

Working for Montana

A REPORT ON THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Prepared by the Montana Association of Land Trusts

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About this Report

This report was developed by Montana Association of Land Trusts (MALT).

MALT is dedicated to voluntary, landowner-driven conservation through the exercise of private property rights. Together, MALT and its members work with private landowners to protect Montana's open landscapes, multigenerational family farms and ranches, clean drinking water, healthy fisheries, recreation opportunities, and critical wildlife habitat.

This report describes the deep connections between the state's most economically important industries and the lands that support them.

Electronic copies of this report are available on the Montana Association of Land Trusts website (www.montanalandtrusts.org).

MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF LAND TRUSTS

FLATHEAD LAND TRUST · GALLATIN VALLEY LAND TRUST · BITTER ROOT LAND TRUST · RMEF · FIVE VALLEY LAND TRUST · The Nature Conservancy

THE CONSERVATION FUND · VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION · TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND · KANIKSU LAND TRUST · MONTANA LAND RELIANCE · PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST



Skyline Angus conservation easement, Stevensville, MT/Photo by Firefly Imageworks

More than one million acres of Montana land have been converted to large-lot housing since 2000, an area the size of Glacier National Park.[1] Montana is defined by open spaces, working lands, and the people who steward and depend on them. From family farms on the Hi-Line to ranches in the Centennial Valley, timberlands in the northwest, and communities large and small across our state, the stunning beauty of our open lands, and thriving agricultural industry reflect generations of landowners who have made deliberate choices to care for the land and invest in its future.

Over the last 50 years, more than 3,500 Montana families have chosen to partner with land trusts to conserve their land in perpetuity through a voluntary legal agreement known as a "conservation easement." These agreements allow landowners to monetize certain property rights, such as development or subdivision rights, while maintaining ownership and continuing to use their land for farming, ranching, forestry, hunting, outfitting, outdoor recreation, and other productive purposes.

> Today, more than 92 percent of Montanans support allowing private landowners to conserve land through conservation easements without government interference.[2]

In nearly every corner of our state – from Baker and Plentywood to Troy and Lima – landowners, businesses, community leaders, and public institutions have used conservation easements to achieve goals that are important to their families, businesses, and communities. As you'll read in the following pages, this tool has been put to work for ranchers, farmers, miners, loggers, hunters, outfitters, the Montana National Guard, and a wide range of local communities.

This report is intended to share the many ways that conservation easements benefit Montana's economy, the people who live and work on the land today, and future generations of Montanans who will carry the legacy of our treasured landscape forward. We hope the stories, faces, and economic data collected here provides a helpful view into the essential role of conservation easements in our state.

Finally, as you take in the stories and data here, know that the landowners featured in this report are the true conservation leaders in Montana. Their commitment to the future of their land helps ensure that the state remains a place where agriculture thrives, wildlife flourishes, communities prosper, open spaces are protected and outdoor traditions endure. We are proud to play a small role in helping these families achieve their goals and in protecting what makes Montana, Montana.

Sincerely,

Paul Travis

Paul Travis
President, Montana Association of Land Trusts

[1] Hernandez, P. 2024. Montana Losing Open Space. https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/ montana-home-construction/

[2] Colorado College. 2025. Conservation in the West Poll. https://cwpoll.org/vis/



Skyline Angus conservation easement, Stevensville, MT/Photo by Firefly Imageworks

Conservation easements benefit Montana's economy, the people who live and work on the land today, and those who will live and work here tomorrow.

Land is the foundation of Montana's economy and identity. It grows the crops and livestock that feed America and the rest of the world, provides timber and minerals, and anchors our way of life. Montana's farms, ranches, and timberlands are part of our heritage and identity and also provide access to world-class recreation like hunting, fishing, and hiking. People who live, work, and play in Montana do so here because of the opportunities that our wide open spaces provide.

As more people are drawn to our state, pressures are building on the landscape on which we all appreciate and depend. One-third of Montana's single-family homes have been built since 2000.[1] Every acre converted to housing is an acre no longer producing food, timber, minerals, or wildlife habitat.

With more than half of Montana's land area privately owned, the future of our state rests largely in private hands.[2] We must give private landowners the tools necessary to voluntarily conserve working lands for future Montanans. Conservation easements are one such tool.

