FARMERS

Growing Opportunity for the Next Generation of Farmers



"This ground should never grow houses. It should stay in agriculture. It is important that these properties are conserved now. This is the time. They won't be here 50 years from now."

Sherwin Leep
Leep Hay & Grain
Gallatin Valley, Montana

Photo courtesy Gallatin Valley Land Trust

The Leep family has been farming in the Gallatin Valley since the late 19th century. Through generations, they have navigated economic pressures to grow their historic farm into a thriving 5,500-acre operation. They used multiple conservation easements across 1,600 acres of their property to expand their land ownership and preserve a family farming tradition critical to Montana's agricultural economy and food supply.

The first fields Sherwin Leep ever farmed are now covered by asphalt – what many in the agriculture industry call "the final crop."

Sherwin and his brother, Greg, grew up farming on leased land in Bozeman. Today, that land is a Target parking lot, a reminder of how quickly productive farmland is disappearing to development in Gallatin County, which has seen more subdivision and building across the landscape than any other county in Montana since 1990.[1]

Despite development pressures that landowners in the area have experienced in recent years, Sherwin and Greg have grown their family operation, Leep Hay & Grain, since the 1990s from a modest family farm to a 5,500-acre operation producing hay, small grains, peas, lentils, and other crops that feed communities across Montana and beyond. Their success earned Sherwin the Gallatin County Outstanding Farmer/Rancher Award in 2024.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Maintaining family agricultural values

Supporting America's food security

Upholding Montana's traditional working lands culture

[1] https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/gallatin-countys-economy/

Conservation easements have served as an important tool in the growth of the operation. The Leeps have partnered with Gallatin Valley Land Trust on four easements, conserving over 1,600 acres of prime farmland. The financial compensation from their easements has allowed them to purchase additional farmland to add to their operation, permanently protecting open working lands and supporting agricultural values in the region.



The Leep family. Photo courtesy Gallatin Valley Land Trust

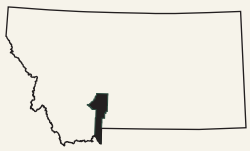
According to Sherwin, conservation easements have been one of the most effective ways for the family to secure their agricultural legacy and ensure his children's future on the farm. "This ground should never grow houses. It should stay in agriculture," he says. "It is important that these properties are conserved now. This is the time. They won't be here 50 years from now."

Looking Forward

As open agricultural lands continue to disappear across the Gallatin Valley, the Leep family remains committed to producing food, supporting their community, and creating farming opportunities. They are dedicated to sustaining a vital family business that supports Montana's $2.2 billion agricultural economy[2] and continues to build on a tradition that the next generation of the family can carry forward.

A Changing Landscape

- Gallatin County, Southwestern Montana, has lost more open space than any other county since 2000[1]
- Since 1970, the number of farm jobs in Montana has declined by 21%.[2]
- The average age of a Montana farmer is 59.3 years.[3]
- From 2017 to 2022, the number of Montana farms with new and beginning producers increased by 94.[3]



SOUTHWEST MONTANA
Gallatin County

PARTNERING LAND TRUST
Gallatin Valley Land Trust

BY THE NUMBERS
Montana Farming

57M
ACRES
Montana land in agricultural production

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2024. National Agricultural Statistics Service, The 2022 Census of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

$2.2B
ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS
Contributed to Montana's gross domestic product by agriculture

SOURCE: Haynes et al. 2020. Economic Impact of Agriculture, Statewide Report. Montana State University Extension. Bozeman, Montana. https://www.montana.edu/extension/agimpact/statewidereport.html

29,000
JOBS
Supported by Montana agriculture

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2024. National Agricultural Statistics Service, The 2022 Census of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

[1] https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/gallatin-countys-economy/

[2] Montana State University Extension. (2020). Economic Impact of Agriculture: Statewide Report. Bozeman, MT. https://www.montana.edu/extension/agimpact/statewidereport.html

[3] U.S. Department of Commerce. 2023. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, Washington, D.C.