

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST

# LEGACY

Newsletter | **FALL 2023**



# Director's Letter

On a recent trip with my son, we saw new mountains and the Pacific Ocean (both beautiful!), but it wasn't our Bitterroot Valley. Sitting on the interstate in standstill traffic while thousands of strangers carried on their busy lives in the daily commute around us, all we could think about was getting back home—to our mountains, our open lands, clean Bitterroot River, and our community that cares about keeping it this way.

The Bitterroot Valley isn't the special place we are grateful to return home to by coincidence. The things that make our way of life here in the Bitterroot so wonderful wouldn't be possible without you.

Your commitment to conserving the Bitterroot's water, wildlife, and working lands was never more evident than last year's renewal of the Ravalli County Open Lands Program – our home-grown investment in the valley's most critical lands and water land and the local families who steward them every day. This incredible commitment our community has made together to ensure the Bitterroot flourishes in the future is a national model of voluntary, locally-driven conservation and we were honored to accept the 2023 National Land Trust Excellence Award from the Land Trust Alliance (read more about the award on the next page).

It was incredibly humbling to have the opportunity to accept this award on behalf of the board, staff, local landowners, and our community - there are over 1,000 land trusts doing incredible work in their own communities throughout the

country and the National Excellence Award is given to one organization annually. This incredible honor highlights how your commitment to collaborative conservation in the Bitterroot Valley is not only something we should all be very proud of, but an example others can follow to ensure land, water, wildlife, and communities thrive for future generations.

I am so proud of all we have accomplished together in the past 26 years – over 13,000 acres protected in perpetuity. In this addition of The Legacy, you can read about local landowners who have protected their family lands this year, including farms and ranches that produce our food, important fish and wildlife habitat, and public access for hunting, fishing, and one of the most popular trailheads in the Bitterroot. This shared success is just the foundation for greater achievement in the future.

We are just getting started.

As support for conservation increases in our community, so does the urgency to protect more of our beloved Bitterroot Valley. We are currently working with 18 local families, whose ownership comprises over 4,000 acres, with the potential to provide new Bitterroot legacies that contribute to our agricultural and recreational economy, protect clean water resources, ensure thriving wildlife populations, and provide opportunities for all of us to get outside and enjoy our treasured way of life.

You make this possible, and your support does not go unnoticed. We take pride in celebrating YOU, our community, and are dedicated to continuing to do so. From our annual Barn Dance in July that unites us for an evening of celebration on a different conserved family property each year, to our Fall Miles Challenge that encourages all of us to get out and recreate in our valley's endless playgrounds, and all of the wonderful Pint Nights and local partner business events in between, we are all working together to pass the Bitterroot Valley on to the next generation in a way that we can all be proud of, and in a way that future generations can be proud to inherit it.

Conservation is the one real, true connecting point for all of us. And one of the main reasons that makes us all happy to return home.

— Gavin Ricklefs, BRLT Executive Director





# The Spotlight is Shining on Ravalli County:

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT LEADS TO NATIONAL AWARD FOR BRLT

Conserving our family farms and ranches, fish and wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty is part of what it means to live in the Bitterroot.

The level of support our community has shown for conservation doesn't just happen overnight, and it doesn't happen in all communities. The national spotlight is shining on Ravalli County, and BRLT has been named the recipient of the 2023 Land Trust Excellence Award.

Announced earlier this fall during Rally 2023: The National Land Conservation Conference, the nation's largest gathering of land conservation leaders, the Land Trust Alliance recognized BRLT out of 1,000 partner land trusts across the country for work in multiple areas, including our partnership with the Right to Farm and Ranch Board and the \$10M renewal of the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program, passed by Ravalli County voters in November 2022.

This national recognition was undoubtedly earned by our Bitterroot community - the families who have left a legacy of conserved lands, the many members of our community who contribute time, money, and volunteer hours to make these projects possible, and the voters of Ravalli County who have invested in leaving a legacy of open lands for the future.

In 2022 alone, local landowners partnered with the Bitter Root Land trust to conserve 2,270 acres of family farms and ranches, critical wildlife habitat, river and stream frontage, and public hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities - a 30% increase in BRLT's total conserved lands in one year.

It's taken over 25 years to build relationships and trust with our neighbors, all circulating

around shared values and love for protecting our valley for future generations. And in some ways, we feel the work has just begun.

And with the support from our Bitterroot community - our friends and neighbors - we have never been more motivated to play our part in bringing these visions of conservation outcomes to life.

Your community is setting a national example for voluntary, collaborative conservation in Montana and across the country. We should all take a ton of pride in what we're accomplishing together, and be excited for what's on the horizon.

— BRLT Staff and Board of Directors



BRLT Staff accept Land Trust Excellence Award on behalf of Ravalli County at the National Land Trust Conservation Conference in October. From L to R: Stephanie Sipe, Lauren Rennaker, Melissa Odell, Kori Anderson, Megan Euclide, Rhiannon Klingonsmith, Gavin Ricklefs, Kyle Barber

## MILLS FARM, STEVENSVILLE

# Farmland, Wildlife & A Big Yellow Taxi

What do productive farmland, open space for wildlife, and a big yellow taxi have in common?

For landowners Barry and Paulie Mills, they were all a part of the equation that inspired their decision to work with BRLT to conserve their 71 acres of farmland on Sunset Bench in Stevensville, honoring a family legacy steeped in agriculture set forth by Paulie's grandparents decades ago.

Growing up, Paulie spent her summers and holidays on her grandparents' ranch across the road, a portion of which is known today as Triple D Ranch – a 420-acre conservation easement also protected in partnership with BRLT in 2022. Her family dates their farming and ranching activities to around 1919 when Paulie's grandfather and great uncle emigrated from Denmark and settled in the Burnt Fork, growing hay and raising sheep and cattle.

Paulie had always wanted to return to this area for the long-term, and when she and her husband Barry had the opportunity to purchase the acreage across the road from her family's ranch, it was almost unbelievable.

**“This land makes you really feel something, and every day it just reaffirms for us that protecting it was the right thing to do.”**

“It's gorgeous agricultural land, it has a terrific holding capacity for water, and it's very fertile which makes it fabulous for production,” says Paulie. “We have to understand the value in that, and make sure to take care of it. The property was originally split up into apple orchard tracts during the Bitterroot Valley apple boom, and has been used for agricultural purposes ever since.”

Today, the property is primarily used for alfalfa and grass hay production and irrigated pasture for cattle and horses. Wildlife known to use the property include mule and white-tailed deer, fox, sandhill crane, and turkeys. In the winter, the area is a known hot spot for raptors such as bald eagles and rough-legged hawks.





“This land makes you really feel something, and every day it just reaffirms for us that protecting it was the right thing to do,” says Barry Mills. “We have always loved the Joni Mitchell song, ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ with lyrics that question paving paradise and putting up a parking lot, and not knowing what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone. It’s such an important thing for people to connect with the outdoors and realize a sense of place. And if we don’t protect the settings that provide that, what will replace that sense of place if we sacrifice the very thing that draws people here?”

While the Sunset Bench area has seen increasing development pressure over the last few decades, BRLT has worked with dozens of families to conserve thousands of additional acres within a couple miles of the farm. The Mills Farm is in close proximity to many agricultural conservation easements, completed thanks in part to funding received from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Nearby conserved ranches include the previously mentioned Triple D Ranch (420 acres), Rory R Ranch (1,260 acres), Griffin Ranch (202 acres), Kerslake Ranch (93 acres), Haywire Flats (258 acres), and Peckinpaugh’s Lazy Burnt Fork Ranch (333 acres).



Thanks to the support of the Bitterroot Valley community, and critical funding received from the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond and the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Barry and Paulie’s vision has been carried out to forever protect this beautiful Bitterroot Valley landscape for future generations.





# COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

Connecting with our friends and neighbors over shared Bitterroot values



## Barn Dance Highlights

*Photos courtesy of Wide Angle Photography*

Thank you to our 300+ community members who joined us to celebrate conservation in the Bitterroot Valley at our 5th annual Barn Dance at Flying E Ranch in the Burnt Fork of Stevensville this summer!

It was a wonderful, picturesque Bitterroot summer evening spent dancing under the big sky to the cowboy sounds of Sterling Drake and Adin Kloetzel, catching up with old friends, meeting new ones, and coming together to generously support conserving more working farms and ranches, water and wildlife throughout the Bitterroot Valley. Many thanks to Dan and Debbie Severson and their family for welcoming the community to their incredible ranch. Tickets for the 6th annual Barn Dance will go on sale June 1, 2024 – mark your calendars!



## Fall Miles Challenge

When you live in an area with endless, world-class outdoor recreation opportunities like the Bitterroot Valley, we think it's only natural that we take a moment to appreciate and celebrate our valley's outdoor wonders. Each year during the month of October, we invite our community to join forces for our free Fall Miles Challenge to get outside and recreate. This year, participants came together and logged over 2,676 miles in support of conservation over the course of the month. Whether it was on a bike seat or on the back of a horse, jogging with a stroller or rowing down the Bitterroot River, our community laced up their boots and got moving for conservation. Congratulations on a successful Fall Miles Challenge!

## Q&A WITH MSU-WESTERN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH CENTER

# A Bountiful Bitterroot Harvest:

After a spring farm field trip with our supporters, BRLT had the opportunity to visit with Zach Miller, Superintendent and Assistant Professor of Horticulture at Montana State University's Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis, to get the inside scoop on growing healthy food to feed our community.

### What type of research do you conduct at WARC?

The MSU Ag Research Center works to improve the productivity, profitability, and sustainability of farms and ranches across the state. As the only horticultural research center in the state, we work to help fruit and vegetable growers in Montana identify good varieties to grow and the best ways to grow them. Figuring out what varieties are best involves many different areas of research: from which can handle our climate, to which types taste best, harvest easily, store well, or can be made into value-added products like jams or wine. A lot of our management research is focused on controlling weeds and how much to irrigate and fertilize.

### What makes the Bitterroot such a great place to grow food?

The Bitterroot has incredible and unique resources to grow food. While there are other moderate, banana-belt areas in the state, the Bitterroot has water resources that other places don't. Specifically, this valley can store lots of water in reservoirs, providing reliable irrigation water throughout the season. Many other irrigated areas in the state don't have this water storage capacity and often dry up before the growing season is done.

### Which crops thrive the best in the Bitterroot Valley?

Many crops can thrive in our valley, but more important is what makes profits for farmers and supports our

economy. Apples did this for a time, then it was sugar beets, and now it's mostly hay and barley. But, as markets change, new crops will find a niche. At WARC, we help farms capture the growing market for local foods and beverages.



### What are some "beginner friendly" crops to grow?

Start in your garden with vegetables and at a smaller scale. Planting fruit is much more expensive, and these long-lived plants are less forgiving to mistakes and poor management early on.

### Any up-and-coming research projects that WARC is excited about?

We're excited about all the research since it's motivated by the needs of Montana farmers. A few highlights include: Using precision irrigation reduced water use in cider apples by 90% and improved apple qualities;

reducing labor and increasing efficacy of weed management in organic vegetable farms with new tools and tactics; identifying wine grapes, tomatoes, and peppers that are suited to the cooler climates of western MT; using cutting edge cold storage to improve shelf life and quality of MT-grown fruits.

### Any advice for someone who is interested in getting a start in agriculture?

If you want a profitable farm don't start with the crop you want to grow. Start at the end, the consumer, and work back to the farm. Start by figuring out what will sell. Then find out what regulations and infrastructure are required. Do the simple math and develop a business plan. The start up costs are high for a fruit or vegetable farm, and in the end it will only be profitable if you can sell your produce.