[1] Hernandez, P. 2024. Montana Losing Open Space. https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/montana-home-construction/

[2] U.S. Geological Survey. 2024. Gap Analysis Project, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US), 4.1. As reported by Headwaters Economics: https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/ protected-lands/public-land-ownership-in-the-us/



Bob and Laurie Sutherlin, conservation easement landowners near Stevensville, MT, with their grandchildren.

What Is a Conservation Easement?

A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally binding agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization, often a land trust, that perpetually limits certain uses of a property in order to sustain its conservation values. Conservation easements are perpetual. Most commonly, conservation easements restrict future subdivision and development while allowing the land to remain in private ownership.

Conservation easements are tailored to the needs of both the landowner and the conservation organization. A rancher, farmer, or forest landowner may choose to sell or donate development rights while continuing to own and manage the property. The land can still be sold, leased, passed to heirs, and, typically, used for activities such as agriculture, forestry, hunting, and recreation.

The concept is based on the idea that a property consists of a "bundle of rights." Through a conservation easement, a landowner voluntarily gives up specific rights, typically the right to develop or subdivide the land, in order to strategically conserve agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, open space, water resources, scenic views, or other conservation values. In exchange, landowners may receive financial compensation, tax benefits, or simply the assurance that the land they care about will remain protected for future generations. Like any other easement, a conservation easement stays with the land. Landowners who own property under a conservation easement continue to pay property taxes on that land.

At the end of the day, conservation easements are a tool that Montana businesses – ranches, farms, timber and mining companies – and communities use to support economic growth.

What Is a Land Trust?

A land trust is an organization that partners with willing landowners and communities who choose to voluntarily protect open lands and natural resources with land protection tools, including conservation easements. They are dedicated to protecting farms and ranches, working forests, open space, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, and the character of Montana's unique communities for future generations.

Unlike regulatory approaches to conservation, land trusts work through voluntary, incentive-based partnerships with willing landowners. They help landowners achieve conservation goals while maintaining private property rights. Once a conservation easement is established, the land trust assumes responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the agreement to ensure its terms are honored over time. By conserving working lands, land trusts help sustain local economies, support agriculture, preserve wildlife habitat, and maintain the outdoor traditions and open spaces that define many communities.

Once a conservation easement is finalized, the land trust's perpetual stewardship promise to that land begins. Montana's land trusts work with landowners to provide resources to maintain the health of the landscape, including noxious weed prevention and mitigation, wildfire mitigation practices, including prescribed fire and timber management, and irrigation improvements. Land trusts make this commitment to the land for this and all future generations of Montanans.

Federal Agricultural Easement Programs Strengthen Montana's Economy

In Spring 2026, with assistance from Montana land trusts, The Harbinger Consultancy analyzed the economic impact to farmers and ranchers who choose to perpetually protect their farm or ranch using federally-funded conservation easements.

The analysis focused on federally-funded easements established from 2022 to 2026 through programs run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The analysis found that, across the state, landowners invested a majority of these funds (96%) into their businesses: 41% into debt repayment and savings; 37% into land purchase and real estate; and 18% into farm and ranch equipment, operations, and diversification. These investment patterns were used as the basis for a Montana-specific adaptation of a Colorado State University model that measures the economic impact on the state. Full methodology and sources are available in the technical report at www.montanalandtrusts.org.

Where the money goes

Share of federal payments by how landowners put them to work, 2022-2026.

Landowners reinvest **96% of easement payments** to strengthen their operations, communities and Montana's economy.

The Harbinger Consultancy, 2026 based on land trust staff estimates.

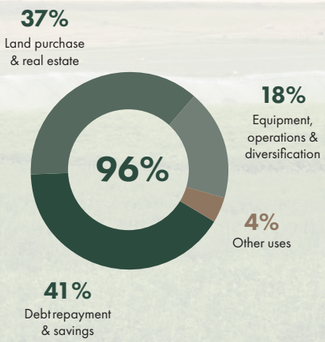


Photo courtesy Gallatin Valley Land Trust

$144 million

Federal Easement Income to Montana 2022-2026

Strategic Investments by Landowners

- Invest in Land Improvements & Operations
- Acquire or Lease More Acreage
- Pay Down Business Debt
- Support Ag Succession Planning
- Keep Family Land Intact
- Sustain Agricultural Legacy

