

LAND

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Agriculture is an integral part of Wallowa County’s rural economy. The county’s top commodities are hay production — primarily timothy and alfalfa — and livestock and wheat. Wallowa County boasts 452,559 acres of farm land and generates an estimated \$46.6 million in ag product market value, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Expanding development and population pressures pose a threat to keeping farmland in agricultural production.

But there’s a new tool to help farmers combat those pressures, a tool that is gaining popularity and momentum across the West—agricultural conservation easements.

Easements keep land in agriculture forever

The Wolfes are protecting hundreds of acres of their family’s farmland forever through agricultural conservation easements. By working with the Wallowa Land Trust, they secured two easements on 463 acres of prime farmland to ensure the property stays in agriculture for generations to come, while also protecting valuable fish and wildlife habitat.

“It’s worth it to me if I can protect this land forever from subdivision and population pressures, and it stays in agriculture,” Wolfe said.

One of the easements was completed in 2017 for 266 acres, in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service through its Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements. This is a program in the Farm Bill that pays



Through partnerships and conservation easements, the Wolfe Family is protecting critical salmon habitat on the Lostine and Wallowa rivers while also supporting cultural values of the Nez Perce Tribe.

half of the appraised easement value cost to make easements a more affordable and realistic option for farmers and ranchers.

The remaining amount is offered up through a nongovernmental group and other partners. In this case, the Wallowa Land Trust secured matching dollars through the Bergstrom Foundation, the Penstemon Fund and the Nez Perce Tribe. Additionally, the Wolfes generously donated 25 percent of the easement value.

Wolfe also has another easement on 197 acres with the Wallowa Land Trust, which was completed in 2011.

The Wolfe Farm has a legacy in Wallowa County. It’s a 555-acre century farm, and has been in the family since 1897. Additional neighboring acres have been acquired over the years for a total of more than 2,000 acres.

Wolfe believes that permanent conservation easements are a valuable tool to protect the rural way of life in his community and to leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

“There’s very few great places left,” Wolfe said. “And the ones that are great—eventually you get enough people coming in and it will change things, and it becomes not so great anymore.”

Like negotiating ‘a bundle of rights’

Securing an easement is not an easy process. It presents many challenges, and can take several years from start to finish. But Wolfe says the end result is totally worth it.

Kathleen Ackley, executive director of the Wallowa Land Trust, describes it as negotiating “a bundle of land rights.”

“When you own land, you own certain rights to the land,

such as the right to develop, the right to build homes and the right to mine minerals,” Ackley said. “Working with a land trust, you remove some of the land rights from the bundle and they go away forever. The landowner agrees to give up certain rights to the land, such as the right to subdivide or develop, for example.”

“It’s a privilege to have that kind of a relationship with the landowners,” she added. “It’s really a partnership. Landowners are willing to work with us because what we do is voluntary and non-regulatory. It’s one of the best tools available to help farmers and ranchers stay on the land and keep it in agricultural production.”

Easements are a negotiation, and each one is different based on the objectives of each party and the various programs involved.

“We have conversations

with the landowner about our mutual goals, then we seek the right program that will allow us to be successful while meeting everyone’s needs,” Ackley said.

Through the conservation easement program, the Wolfe’s have a management plan to use no-till farming practices. No-till causes less disturbance in the soil, resulting in higher organic matter, better water infiltration and less erosion.

They also manage healthy streamside habitats on the property to provide quality habitat for fish and wildlife. The property is teeming with life. Sounds of crickets, woodpeckers, song birds and frogs abound as the Lostine and Wallowa rivers flow through healthy meadows.

“It makes sense to manage the land for ecological purposes,” Wolfe said. “I believe if we want healthy farm land, we have to have healthy habitats adjacent to it.”

Easement economics

Easements are a great way for landowners to earn additional income. In Woody’s and Megan’s case, they were able to use the money gained from the sale of an easement to pay down debt and invest in the farm’s operation.

“I can sleep easier at night knowing that I was able to pay down some debt because of the easement capital,” Wolfe said.

However, he cautions other farmers to avoid the process if the financial incentive is their only motivation.

