

Preserving a ranch in perpetuity

Mark and Patti Bennett of Baker County signed a conservation easement to ensure their land remains a working ranch

By IAN CRAWFORD

Baker City Herald

UNITY — The sounds of the sage grouse defy simple description, a combination of whooping, plunking, whooshing and cooing. The birds can detect infrasound, frequencies under 20 hertz, from miles away.

In humans, even though infrasounds are inaudible, there is an innate sensation, a detectable feeling of worry when exposed to it at length. An instinctive response attuned to sometimes dangerous sources.

Mark Bennett has been listening among the grouse for years on his cattle ranch near Unity in southern Baker County. When the future of his nearly 9,000-acre property came into question, Bennett acted to preserve both the land and its grouse, and turned to land conservation.

“This has been a 10-year project,” said Bennett, who is also a Baker County commissioner. “We’d had a family meeting (about the future of the ranch), and the kids said ‘We have our own kids, our careers. We won’t be returning.’”

Bennett said he felt a pang of anguish at the time.

“We wanted to preserve what my folks had been doing and what we’d done,” he said.

His parents bought the property, known as Secret Valley Ranch, in 1979, and Mark has been running the ranch since 1989.

Bennett and his wife, Patti, decided that, come retirement, there needed to be a better plan than to simply sell the ranch. Handing it off for the greatest payout opened liability for the land to be subdivided or abused, and they needed certainty that it wouldn’t.

The result was a conservation easement, covering 8,887 acres of the Bennetts’ ranch, through the Blue Mountain Land Trust, a nonprofit formed in 1999 and based in Walla Walla, Washington.



Contributed Photo

Mark and Patti Bennett’s ranch in southern Baker County includes habitat for sage grouse.

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A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust, such as Blue Mountain Land Trust, that permanently limits uses of the land to protect such values as wildlife habitat.

The property remains privately owned, but elements of the easement, such as prohibiting the land from being subdivided and ensuring it remains a working ranch, remain legally binding even if the land is sold or transferred to heirs.

“One of the goals that we set was, not only would there be conservation protec-

tions, but that it would be an economically viable ranching operation,” Bennett said.

In 2018 the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board allocated \$879,000 to buy the conservation easement from the Bennetts.

The money comes from the Oregon Lottery.

The project was coordinated by the Blue Mountain Land Trust, the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Watershed Enhancement Board.

The Bennetts have invested time and material to protect their ranch and its wild-

life and other resources, and they’ve been rewarded for their efforts.

“We believe and are able to show that conservation methods are good for land, wildlife and are profitable,” Bennett said. “You can run around, and talk about it, and people go ‘uh huh, uh huh,’ we set about it quietly to prove the template, that you could do it and still profit. We’re not being micro-managed by an environmentalist group.”

The easement, completed early this year, acts as a biological oasis for not only the grouse, but the trout in West Camp Creek, and other species that inhabit the land from the tree tops to their root depths.

Bennett said managing the land is a challenge due to shallow soils and other factors.

“The crucial thing is that we all are entrusted with something, even if it’s just a lawn, trees, our responsibility is to make the best better,” Bennett said. “If everyone takes care of their things, that responsible stewardship is so important. We feel responsible to protect the wildlife too, God wants us to take care of it.”