Three families triple the conservation impact near Townsend

NOT ONE, NOT TWO, but an impressive three individual farm and ranch families have entered their properties into Prickly Pear Land Trust conservation easements. These Montana operators know the value of their land, not only for grazing and farming but also as entangled webs of ecosystems worth preserving. This cumulative upshot creates a conservation corridor in a time and place under intense development pressure.

In the Upper Missouri River Valley, loss of habitat and agriculture production on irrigable acres to rural development would constitute a loss for the rural economy. The extra strain, runoff, and vegetation erosion would devastate water resources along the Missouri River, Deep Creek, and Crow Creek. Each property is unique but all three share deep roots involving family history and stewardship.

"The Hahn family is proud to have worked together with PPLT to permanently preserve and maintain the character of our productive, open space lands. Projects like these help keep Montana a wonderful place to live, work, and play," says Chuck Hahn, longtime Broadwater County agricultural operator. Folks in Broadwater County support the agriculture economy and want to keep working the land. They’re willing to forfeit some potential uses and resale value to ensure the home ground stays in agriculture. Conservation easements effectively retire landowners’ ability to subdivide land, build on or pave over increasingly rare farmland and valley bottom habitat. While landowners receive some financial compensation, each family donates significant value to work with the Land Trust to ensure the protection of the land. For many farm and ranch families, a little cash through a project like this can help maintain a suitable land base and make farming and ranching more financially viable. These three landmark easements constitute the 7th, 8th, and 9th land conservation projects around the Fort Harrison and Limestone Hills facilities completed by the Land Trust, thanks to the help of supporters. The Montana Army National Guard at Fort Harrison and Nat’l Guard Bureau in Washington D.C. work closely with PPLT staff to secure funding, set priorities, and review proposals.

From the perspective of the Army, investing in land protection is a wise and cost-effective strategy. Without taking on additional land management, the military protects its training mission by creating a buffer of open space around its bases and training areas while supporting conservation outcomes in the surrounding community. ‘The Montana Army National Guard is thrilled. We see our partnership with Prickly Pear Land Trust as a great community outcome protecting local farmland while meeting the goals of the military,’ said General Pete Hornek.

“We are deeply grateful for every single person, business, and partner... who make projects like this possible.”
—Executive Director Mary Hollow

"We are deeply grateful for every single person, business, and partner... who make projects like this possible," said Mary Hollow. "Having a broad support base also means bigger and better lasting community outcomes – parks, trails, and local agriculture, wildlife habitat – that will benefit our kids, and their kids." Farms, wildlife, and open space have champions in you and the people of Broadwater County.

Our mission is to inspire connections to the landscapes, water, wildlife, recreation, and agricultural heritage of west-central Montana through conservation, now and for future generations.

1 Hahn Ranch
Productive farmland with over 100 years of Montana family history and stewardship. This prized piece of property hosts a well-known and major tributary of the Missouri River, Deep Creek, a place where cold water meets the warmer currents of the Mighty Mo. On this ranch, much of the space has been set aside for wildlife habitat for generations of elk, antelope, moose, and trout.

2 The Crow Creek Ranch
Protects three braids of Crow Creek and the orchards of the historic Poe Ranch including 700+ acres of cottonwood galleries, lush grasses, and wetlands. The property is located on the portion of the water after it has left the Elkhorn Mountains (and the popular trail to Crow Creek Falls) where it spreads out in an oasis-like alluvial fan, a triangle-shaped deposit of gravel, sand, and sediment that supports a plethora of wildlife like moose and antelope.

3 Nelson Farms
Bridges a long stretch of the Missouri River adjacent to state land and the Tri-IG conservation easement completed by PPLT in 2021. The easement protects 330 acres of irrigated, high-value crops and 0.6 miles of Missouri shoreline, bringing the total protected shoreline to more than three contiguous miles.
A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

VOLUNTEERS ARE often talked about as the lifeblood of a non-profit; indeed they make the impossible possible. At the same time, many of us fail to recognize the force of nature that is an intern. Prickly Pear’s recent intern is exactly that – full of life, unstoppable, and unforgettable. Olivia Gervacio Jakabosky, a worldly and well-grounded student that came across the country to major in Conservation Biology at MSU. Wary at first of the duties and responsibility that came with the role, Olivia quickly acclimated and fell in love with the experience.

When her counselor mentioned an organization that worked to “bridge the gap between the natural world and humanity,” it spoke directly to her core. This is her life’s mission as well. Olivia learned about the move from Bozeman to Helena, and shadowed each PPLT team member to learn the ways of a conservation non-profit. She saw everything from the science and industry standards behind the work to the cultivation of organizational support and the importance of storytelling. Olivia found that Montana wasn’t just picturesque and vast, nearly untouchable; it was a land built around the passion of its people. The pronghorn antelope is an icon that means more to Helena than meets the eye. Her internship also meant leading the Summer Walk Series and coordinating volunteer projects, effectively making her an informed steward of the land she was helping to protect.