Economic Impact Across Montana

$284M	$91M	1,800
Total Economic Impact	Labor Income	Jobs

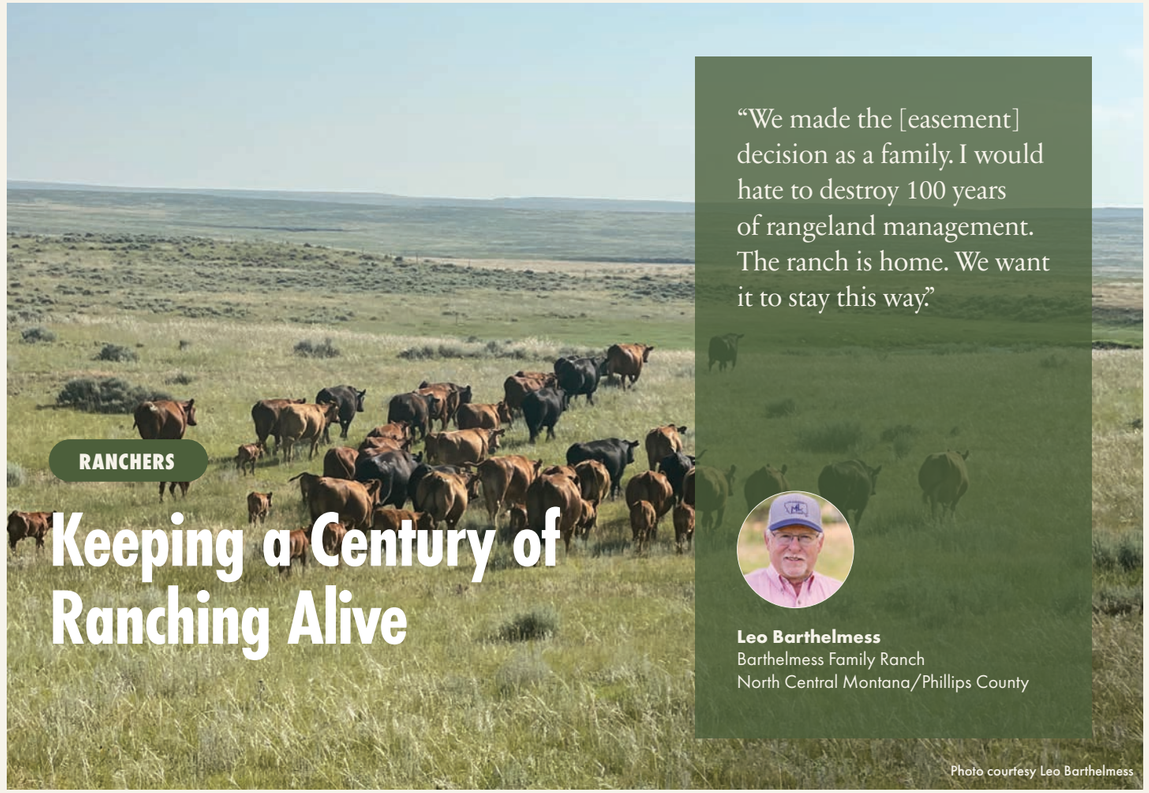


Photo by Joel DeMay

Stronger farms. Stronger ranches. Stronger Communities.

Healthy agricultural operations are the foundation of Montana's rural economy.

The economic impact analysis is broadly conservative and does not account for several factors likely to make the true contribution greater than estimated, such as the additional impact of state and local matching funds, the longer-term effects of investing in business operations and expansion, the value of increased business stability and solvency, and the economic benefits of habitat improvement. Easements are concentrated heavily in rural Montana, where these dollars can have a pronounced effect.



RANCHERS

Keeping a Century of Ranching Alive

"We made the [easement] decision as a family. I would hate to destroy 100 years of rangeland management. The ranch is home. We want it to stay this way."

Leo Barthelmess
Barthelmess Family Ranch
North Central Montana/Phillips County

Photo courtesy Leo Barthelmess

For over 100 years, the Barthelmess family ranch has contributed to Montana's agricultural economy while stewarding healthy rangelands and wildlife habitat. To ensure the ranch remains in working hands for generations to come, the family chose to partner with The Nature Conservancy to place a conservation easement on their 8,100-acre ranch, ensuring this working landscape continues producing food, supporting the people and businesses of Malta, and conserving grasslands.

As fourth-generation ranchers, Leo Barthelmess and his brother, Chris, have managed working grasslands near Malta with a commitment to the long-term viability of Montana agriculture. The Barthelmess family's cattle and sheep operation has helped produce food and strengthen the resilient agricultural systems that underpin food security in Montana and across the nation.

