



Ranchers continue to raise sheep and cattle on their working lands, and continue to pay property taxes that help support their rural communities.

LANDOWNER-LED CAMPAIGN PROTECTS 94,000 ACRES OF WILDLIFE HABITAT ON PRIVATE LANDS IN THE PIONEER MOUNTAINS OF IDAHO

By Steve Stuebner

Fine red wine might not be the only thing that gets better with age.

The Pioneers Alliance formed in 2007 amid concerns about a \$1 billion, 430-mile Mountain State Transmission Intertie being routed through the unspoiled, wide open spaces of the Craters of the Moon National Monument-Pioneer Mountains eco-region from Montana.

Although this quiet corner of Central Idaho always has been home to a rich variety of wildlife on thousands of acres of sagebrush-grasslands, towering mountain peaks, and mountain meadows, it's been home to cattle and sheep ranching operations for more than a century. No one knew it was that special as an eco-region per se.

But over time, extensive outreach by Pioneers Alliance conservation partners and

ground-breaking research on antelope migration patterns, funded by the Lava Lake Institute for Science and Conservation and Wildlife Conservation Society, has led to the protection of approximately 94,000 acres of private ranchland rich with wildlife values particularly for sage grouse and antelope.

The Alliance's accomplishments so far are just shy of a 100,000-acre goal. The transmission line route was re-routed to avoid



Lara Fondow, acting state wildlife biologist for NRCS, left, and Jim Barton, check out one of Jim's cattle ponds on his ranch.

the entire area. In 13 years, the Alliance has pieced together a giant zigsaw puzzle of private, state and federal lands into a cohesive, functioning whole for wildlife and livestock.

"It's been really fun," says Keri York, Lands Program Manager for the Wood River Land Trust (WRLT) in Hailey. "It's been really satisfying to have so many landowners to work with. We're proud to be part of the whole Pioneers Alliance effort, and we're proud that the Wood River Land Trust helped make it happen."

The Nature Conservancy and WRLT have worked for 10+ years with about 30 landowners in the Pioneers region to protect the 94,000 acres with conservation easements, many of them funded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill programs.

The acquisitions underscore the value of fish and wildlife habitat on private land. The private land meadows provide brood-rearing habitat for sage grouse, while providing browse and hiding cover for mule deer and elk. There are currently 29 occupied sage grouse leks in the region. The private land wet meadows also provide a safe refuge for pronghorn antelope while they're raising their young.

At the same time, ranchers continue to raise sheep and cattle on their working lands, and they continue to pay property taxes to help support rural communities.

"The antelope, elk, deer, sheep and cattle all complement each other, and they have for years," says John Peavey, co-owner of the Flat Top Ranch, with his wife, Diane Josephy Peavey, son Tom, and grandsons, Cory and Jake Peavey.

The Peaveys signed a 1,114-acre conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy and Blaine County early on during the Pioneers Alliance campaign, and that helped "break the ice" with other landowners and ranchers who would join the cause over time, officials said.

Tess O'Sullivan worked on the Flat Top easements, among others, as The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Manager for the Pioneers-Craters Landscape. O'Sullivan calls the private land meadows "pronghorn heaven." She's proud of what they've accomplished so far.

"By partnering with so many landowners, the work is even more impactful because we've been able to conserve a whole landscape," O'Sullivan says. "We have diverse habitats from sagebrush lands, stream corridors, and high elevation forests that collectively are essential for wildlife to thrive. It's a big puzzle. Easements keep those habitat pieces connected and the land stays productive and intact."

Early on, a key driving factor that elevated the Pioneers campaign to a loftier status was ground-breaking research on

Notice to Idaho Conservation Districts of the Terms of the Settlement Agreement with Franklin SWCD, Et Al.

A final Settlement Agreement ("Agreement") has been reached in civil action CV21-19-0352 between the plaintiff Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission ("ISWCC") and the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District ("FSWCD") et al.

As part of the settlement FSWCD agreed to pay \$68,500 directly to the other conservation districts in the state according to the payment schedule which is available at <https://conta.cc/3hawJPF>. Payments will be made as follows:

- An initial payment of \$17,500 will be paid before September 14 directly to districts in the amounts listed in the schedule.
- The remaining balance of \$51,000 will be paid by FSWCD directly to districts in increments of \$8,500 per year. Districts will be paid the remaining amount in alphabetical order as indicated in the attached schedule.
- FSWCD will notify ISWCC when payment has been made. Any district that doesn't receive funds as scheduled is asked to promptly notify the ISWCC, which may request proof of payment from FSWCD.

The amount ISWCC asked to be paid to each district was based on the proportion of match funding each district would have received in fiscal years 2014 through 2017 had FSWCD received less match funds. Accordingly, districts capped at \$50,000 during those years won't receive settlement funds.

With the signing of this Agreement, the ISWCC pledges to continue working to rebuild the partnership with willing districts. The entire Agreement and the payment schedule can be read at <https://conta.cc/3hawJPF>.