In the words of Eric’s wife, Ellen Feaver, “Eric hiked Mount Helena, the South Hills, the Scratchgraves...”

PARKS AND PLACES are often talked about as the lifeblood of a non-profit; indeed they make the impossible possible. At the same time, many of us fail to recognize the force of nature that is a land trust. PPLT is often “a land built around the passion of its people.”

Eric’s trail of inspiration is long and it meanders through many facets and faces. Falling in love with the experience showed her that a non-profit can be structured and balanced while offering creative liberty to pursue community wins. You don’t necessarily have to “stay in your lane,” to find creative solutions to help people connect with nature.

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COMMUNITY CHAMPION, ERIC FEAVER

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TRAILS AS CONSERVATION

by Tim Lawrence

TRAILS REST at the intersection of the well-being of ecosystems and the human enjoyment of those ecosystems. We often think trails are for our benefit, but this is only partly true. Trails and responsible recreation are inherently good and important.

For example, in this very issue we feature two thought leaders who have been instrumental in the growth and development of our very own LeGrande Trails. These two individuals are: Timeworn Trail Head of Land Stewardship, Ben Sussman, and the executive director of the Blackfoot Conservation Cooperative, Jad Case. These two men bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their roles, and we are grateful to have them on the Land Trust’s team.

In addition to these two individuals, the Land Trust has over 100 dedicated volunteers who work tirelessly to build and maintain trails, as well as to ensure that they are used responsibly and safely. These volunteers are the backbone of our trail system and their contributions are invaluable.

In this issue of the Trails Desk, we will discuss the history of the LeGrande Trails, as well as the challenges and opportunities that face us as we continue to develop and maintain this important resource.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and that you will take the time to get out on the trails and experience the beauty and serenity that they offer. As Tim Lawrence, Executive Director of the Land Trust, said in his introduction to this issue: “I’m excited to make everything work more smoothly, for the community, for our partner agencies, and for the land trust.”

New LeGrande Area Trails

You may have noticed that Mount Helena City Park grew this season, expanding its boundary in the northwestern corner, thanks to recent donations to the City. The recent addition features a sentimental history and new fresh trails. The previous owner, William Whyte, loved this 90 acres south of the popular Le Grande Cannon Trail and graciously allowed access to it over the years. After Whyte’s death, the City, represented by a friend of Prickly Pear Land Trust, Rogers Little, worked with the Land Trust to preserve William’s legacy and ensure permanent public access.

In 2019, PPLT worked with military partners from Fort Harrison and community leaders Ken and Liz Eden among many others to raise funds. Prickly Pear Land Trust assembled and completed the purchase of 90 acres of prime real estate, donating it to the City of Helena and thus, YOU, the public, in 2020.

This year, the Land Trust’s Trails and Parks Coordinator, Tim Lawrence, organized the experts and the crews to design and build official trails. First, he laid out new routes with help from PPLT’s Trails Assistant Emmett Purcell, Trails and Programs Director Nate Kopp, and the City of Helena’s Assistant Open Lands Manager Tyler Wock. Then, Tim led the construction of the trails with Montana Conservation Corps crews, volunteers, and PPLT’s seasonal intern Olivia Gervacio Jakabsky. As a result, several miles of brand-new trails were added to the system.

Construction of a few of these trails took place in the west, including the Northwest Passage, which was altered to accommodate a private property and now connects the new Road to Mars Trail. This is a popular destination for mountain bikers, hikers, and runners. The new trails provide new opportunities for recreation and enjoyment of nature.

PPLT works on improvement one trail at a time

It’s one thing to build up a vast public land and trail system as Prickly Pear Land Trust has done over the past 25 years. It’s another to ensure those trails are properly maintained and managed. Enter Tim Lawrence, the new(ish) Trails and Parks Coordinator. Tim proves his salt as a seasonal trail coordinator today and serves the Trail Community with a wealth of trail management knowledge and experience.

2022 Trail Additions

Given our unmatched access to trails, we protect natural areas as parks, in the Helena region, our city parks and national forest south of town are most prominent. We build trails on these lands so that when we explore, we limit our impact on the resource so future generations can do the same. We intentionally permanently alter part of the landscape, scar the open lands by building trails, so that people who want to partake in the natural wonder of our open spaces can do so without fear of destruction of an already limited resource. This, of course, requires the participation of the recreationist in conservation best practices.

Public lands are important and are here for conservation and recreation, this is especially true in Montana where the land is our legacy. The word “recreation” has roots, in French, regarding the physical and spiritual restoration from a good meal. It grew to include any activity that was physically or spiritually restorative. In terms of public lands that means hiking and running, biking and riding horses, hunting, fishing, and birding, the possibilities are endless. In our society, it may mean any hobby or sport as well, but we’re not going into that here.

In recent years, studies have shown that just being outside in a natural setting such as a forested park, has the health benefits of reducing stress levels and blood pressure. You don’t even need to be moving to gain these benefits, just present in a natural setting. (The Nature Fix by Florence Williams is an approachable breakdown of recent science). Some doctors now prescribe time outside as the cure for what ails ya.