The family's commitment to the land and to the business of ranching in the state is clear. Leo helped restore his family's private land and adjoining BLM grazing allotment into a productive grassland ecosystem that supports hundreds of cattle and thousands of birds, pronghorn, and mule deer, among other abundant wildlife. A former director of the Montana Stockgrowers Association, former board member of the Montana Livestock Ag Credit Board, and a co-founder of the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, Leo has served as a voice for Montana's $1.9 billion livestock industry.[1]

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Ensuring family ranching legacy
- Contributing to America's food security
- Protecting Montana's grasslands

[1] https://www.montana.edu/extension/agimpact/statewidereport.html

Love for the landscape and their ranching legacy is front and center for Leo and Chris as they plan for the future. "My brother and I are going to retire whether we want to or not," Leo says. "It takes a lot of money to get old, and ranchers have lots of assets but not a lot of cash."

By selling development rights while retaining ownership and agricultural use of the land through a conservation easement, Montana ranchers like Leo and Chris can access capital and meet their financial and succession goals — keeping the working land in working hands.

Looking Forward

Together with the adjoining public land, the Barthelmess' easement secures a large, connected landscape that supports agriculture, wildlife, and Montana's food supply. "Nearly every family in our community has young people coming back," Leo notes. As they do, the next generation can be certain they'll have the rangeland they need to continue the family's ranching legacy.



Photo courtesy Barthelmess family

Saving Montana's Grasslands

Montana's grasslands are among the nation's most important habitats, providing a home for year-round residents like sage grouse and prairie dogs, as well as critical migratory stops for birds, pronghorn, elk, and more. They are also disappearing faster than any other type of landscape in the country.

"This should be grassland forever," Leo says, of his property. "The soil is unsuitable for farming. We don't want to see it get plowed up again. It's a lot of pretty cool habitat for prairie birds and thousands of acres of sagebrush. That's important."

Conservation easements can help prevent the conversion and development of grasslands, protecting the land and our state's ranching for future generations.

356,300
ACRES CONVERTED
Montana grassland habitat converted to cropland, 2008–2016.[1]

[1] Lark et al. 2020. Cropland Expansion in the United States Produces Marginal Yields at High Cost to Wildlife. Nature Communications. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-18045-z



NORTHEAST MONTANA
Phillips County
PARTNERING LAND TRUST
The Nature Conservancy

BY THE NUMBERS
Montana Ranching

$1.9B
MARKET VALUE
Livestock-related sales in Montana

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

28%
GROWTH
Market value of Montana's livestock, 1997–2017

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

$438.2M
ECOSYSTEMS SERVICES
Value added by Montana cattle ranching through foraging, climate and disease regulation, nutrient cycles, and recreational benefits

SOURCE: Taylor et al. 2019. Beef Facts: The Economic Value of Montana Beef Cattle Ranching-Based Ecosystem Services. University of Wyoming, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and Cattlemen's Beef Board. https://www.beefresearch.org/media/beefresearch/docs/montanafinal_11-28-2020-103.pdf



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]

[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.



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.



Building on more than a century of forest stewardship, Stimson Lumber Company has used voluntary conservation easements to permanently protect nearly 130,000 acres of Montana's working forests.

Over seven generations, this family-owned business has grown into one of the nation's oldest integrated wood products companies. In Montana, Stimson's forests are working landscapes that produce timber, support local and regional jobs, strengthen rural communities, and provide important public benefits. Through active forest management, Stimson maintains forest health and helps reduce wildfire risk through sustainable timber harvesting, tree spacing, wildfire mitigation activities, and hazardous fuels reduction. These timberlands also provide Montanans with opportunities to hunt, fish, hike, bike, and enjoy their outdoor heritage while supporting habitat for a wide range of fish and wildlife species native to Western Montana.

Stimson's long-term perspective has shaped the company's approach to land management. Over the past 15 years, Stimson has voluntarily agreed to conserve nearly 130,000 acres of Montana timberland through conservation easements. Each project has spanned changing markets and multiple state and federal administrations while maintaining the consistent goal of keeping Montana's forests protected, resilient, healthy, and working.

Working in partnership with the Trust for Public Land and with support from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, Stimson has used conservation easements to voluntarily restrict development rights while retaining private ownership and the ability to actively manage its Montana forests.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Reducing wildfire risk
- Maintaining working forests, open spaces, and Montana's heritage
- Sustaining forest industry jobs and economic contributions
- Supporting wildlife habitat and connectivity
- Providing public access to recreation


Photo by Chris Boyer, Kestrel Aerial

The Forest Legacy Program works with willing landowners and the support of local and state partners. The program requires perpetual easements, ensures permanent public access to enrolled lands, and provides funding for up to 75% of the value of working forest easements. These grants come from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is funded through royalties from oil and gas revenues, - not taxpayer dollars. Timber companies, such as Stimson, often donate significant land value to facilitate these projects, demonstrating a long-term commitment to generational forestry. The land remains privately owned by timber companies that pay annual property taxes and actively manage the timberland. These lands remain working forests forever, helping support Montana's rural economies.

While easements are not the right fit for every situation, they have been an effective tool for timber companies, including Stimson, to strengthen their businesses while conserving Montana's landscapes for the long term.

Looking Forward

As Montana faces ever-increasing development pressure, Stimson's commitments have created an enduring legacy that will help sustain Montana's working forests for generations to come. The Forest Legacy Program provides a viable pathway for landowners like Stimson to continue owning and managing their lands as working forests into the future. Without this opportunity, the economic incentive to pursue subdivision and development can be too great.


Photo by Chris Boyer, Kestrel Aerial



NORTHWEST MONTANA
Lincoln County

PARTNERING LAND TRUST
Trust for Public Land

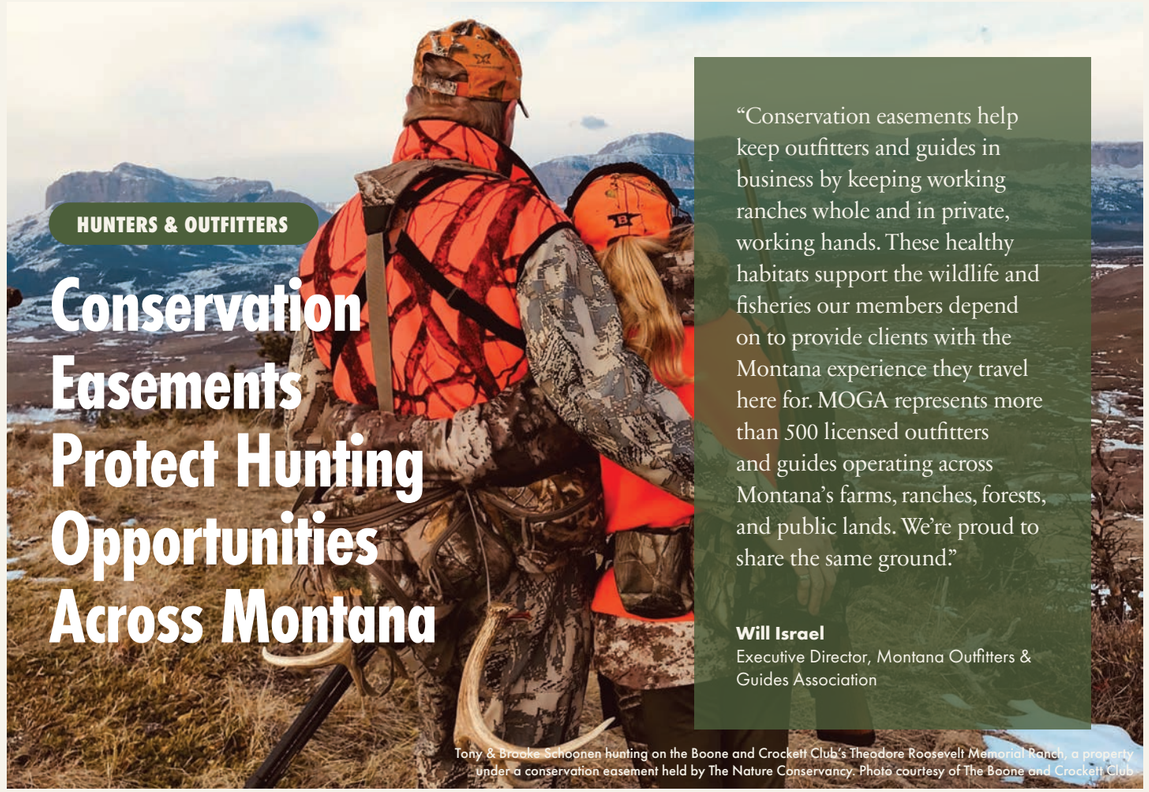
BY THE NUMBERS
Montana Timber

33%
OF MONTANA'S TIMBER PRODUCTION
Occurs on private land

$425M
IN WAGES
Generated for Montana workers by the timber industry

8,346
JOBS
Supported by Montana's timber industry

SOURCE FOR ALL ABOVE DATA: Sampson L. 2025. Montana's Forest Products Industry and Timber Harvest, 2022. University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER). Missoula, MT. https://www.bber.umt.edu/pubs/forest/fidacs/MT2022%20Tables.pdf



