

Lake County Ranch Expansion Provides Win for Two Families, Lake County, Oregon

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easements - Grasslands of Special Significance



Lake County Ranch Expansion

With its wide open landscapes and a mix of private and public lands, Lake County has long been a hub for Oregon's cattle industry. Ranches have contributed to the state's agricultural economy for generations. But like many rural areas, the county faces challenges as aging ranchers look to retire and younger generations struggle to access affordable land.

In a partnership between Oregon Agricultural Trust (OAT) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a Lake County operator made his 2,500 acres of ranchland more affordable for a local family with a conservation easement.

The Solution to no Successor

One Lake County ranch operator was ready to retire but didn't have a successor interested in continuing the business. Meanwhile, a neighboring rancher and longtime friend had been hoping to expand his cattle operation, but the market value of the land made it financially out of reach.

The two families turned to OAT to help them keep the land in production while making it more affordable for another producer in need of land.

One of OAT's primary tools is a working land conservation easement—a voluntary, legal agreement that permanently restricts nonagricultural development on farmland or ranchland. In exchange, landowners receive financial compensation, usually in the form of cash or tax benefits, for the appraised value of the development rights they forgo. This reduces the purchase price for future buyers, making the land more affordable while ensuring it stays in agricultural use.

Why the Landowner Chose Permanent Protection

The average price per acre of agricultural land in Lake County had nearly doubled between the last two USDA Census of Agriculture reports, increasing from \$1,081 per acre in 2017 to \$2,108 in 2022.



How the Land Was Protected

The conservation easement was made possible with efforts from OAT and funding received from NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) - Grasslands of Special Significance.

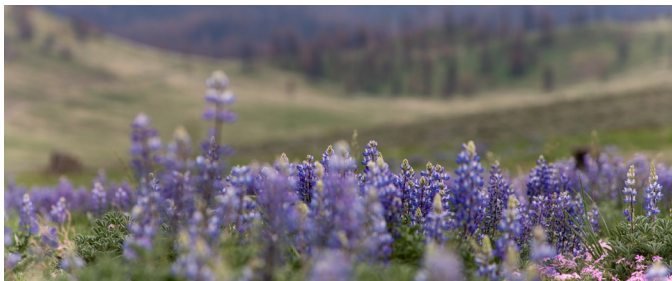
The landowner also made a charitable contribution toward the easement purchase.

ACEP-ALE helps private and tribal landowners, land trusts, and other entities such as state and local governments protect croplands and grasslands on working farms and ranches by limiting nonagricultural uses of the land which negatively affect the conservation values of eligible land.

Grasslands of special significance contain little or no noxious or invasive species and are subject to the threat of conversion to nongrassland or fragmentation.

Where NRCS determines grasslands of special environmental significance will be protected, NRCS may contribute up to 75 percent of the fair market value of the agricultural land easement.

Once the working land easement was finalized and the cash payment delivered, the retiring rancher was able to sell the land to his neighbor at a reduced price, making the purchase financially viable.



What Was Accomplished

The conservation easement in Lake County represents a four-way win:

- A win for the seller, who was able to retire with cash in hand and the knowledge that his property would remain in ranching.
- A win for the buyer, who expanded his cattle operation and strengthened his family's agricultural business.
- A win for the land, with grazing not only allowed, but required, and with protection of habitat for sage grouse and other species.
- And a win for the local economy, as another working ranch stays in production, supporting local jobs, food systems, and rural livelihoods.

This successful project illustrates how ACEP-ALE funding for conservation easements can support agricultural land affordability, generational transfer, and ecological stewardship, ensuring Oregon's working lands remain productive for generations to come.



About the Partners

Oregon Agricultural Trust

Oregon Agricultural Trust partners with farmers and ranchers to protect agricultural lands for the benefit of Oregon's economy, communities, and landscapes.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS provides America's farmers and ranchers with financial and technical assistance to voluntarily put conservation on the ground, helping the environment and agriculture operations. To find out more visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov.



Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE