

THE ASPEN TIMES

A conservation conundrum

Preservation of ranch in hands of reluctant county commissioners

By **Scott Condon**
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Conservationists are scrambling to convince Eagle County commissioners to help preserve 753 acres of a cattle ranch in Missouri Heights.

Aspen Valley Land Trust is trying to help Sarah "Wendy" McNulty and her daughter Katy continue working the land rather than chopping it into 10- to 35-acre ranchettes. The McNultys have maintained the cattle operation despite the debilitating illness of Wendy's husband Gary, who is receiving care in Denver. The ranch has been in Gary's family since the late 1880s.

"It's one of the biggest chunks left of a working ranch," said Shannon Meyer, associate director of AVL. "It's probably one of the oldest working ranches in the valley."

The ranch is eye-catching because it has an old-time Colorado feel; dilapidated barns, sheds and grain bins dot the property. Cows wander pastures and Cattle Creek meanders through lower meadows.

Rural sprawl creeps closer

The ranch is located along Upper Cattle Creek Road at the base of Cottonwood Pass. It is split between Eagle and Garfield counties. About 466 of the 753 acres the family wants to preserve is located in Eagle County.

The development of trophy homes are chewing up Missouri Heights and creeping closer to the ranch every year; a gated subdivision is located just over a hillside to the southeast.

"There's definitely a big development threat," Meyer said. AVL supports conservation of the ranch for a variety of reasons, including easing the rural sprawl that plagues Missouri Heights, preserving the ranching heritage and preserving wildlife habitat.

The McNulty family donated a conservation easement on 65 acres of the ranch to AVL last year. They received a state tax credit which they were able to sell.

This year, Meyer worked with the AVL on a plan to place conservation easements on a majority of the ranch. Following the plan, the McNultys would sell conservation easements which severely restrict their ability to develop the ranch. In return, they would remain on the ranch and be able to continue working the land indefinitely.

The family also would reserve the right to develop five home sites, including one where an old ranch house is located.

County support uncertain

Cows graze near an old cabin on the McNulty Ranch, which was homesteaded in 1884. The owners hope to sell conservation easements, which would prevent development and allow them to continue ranching. (Courtesy of Aspen Valley Land Trust)



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The family is seeking \$1.9 million from the Eagle County government's open space fund for conservation easements. They also applied for a \$1.8 million conservation grant from the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The state is expected to announce next week if the McNulty Ranch made the cut for a grant.

Garfield County doesn't have an open space program and won't contribute funds for the conservation effort.

The ranch provides severe winter range for elk and mule deer, Meyer said. The state wildlife division has funds available to protect that habitat.

Support from Eagle County appears "tenuous," according to Meyer. The Eagle County Open Space Advisory Board voted unanimously Sept. 11 to recommend that the commissioners fully fund the project.

The county commissioners delayed action when they reviewed the project Oct. 24. Meyer said Commissioner Tom Stone indicated he wouldn't support the project because it didn't meet his criteria for open space purchases.

"We know one commissioner is going to vote against it," Meyer said.

So AVLTT is urging proponents to lobby the other county commissioners, Arn Menconi and Peter Runyon, to support the deal. The commissioners are expected to reconsider the issue later this month or in December.

If the grant from the wildlife division range comes through but funding from Eagle County doesn't, conservation easements would be placed on the lands in Garfield County, Meyer said, and the family would continue to pursue funding from Eagle County next year.

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