

Our Featured Customers

State: Oregon

Featured Customer: The Wahl Family

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Across the Landscape and Through the Generations One Family's Decade of Land Stewardship

Curry County, Oregon

Where the forested foothills of the Coastal Mountains roll into savannahs and grasslands leading to the southern Oregon coast, the Wahl family has kept watch of the area's resources and landscape for more than 125 years.

"We've been here so long that I can't even imagine not having this," reflects Mary Wahl, whose forebears from Scotland began raising sheep on the Oregon coast in 1874.

Over the past century, the mantle of caring for the land has passed from generation to generation, a seamless continuity of sound land management principles that are now being instilled in the next generation. Mary explains that, for them, conservation and family are inseparable. In her words, it's about wanting "a future for the kids that involves ranching, and part of having ranching keep going is conservation."



The family has long employed a land management ethic that is flexible to opportunities and proactive toward environmental and resource concerns. Over the decades, the operation has blossomed into a 2,000-acre sheep and cattle ranch with rich timber-producing forests.

Meticulous in their conservation land management techniques, the Wahl family takes pride in knowing they have taken steps to protect all the resources on the operation.

Livestock, the foundation of the agricultural operation, is intensively managed with planned grazing to maximize animal health and pasture productivity. Their 4,000 head of sheep are rotated daily using a system of both permanent and temporary electric fence, a system designed to

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—Mary Wahl

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minimize impacts on the landscape and maintain high quality forage. With good management, these pastures stay lush and green without a speck of erosion. In addition, many of these grazed lands are dotted with chains of ponds, each buffered by thick, green riparian vegetation that keep the soil stable and the water clean providing a rich haven for wildlife.

Due to the coastal location, conservation measures on the Wahl Ranch also provide key benefits to a number of aquatic and wildlife species. Over the years, the family has taken steps to maintain stream, riparian and wetland habitats that provide critical food, shelter and rearing habitats for native fish, birds and mammals.

One example is their work to improve water quality, fish habitat and fish passage along the Elk River and its tributaries, areas important to threatened, endangered or other species of concern like coastal coho salmon, cutthroat trout and steelhead. Activities they completed, include fencing and planting over five miles of riparian buffers that control soil erosion and prevent pollutants from entering the water.

They also removed a culvert and created fish friendly passage, opening access to a wetland and nearly a mile of habitat for native fish. As a result, habitat and the ability of fish to move freely to spawning areas were restored to the stream.

Terry Wahl, Mary's brother who also keeps the family conservation tradition alive, describes what all of this work means to him. "One of my best things going is, I can be here, my family and I, and have a look around and I get to see the results of what little I have done, [that it] is making a difference," Terry explains.



Having always worked together as a family, the Wahls understand the importance of strong partnerships. Over the years, they have worked with a number of local, state and federal groups to assist with their restoration projects and management principles. These include, among others, the local watershed council, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon State University Extension Service, the Wetlands Conservancy, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Curry County Soil and Water Conservation District, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The family has always taken leadership for the conservation activities on their land, and in the process found a trusted ally in the NRCS to stand by them and help out when needed. Over the years, the Wahl Ranch has made use of the full range of USDA conservation programs, including: Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program,



Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. In addition, the Wahl Ranch was recognized as a top-level conservation operation when they qualified for Tier III in the Conservation Security Program, an NRCS program that rewards only the best land stewards for success in protecting the nation's natural resources.



The record of the Wahl family's 125 years of conservation can be seen and felt in a number of ways – some are obvious to anyone who gazes over the healthy green forests, productive rolling grasslands, and clear streams teeming with life. Even the coastal ranch house seems to stand guard to the open spaces that increasingly become absorbed by development and other uses.

Other evidence of this tradition is less tangible, yet no less important to this part of rural Oregon and beyond. It's shown the almost infectious way the land ethic is passed on from one to another in the community. Each generation of the Wahl family has passed some of the knowledge of the land and the devotion for protecting it to those around them. In fact, ranchland adjacent to the Wahls and part of the original homestead, is also managed by another branch of the family in the same stewardship-minded manner.

Within the family and beyond, the Wahls' overall land ethic filters to those around them. Mary Wahl sees that, while people in the community approach it in different ways, conservation is a common value.

“People feel differently about it in varying degrees of passion about environmental things,” she says, “but everybody wants the same thing.”

Thanks to the example set by families like the Wahls and other land stewards, conservation will remain a priority in communities across the country.



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