in Alaska, and helped found the Anchorage Audubon Society.

When he retired to the Bitterroot Valley in 1985, Bill turned a lifelong passion for photography into a professional hobby, selling photos to publications such as Audubon,

Discover, Natural History, Orion, Ranger Rick, Time, and U.S. News.

Bill’s life was extraordinary. But his quiet, gruff exterior belied his equally extraordinary generosity. He regularly donated to organizations such as Bitter Root Land Trust, Five Valleys Land Trust, the Five Valleys Audubon Society and the University of Montana, among many others. This philanthropic spirit continued even after Bill was gone.

Prior to his passing in April 2020, Bill arranged for several significant planned gifts to organizations that supported the passions he had in life, including BRLT. Thanks to his foresight, future generations of Montanans will benefit forever from his generosity.

Interested in leaving a legacy of your own?

Planned giving offers a meaningful way to continue your own tradition of support for BRLT well into the future.

Thank you to Five Valleys Land Trust for providing this article copy. To learn more about how your values can live on as a Forever Bitterroot member, contact Lauren Rennaker, Development Director, at lauren@bitterrootlandtrust.org or 406.375.0956

Summer Intern Spotlight

BRLT had the pleasure of hosting two fantastic high school interns at our office this summer. Izzy and Ripples had the opportunity to learn about all aspects of the organization and conservation through visiting several conservation easements, assisting with planning our Poker Ride and Barn Dance, and participating in staff and board meetings. If you or someone you know may be interested in a high school or college internship opportunity next summer, please contact our office at 406-375-0956.

“I enjoyed learning about event planning by helping with the Barn Dance, social media engagement and all of the ways in which BRLT helps the land in Ravalli County.” –Ripples Turquand



“By visiting conservation easements and places like Skalkaho Bend Park, I had the opportunity to see firsthand the progress BRLT has made with in the Bitterroot Valley. I enjoyed engaging with the community during my experience.” –Isabella (Izzy) Caffarelli

NEW! BRLT Offers Unique Graduate Assistantship in Wildlife Biology and Conservation

Thanks to the vision and support of one local couple, a new Master of Science assistantship creates an opportunity for students to step outside of the classroom and onto the land, with the goal to further local conservation while providing graduate level education in the Bitterroot Valley.

In a unique partnership, BRLT and the University of Montana’s Avian Science Center, part of the University’s top-ranked Wildlife Biology Program, have partnered to offer a two-year Professional Master of Science (M.S.) assistantship position to a graduate student interested in a career in land conservation.

The opportunity was made possible thanks to a generous scholarship donation from local

BRLT supporters Arnie and Deb Prentice. With backgrounds that include academia and a passion for philanthropy, the Prentices recognized BRLT’s need for continued support to help conserve the water, wildlife and working farms and ranches here in Ravalli County.

“After meeting with the leadership from the University of Montana’s Wildlife Biology Department, we became excited to learn that there could be a fantastic opportunity for overlap with the work that the land trust does,” said Deb Prentice. “This is a great opportunity to support the university, its students, and the land trust at the same time.”

With no current offering for UM students to pursue a degree working in land trusts, this assistantship position will provide a unique opportunity for hands-on training in the field, focusing on working collaboratively with landowners to conserve important land and water resources throughout the valley.

After a competitive interview process, BRLT and the University of Montana have selected Megan Euclide for this opportunity.

Originally from Pennsylvania, Megan began the two-year graduate program at UM in August 2022. She will work alongside BRLT staff and local landowners to gain direct career experience to protect natural resources on private lands.

“I am excited to have the opportunity to learn about the local land and wildlife habitat conservation here in the Bitterroot,” says Megan. “I am looking forward to being part of the community effort at the forefront of protecting this beautiful landscape.”



For more information about unique ways to give back to BRLT, contact BRLT Development Director Lauren Rennaker at lauren@bitterrootlandtrust.org or 406-375-0956. To learn more about the University of Montana’s Avian Science Center visit www.fgc.umt.edu/asc



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Save The Date!

Burnt Fork Poker Run Saturday, May 20, 2023

Presented by: BRLT's Next-Gen Committee

More info coming soon!

Find out more at bitterrootlandtrust.org

Cover: Gary and Robin Beadle of Rory R Ranch. Photo: Jessica Fay Brown



The Lewis Family conserved Triple D Ranch earlier this year. Photo by Ashley J Photography