“If you’re just in it for the money, then don’t do it,” Wolfe said. “It’s challenging to enter into an agreement that lasts forever. You need the flexibility to farm, but you also are obligated to ensure that the conservation values that are

being protected actually are being protected. You have to have the stewardship ethic and values in order to make it successful. My goal is sustainability — to keep the land healthy and thriving for as long as it can.”

Partnerships are key

Wolfe began working with the land trust in 2004. He has future plans to do more conservation work on the farm including reopening 100 acres of functioning natural flood plain.

He wants to continue using easements as a tool in his land management.

Partnerships with local, state and federal natural resource groups and with the Nez Perce Tribe are critical to getting the work done.

“Working with good partners is essential to creating success,” Wolfe said. “They have research and science behind what they do; it’s important to partner with people that have the capital and the knowledge to get things done.”

“It’s been a pleasure working with the Wolfe Family and to see their genuine stewardship ethic come to fruition on the property,” Ackley said. “We couldn’t have done it without help from many partners, including the NRCS, the Nez Perce Tribe and others. Perhaps most importantly, the benefits will be shared with the community forever.”

For more information about conservation easement programs offered by NRCS in Oregon, visit www.or.nrcs.usda.gov.

This story was provided to the Chieftain by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, words and photos by Tracy Robillard.



Courtesy Photo

Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash, left, recently visited Washington, D.C., with the main purpose of seeing the Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision reach its final destination. The revision will change management practices on the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests. Standing with Nash are U.S. Forest Service Chief Tony Tooke, and Malheur County commissioner Mike Owens.

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Nash said Wallowa County, the cattlemen’s association, USDA rangeland scientist Chad Boyd and Oregon’s U.S. Rep. Greg Walden weighed in on that portion of the plan.

With the changes in place, Nash asked U.S. Forest Service Region 6 forester Jim Penny if a county commissioner could accompany him when he made the revision presentation to USFS Chief Tony Tooke in Washington, D.C.

Penny agreed and Harney County Commissioner Mark Owens was appointed for the job. Nash attended meetings elsewhere as well as a number of meetings with the head of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, which oversees the USFS and also representatives of the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Land Management and a wrap-up with Tooke.

The group also met with Walden and staff from Oregon’s U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

Much of the agency talk revolved around issues facing ranchers and loggers. These included the threatened species status of plants such as Spalding’s Catchfly and fish species, including Bull Trout.

“We’re looking at setting up distinct population areas where they might be de-listed in an easier manner,” Nash said. “We have a thriving population of both those species in Wallowa County, and we should be proud of the fact that we have so many endangered species that thrive here, and we should be acknowledged for the good stewards we are.”

Nash said that probably the most significant results from the meetings were a possible reassessment of federal graz-

ing policy, including closed, but most especially, vacant grazing allotments.

“That was on their radar all the way through,” Nash said. “They wanted a priority list of the allotments we’d like to see reauthorized.” He added that the county has already compiled such a list and would return it soon, along with lists from Baker and Union counties.

The USFS has lost a number of employees, so the implementation process of new policies may be slow. However, the Oregon Good Neighbor Authority Master Agreement, signed by Gov. Kate Brown in 2016, should help move the process along as it was designed to facilitate county, state and federal agencies collaboration to manage national public forestlands and watershed health through funding and skills sharing.

Nash was surprised to hear that the lawsuit filed by the environmental groups Greater Hells Canyon Council and Oregon Wild to stop implementation of the Lostine Corridor Public Safety Project had reached the ears of the highest levels of natural resources agencies in the government.

“The fact that the categorical exclusion was challenged in this case, and the frivolousness of it — they’re really frustrated with groups like Hells Canyon and Oregon Wild, and the conduct they’ve presented there,” Nash said.

The trip may sound like it was expensive, but because of pooled costs, Wallowa County’s share only came to \$700.

“For what we achieved, it was worth it,” Nash said. “Our lobbyist out there, Jay Sullivan, would like us to come back. Now that we’ve got a foot in the door we need to keep up those relationships and the lines of communication open.”

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