Pioneers Alliance Partners

- City of Carey residents**
- Local ranchers and landowners**
- Blaine County Board of Commissioners**
- Bureau of Land Management**
- City of Carey Hall & Hall**
- Idaho Conservation League**
- Idaho Department of Fish and Game**
- Idaho Department of Lands**
- Lava Lake Institute for Science and Conservation**
- National Park Service**
- Sawtooth National Forest**
- The Conservation Fund**
- The Nature Conservancy**
- Wildlife Conservation Society**
- Wood River Land Trust**
- Idaho Wildlife Federation**

antelope migration in the Pioneers-Craters region. In 2009, researchers shared their discovery that in late fall, antelope migrated from the Pioneers, out south to the north edge of the Craters lava fields, then onto the vast, 89-square-mile Idaho National Laboratory compound in the Arco desert, and then northeast to the Beaverhead Mountains in Montana on the Continental Divide.

Round trip, the migration route is 160 miles. The migration “ranks among the farthest for any land mammal in the Western Hemisphere,” researchers said in a news release printed on the National Geographic web site.

When springtime comes, the antelope return, flowing through Craters into the Pioneers, crossing U.S. Highway 26 in a very narrow patch of land now known as “Pronghorn Pass.”

The massive antelope migration helped put the Pioneers Alliance campaign on a higher pedestal in terms of national significance. That helped with national funding.

And then, another boost came into play. In 2010, NRCS officials launched the Sage Grouse Initiative campaign to work on voluntary conservation activities on private ranchlands. National Farm Bill funds



The Flat Top Ranch, owned by John and Diane Peavey here in front of a ranch cabin, was one of the largest conservation easements in the whole Pioneers package.

made available for sage grouse conservation would play a key role in the Pioneers conservation effort.

“There was this amazing convergence of a lot of great opportunities coming together at the same time,” notes Sal Palazzolo, private lands/Farm Bill coordinator for Idaho Department of Fish and Game, a Pioneers Alliance partner. “And the emergence of SGI created a huge pot of conservation money.”

But still, the campaign hinged on land-owner relations. That takes time.

For Jim Barton, whose family has been ranching in the Pioneers for decades, the idea of partnering with a land trust seemed crazy at first. “I thought it was a bunch of do-gooders who wanted to take away our land. I didn’t want anything to do with them,” he says.

Mark Davidson, Conservation Director for The Nature Conservancy of Idaho who lives in Blaine County, invited ranchers to an open house meeting in the little bitty ranching town of Carey, which lies at the foot of the Pioneers. Barton reluctantly showed up.

“Davidson said, hey, we’re the good guys, we’re here to help you,” Barton recalls. “We want to help you preserve your ranch, and the government is paying good money to do that. My ears perked up a little bit at that point.”

The Peaveys and Brian and Kathleen Bean, owners of the Lava Lake Ranch, already

had placed conservation easements on their lands. But Barton and other ranchers weren’t quite convinced. They thought they might be making a deal with the devil.

But then Davidson brought in Salmon-area ranchers Tom McFarland and Merrill Beyeler. Those two talked about the benefits of receiving substantial cash money for selling the development rights to their ranches via conservation easements. They didn’t want subdivisions and golf courses to overtake the ranch lands around Salmon, and they had a hunch

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that the ranchers in the Pioneers didn't want to see their open spaces carved up into ranchettes, either.

"Tom and Merrill – they're just like us. The lightbulb started to go off," Barton says.

NRCS national programs like the Farm and Ranch Protection Program and Grassland Reserve Program offered federal dollars for conservation easements. Barton eventually signed up to sell the development rights to his ranch. Cash from the conservation easements have allowed him to add more land to his ranch and make substantial improvements, including a \$100,000 water pipeline to his alfalfa fields at the home ranch.

"Turns out I've got real valuable habitat," Barton says, with a grin. "It's all turned out real nice. It's helped us a lot."

As NRCS officials explain, the local land trust officials play a crucial role in putting those land deals and funding packages together for the ranchers.

"We don't do ag easements directly with landowners," said Wade Brown, an easements expert for NRCS in the Idaho state office. "We do them through land trusts.



The Flat Top Ranch continues to be managed for production agriculture, generating property taxes that benefit the local economy.



Fig 13. Pronghorn caught from camera 3 showing a large group passing between Camera 1 (upper right) and Camera 2 (center left).

Photo courtesy of Craters of the Moon National Monument.

The land trusts come to us with an application, we evaluate them for suitability for funding, and then if they're suitable, the land trust closes the easement with the landowner and holds the deed to the easement."

Will Whelan, executive director of the Idaho Coalition of Land Trusts, marvels at the scope of the great work done by TNC, Wood River Land Trust and other entities involved in the Pioneers Alliance.

"The Land Trust role is a critical lynchpin," Whelan notes. "They've really put the pieces of the puzzle together to knit together a large intact landscape."

For the Peaveys, placing conservation easements on the Flat Top Ranch was a perfect way to ensure their

beloved ranch will never be carved up by development.

"It means everything that I love about this place should be here forever," says Diane Josephy Peavey. "This is an amazing piece of land, and it's got an amazing history. Just to think that it will be here really is something to be very proud of."

"I'm pleased that the valley will look like it does now about 100 years from now, 500 years from now. That makes you feel good," says John Peavey.

Steve Stuebner writes regularly for *Conservation the Idaho Way* and is a long-time Idaho natural resources writer who specializes in conservation success stories for many of our partners. Funding for this article was made possible by a Natural Resources Conservation Service (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/id/home/>) grant to Amos Eno and Idaho LandCan – part of the national Land Conservation Assistance Network <https://www.landcan.org>.

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