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Conservation easement placed on 89 acres near Marble

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A big, open meadow just off the road on the way to Marble is going to always be just that, a big open meadow.

“We just wanted to see it kept the way it is,” said Larry Darien, who along with his wife, Dana, recently finalized putting a conservation easement on 89 acres of the Darien Ranch.

The property is three miles up County Road 3 from Highway 133 toward Marble. It is past the Bogan Flats campground, past the bridge that crosses over the Crystal River, and is the big, open meadow that bursts into the view on the right side of the road.

“It is the most dramatic scenery going into Marble,” said Martha Cochran, executive director of Aspen Valley Land Trust, which now oversees 28,000 acres of conservation easements in the Roaring Fork and upper Colorado river drainages.

The Crystal River runs alongside the Darien Ranch property, which has big views of Chair Mountain and Whitehouse Mountain. The ranch is also labeled as “Prospect Ranch” on some area maps.

In the 1970s, a developer seeking to build a ski area in Marble once got approvals to build up to 600 homes on the property, but now it will remain open pasture.

“That would be like standing in downtown Aspen,” Darien said of the old development rights. “And that wasn’t what our plans were.”

The Dariens had already placed 70 acres of the 185-acre ranch under a conservation easement in 2007. Yesterday, they formalized a deal with AVL T to put another 89 acres under an easement. They also own another 20 acres that include either houses or development rights.

The Dariens received \$891,500 for the easement from a variety of partners. Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), which is funded from state lottery proceeds, provided \$556,000. Aspen Valley Land Trust contributed \$50,000, Pitkin County Open Space Fund gave \$250,000 and the Gunnison Valley Preservation Fund chipped in \$35,000. In addition, the Dariens donated \$111,500 in value, according to AVL T.

Pitkin County’s open space program took the lead role in putting the deal together. The Dariens plan to continue to graze cattle and horses on the 89-acre parcel and it will not be open to the public, as it remains private land that cannot be developed.

Three Darien brothers — Gus, Hank and Jim — bought the ranch from John Osgood in 1938. Osgood also built Redstone Castle. Larry and Dana Darien ended up with the ranch and once ran the Ute Meadows Nordic Ski Area on the property.

“With the easement, we’re allowed to do the Nordic center if we want again,” Larry Darien said. “And I guess there is a possibility that the Aspen Nordic council wants to do something again.”

Conservation of the Darien Ranch is a part of the Crystal Watershed Legacy project, which was initiated to conserve the last major ranches and historic properties in the Crystal River Valley. Legacy projects are multi-year, multimillion-dollar commitments given to local agencies that otherwise might not have the funding to achieve their visions, according to GOCO.

GOCO has committed to funding \$5 million worth of projects in the Crystal River Valley.

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A conservation easement was recently placed on this 89-acre parcel on the Darien Ranch near Marble. The land, with views of Chair Mountain (prominent peak in the background), is three miles up County Road 3 from Highway 133.

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