Given our unmatched access to trails, this is pivotal for our quality of life here in Helena. We can stay active and enjoy health benefits by partaking in the trails in our own backyard. We have a huge amount of public land. We have established trails so we can enjoy these environmentally, communally, and individually beneficial places together and responsibly. Volunteers and paid staff maintain those trails and update outdated trails when resources are available. We have trail professionals that are plugged into the recreation and trails community state and nationwide who plan routes for new multi-use trails throughout our system. All this so we can enjoy our public lands, our open lands, and our community without simultaneously destroying them.

You really can have it all, Helena.

TRAILS AS CONSERVATION

by Tim Lawrence

Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Conservation Corps – as well as local businesses and citizen groups that are volunteer-minded is essential.

Tim recently completed the route-finding, planning, and trail building on nearly two miles of trails this season working with Tyler Wock from the City Open Lands Department, Montana Conservation Corps, and community trail volunteers. He added, “We have a great community invested in our trails. When it comes to trail building, we would not be able to do it without the local Montana Conservation Corps crews, truly.”

Tim’s Supervisor, Nate Kopp (Program and Trail Director) says: “Tim has been an awesome addition to the team, he brings a calm demeanor and a level of consistency to everything he does. A very intentional and thoughtful person, it’s not uncommon to find a pastry or breakfast burrito on your desk in the morning courtesy of Tim. Now, a decade of trails work allowed him to step in and take our program to new heights. It is no easy feat to construct two miles of trail entirely with volunteers and person-power in one season and that’s exactly what he did this summer on the LeGrande trail additions.”

When he’s not covered in dirt and sawdust on the trail, he’s cooking for friends or reading a book and writing with a french press of coffee. Tim has already hit the ground running, give him a hello if you see him on the trails!

ARE YOU A TRAIL LOVER?
Consider becoming a Cactus Club member.

By pledging a recurring monthly donation, you become part of the community that supports our work throughout the seasons. No monthly gift is too small to make a difference. Cactus Club starts at $5 per month and great perks start at just $10 per month! Visit prickleypearl.org/give/cactus-club to join.

Note: Physical trail signs are in progress. When you see the pink diamond or orange diamond on your hike, it's not uncommmon to find a pastry or breakfast burrito on your desk in the morning courtesy of Tim. Now, a decade of trails work allowed him to step in and take our program to new heights. It is no easy feat to construct two miles of trail entirely with volunteers and person-power in one season and that's exactly what he did this summer on the LeGrande trail additions.
Have you seen the new kid (brewery) on the block? Under the shadow of its namesake, tucked into downtown Helena is Ascension Brewing. Behind the tap system is a map of trails, Mt. Helena and Mt. Ascension dominating the topographic area. The horseshoe bar allows a great view of the map, a TV, and the brewing room. It’s a comfortable place—and you can even buy food!

Their grand opening was August 13; since then, they’ve been swamped. But it’s not just their popularity that’s interesting. It’s their partnership with Prickly Pear Land Trust that’s the kicker. Their Happy Trails IPA is serving double duty. Not only is it a refreshing, delicious beer, but 2% of the profits go to Prickly Pear Land Trust. Here’s the best part: it’s not just seasonal, it’s FOREVER!

The beer was two years in the making and Bex, Head Brewer, says it’s “her baby.”

Bex approached PPLT Director Mary Hollow in 2020 about the idea. “We are thrilled to be partnering with Bex and her team, and we love the model of local giving,” said Mary Hollow. Ascension Brewery wants to ensure that they’re giving back to the community, and this partnership was their idea. But PPLT isn’t the only Montana business that they support. The Happy Trails IPA is made with hops grown on Montana soil at the Big Sky Orchards & Hops Farm in Bigfork.

Just in case you needed some more encouragement, Bex says: “Come drink more beer so we can donate more money!”

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Sarah Alling
Andrew Anderson
Cameron Betchey
Peter Brum
Riley & Leah
Burnham
Caryn Davidson
Emily Dean
Anna Denton
Raymond Dominick
Matt Eilewine
Mark & Mary
Keeffe
Adam Kraft
Conina Krick
Bert Lindler
Pat McNicol
Scott Pfeifer
Patricia & Gerald
Sheilds
Mike & Karen
Stevenson
Gordon & Pat
Talent
Tammy & John
Wilkins

SAVE THESE DATES!

Lantern Walk
Saturday, December 3, 4:30 pm
on Mount Helena

East Helena Christmas Stroll Merch Popup Booth
Galaxy Coffee Roasters
10 W Main Street, East Helena
Thursday, December 1

Don’t Fence Me In
Trail Run 2023
Saturday, May 13

PPLT’s Harvest Moon Banquet and Auction will be back in 2023!

After a three-year hiatus, this will be a return to remember! Dust off your dancing shoes and bolo, Harvest Moon is coming back in style. We cannot wait to see you there!