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Eagle County preserves cattle ranch

Commissioners approve \$1.9M conservation deal

By **Scott Condon**
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EAGLE COUNTY — The McNulty family's commitment to preserve their cattle ranch in Missouri Heights finally paid off Tuesday.

The Eagle County commissioners voted 2-0 to purchase conservation easements that will eliminate development rights on 466 acres of the ranch. Eagle County will spend \$1,926,000 over the next two years to acquire the conservation easements. Aspen Valley Land Trust contributed another \$100,000 to the deal and The Nature Conservancy added \$5,000.

Sarah "Wendy" McNulty and her daughters Katy and Meg donated 32.6 percent of the appraised value of the conservation easements to the deal. That was essentially a contribution of \$1 million.

The McNultys could have sold the land for a significantly higher price. A 10-acre parcel next to their property recently sold for about \$425,000.

"I'd rather have less money and keep the ranch a ranch," Wendy said.

Their spread straddles the Eagle-Garfield county line, about six miles north of El Jebel. It's at the base of Cottonwood Pass.

McNulty said her family feels strongly about the responsibility of being good custodians of the land. She has been running the ranch since the 1990s, when her husband Gary was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. He is on a life-support system at a Denver hospital.

Under the terms of Tuesday's deal, the McNultys retain ownership of the land and can continue to ranch it. Their development rights on the 466 acres are extinguished.

The McNultys explored sales of conservation easements for years because they wanted to see the land preserved rather than carved into ranchettes. Wendy said they will eagerly continue to raise cattle.

"It's something we know how to do," she said. "There's a love of the land that's hard to explain. People either have it or they don't."

The Carbondale-based Aspen Valley Land Trust felt so strongly about the McNulty deal that it allocated funds for a purchase of conservation easements for the first time ever, associate director Shannon Meyer said. Usually AVLTT relies on donations of conservation easements from landowners who receive tax breaks.

Wendy and Katy McNulty ride on their Missouri Heights ranch in November. (Jim Paussa/The Aspen Times)



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"This is one of the last working ranches in Missouri Heights proper," Meyer said. Ranching is a way of life that is disappearing in the entire Roaring Fork Valley, she said. The deal was also important because the ranch provides excellent wildlife habitat.

The super-heated real estate market devoured more than 11,000 acres of ranch land in the valley during a one-year period that started in June 2005, according to AVL's research. In nearly every case, agricultural land was or will be converted into large-lot, rural residential development labeled exurbia.

The Grange family of Basalt, like the McNultys, bucked the trend to sell out. The Granges sold conservation easements to their land last year and continued cattle ranching. The old Perry Ranch outside of Carbondale was also purchased by buyers who claim they will preserve it.

Meyer said she hopes those examples show owners of the last working ranches throughout the region that alternatives exist to selling to developers. She credited the McNultys with sticking to their commitment to preserving the land. Eagle County politely declined the McNulty offer last year. Other grant requests to preserve the ranch were turned down.

"There were times they could have said, 'Just forget it,'" Meyer said of the McNultys.

The family retained ownership and development rights on 20 acres of their ranch in Eagle County. They also own 422 acres in Garfield County. They donated conservation easements to AVL on 135 of those acres.

McNulty said they received an outpouring of support for the preservation effort from people throughout the valley, many of whom they didn't know. More than 20 people spoke in support of the deal at a recent commissioners' hearing.

Commissioners Sara Fisher and Peter Runyon approved the expenditure Tuesday. Commissioner Arn Menconi wasn't present at the time of the vote but conveyed his support through a county official.

McNulty said the money her family received will be plowed back into the ranch. Fences need mending. Irrigation ditches need shoring. Pastures need attention.

"All these years that Gary has been so sick, the poor ranch has taken the short end of the stick," she said.

She informed Gary by e-mail Tuesday that Eagle County approved the deal. Some days he is able to respond, she said while awaiting an answer. He wholeheartedly supported the plan to preserve the ranch, according to Wendy.

Now they have peace of mind that the ranch will remain largely as it is, after their children and grandchildren are gone, Wendy said. "This land will be cared for in perpetuity," she said.

Scott Condon's e-mail address is scondon@aspentimes.com.

[BACK](#) 