### What do you think (personally) is the most delicious fruit/vegetable grown at WARC?

That's like asking someone to pick their favorite child. But there are some varieties of fruit that are delicious and not as well known. My top three would be: a ripe Aurora honeyberry, somerset seedless grapes, and chestnut crab apples.

### Is the WARC farm open to the public for tours?

We host a big field day each summer (save the date for next year's event on September 12, 2024), as well as workshops and smaller tours throughout the year. We're open for pre-scheduled tours as well.

*Special thanks to WARC and Zach Miller. The WARC farm is located at 580 Quast Lane, Corvallis. To learn more, visit [agresearch.montana.edu/warc](http://agresearch.montana.edu/warc)*





# Pedaling with a Purpose of Open Space

BRLT Board Member John Ormiston receives Outstanding Volunteer Fundraiser Award from the Montana Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals

If you've attended a Bitterroot Valley community event over the years, it's likely that you have had the opportunity to visit with the friendly man wearing a BRLT hat, clipboard in-hand, recording the names of community members who have made a pledge to support his annual bike ride to support the Bitter Root Land Trust.

An active member of the community, John Ormiston (or as we affectionately refer to him, "John O.") has volunteered his time as a BRLT board member since 1999 and has been organizing his own fundraising goal for the organization the past 16 years. What started as a small "friend-raising" bike ride has now evolved into an annual fundraising campaign, raising close to \$20,000 annually for BRLT and more than \$125,000 to date.

It's his unwavering support and commitment that has named John as a 2023 recipient of the Outstanding Volunteer Fundraiser Award from the Montana Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

The Association of Fundraising Professionals empowers individuals and organizations around the globe to practice ethical fundraising through professional education, networking, research and advocacy. The recipients of AFP's annual Awards for Philanthropy are selected based on a nomination and review process by a committee of AFP Board of Directors.

Each year, John sets a fundraising goal higher than the previous year, and each year, he exceeds it. John's ride has become an integral part of BRLT's fundraising and annual development plan, engaging with over 200 donors each year (most of which are in-person) as he gears up for his annual bike ride.

"John's service, dedication and impact are felt throughout our valley. His passion and dedication are contagious. At age 83, John hasn't slowed down one bit. He motivates others and promotes philanthropy because of his unyielding dedication to fundraising on behalf of BRLT. Many can learn from his longtime service and dedication, as well as his 'can-do' attitude and upbeat personality full of interesting stories," says Lauren Rennaker, BRLT Development Director.

When asked how he has the courage to approach total strangers and ask for their support, John says, "There is no reason to be shy because BRLT's mission is so important. All you have to do is simply ask for support."

Thank you, John, for your dedication to conservation in the Bitterroot Valley and your personal dedication to the Bitter Root Land Trust. Congratulations on this well-deserved recognition!

To make your pledge for John's 2023 campaign, you can make a donation by visiting BRLT's website or send a check to BRLT at P.O. Box 1806 Hamilton, MT 59840 with "John O Bike Ride" in the memo.



# Forever Bitterroot: “What’s Not to Love?”

A woman finds her way to the Bitterroot Valley and develops a desire to protect it beyond her lifetime

For some, the road leading to the Bitterroot Valley is made of many turns, circles, and roundabouts along the way. For Arizona native Cindy Doll, she didn’t discover the beauty of the Bitterroot Valley until a later chapter in life after she had retired from a career with the railroad and moved to the town of Polson where she took a new job as a school bus driver.

“I would drive the kids down for different events in the Bitterroot Valley, and while they were at their sports games and whatnot, I would take walks down at Skalkaho Bend Park to pass the time.”

It was during these quiet and reflective walks down at the 70-acre riverfront park in Hamilton, created in partnership with BRLT and opened to the public by the City of Hamilton in 2020, that she realized her love for the area.

“Once you’ve seen this place, it’s hard not to appreciate it. What’s not to love? I was mesmerized by the open space, the river, the native vegetation, and the wildlife.... especially the moose in the river park. I knew this was the place I needed to be.”

Cindy made the decision to relocate to Hamilton and found a connection with BRLT after attending our special farm field trip held earlier this year to the Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis. It was after learning more about the values and mission of the Land Trust that she realized she held a shared vision to protect this special valley.

Cindy made the decision to name BRLT as a beneficiary in her will, becoming the newest member of our Forever Bitterroot planned giving program for supporters who choose to leave gifts to BRLT in their will or estate plan.

“The work that the Land Trust does seems to me like a worthwhile cause. And when you wake up one day, and you’re 62 years old, you start thinking about how you want to leave your mark on the world.... And for me, this is it.”

***Please request a Forever Bitterroot brochure to learn more about this special program, and how you can ensure your love of the Bitterroot Valley can live on. Contact Lauren Rennaker, BRLT Development Director, at [lauren@bitterrootlandtrust.org](mailto:lauren@bitterrootlandtrust.org) or 406-375-0956.***



Cindy Doll and Coco Puff



## SWEATHOUSE CREEK CONSERVATION EASEMENT, VICTOR

# Partnerships for Perpetuity

Hackett family provides multi-use recreation access and protection of critical wildlife habitat, access to iconic and secluded trail to Sweathouse Falls

One local family's longtime vision to conserve their 540-acre ranch and provide permanent public access for the community to enjoy forever has finally come to fruition, thanks in part to funding received from the Ravalli County Open Lands Program and the collaboration between several local partners in conservation.

The Hackett family, in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Bitter Root Land Trust, Bitterroot National Forest, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, and the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program, have provided the public with a diversity of recreational opportunities, including hunting and fishing access on private lands and recreational access to adjacent National Forest lands including the trail to the scenic Sweathouse Falls, one of the most popular day hiking destinations in the Bitterroot National Forest.

maintains the family's history of providing hunter access through Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' Block Management Program, ensures permanent protection of the rolling foothills that serve as winter range habitat for elk and mule deer, and the property's shared boundary with the Bitterroot

**“We are grateful for the Hackett family's longstanding commitment to maintaining their property as natural open space and allowing public recreational access, in perpetuity.”**

National Forest ensures that the wildlife that currently benefit from this habitat will continue to use this property long into the future. The property also includes three-quarters of a mile of Sweathouse Creek and a small stretch of Gash Creek, both of which are important westside tributaries of the Bitterroot River and serve as habitat for native westslope cutthroat trout.

“We are grateful for the Hackett family's longstanding commitment to maintaining their property as natural open space and allowing public recreational access, in perpetuity,” says Randy Arnold, Regional Supervisor for Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 2. “Conserving this special piece of the Bitterroot Valley permanently secures public access for hunting, fishing, hiking, and recreating, while conserving critical aquatic and terrestrial habitat, for the benefit of wildlife and for future generations of Bitterroot residents, visitors, and sportspeople.”

Thanks to the vision and generosity of the Hackett family, the support from our partner agencies in conservation, and for our community's dedication to local conservation and recent renewal of the Open Lands Bond, this gift of open space and access to the iconic mountain waterfall will continue to be enjoyed by future generations who explore the landscape, far into the future.



“Our family wanted to preserve the property for future generations but needed to receive some compensation for retirement,” says landowner Scott Hackett. “The conservation easement was able to accomplish both goals.”

Located approximately 3.5 miles west of Victor, the conservation easement on the property,









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**We are excited to announce** that local community members, businesses and partners have stepped up to once again offer an incredible match for your giving from now through December! We need you, and 299 other donors who believe in conservation like you do, to make a donation in any amount in order to unlock the exciting match. More information to follow in our upcoming letter, hitting mailboxes soon!

Cover: Courtesy of Wide Angle Photography



Photo: Courtesy of Tae Anne Creative Co.