HUNTERS & OUTFITTERS

Conservation Easements Protect Hunting Opportunities Across Montana

"Conservation easements help keep outfitters and guides in business by keeping working ranches whole and in private, working hands. These healthy habitats support the wildlife and fisheries our members depend on to provide clients with the Montana experience they travel here for. MOGA represents more than 500 licensed outfitters and guides operating across Montana's farms, ranches, forests, and public lands. We're proud to share the same ground."

Will Israel
Executive Director, Montana Outfitters & Guides Association

Tony & Brooke Schoonen hunting on the Boone and Crockett Club's Theadore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch, a property under a conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy. Photo courtesy of The Boone and Crockett Club

As Montana's most prominent conservationists, hunters have often been the first to recognize the inherent relationship between the species they pursue and the land that underpins that relationship. Healthy wildlife populations depend on healthy, intact habitat to thrive. Elk, mule deer, pronghorn, waterfowl and other wildlife do not recognize property lines. Their survival, and the hunting opportunities they provide, depends on connected landscapes that provide food, water, cover and places to raise young.

For hunters, outfitters, and guides, the equation is straightforward: conserve habitat, sustain wildlife, and maintain opportunities to hunt. In Montana, and across the country, conservation easements help make that equation work.

Conservation, properly understood, is the wise use of our nation's natural resources. It strengthens rural economies, supports hunting, and honors Montana's longstanding stewardship tradition. Conservation easements are one way to accomplish those goals through voluntary, landowner-driven conservation. They can provide economic benefits to landowners while helping keep Montana's landscapes open and productive for future generations.

As development pressure increases, keeping large blocks of working agricultural lands intact helps preserve the habitat that supports healthy big-game populations. Protecting migration corridors and winter range keeps elk and other wildlife moving across the landscapes they have used for generations. For guides and outfitters, maintaining these productive habitats can help sustain the wildlife resources

WHY THIS MATTERS

Montana's outfitters and guides make a significant contribution to the state's GDP

Conservation easements secure wildlife and fish habitat

Conservation easements can provide access for hunters and anglers

and hunting experiences that support their businesses and traditions of rural communities.

Montana's hunters, outfitters and guides, and landowners continue a legacy of working together to conserve Montana's wildlife, from the prairie pothole region of the Hi-line to the thick timberlands of Western Montana.

High Quality Habitat

The benefits of conserving habitat in Montana extend far beyond state lines.

The ducks and geese that nest and raise their young in Eastern Montana's prairie pothole wetlands, grasslands, and agricultural landscapes eventually migrate through or to other states, where hunters pursue them. Conserving these habitats in Montana helps sustain hunting opportunities throughout the Central Flyway.

North of Chinook, the Elloam Grazing Association has entered their pastureland into a conservation easement that was purchased with funds raised from the sale of "Duck Stamps," which all waterfowl hunters nationwide are required to purchase. Under this agreement, members of the Grazing Association continue to graze livestock at scale on the property, but intentionally conserve the important prairie pothole wetlands on the property for future generations of ranchers and waterfowl alike. This property is interspersed with state trust and BLM lands which serve as an island of conserved land for waterfowl.

Likewise, migratory big game animals like elk rely on healthy intact habitat, including summer range, winter range, and clear pathways between the two. Conservation easements, donated by landowners or paid for using funds raised by hunters, contribute to all of the above. In addition to the work of Montana's land trusts, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks also invests funds from their Habitat Montana program in conservation easements.

Conservation Easements Protect Public Hunting Access

In Sula, in Ravalli County, the Wetzsteon family has donated perpetual public access to their family ranch to ensure that public hunting opportunities continue into the future as they have in the past. Owned by the family since 1889, the historic Lazy J Cross Ranch is open to public hunting through Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Block Management Program. A conservation easement on the property completed in partnership with the Bitter Root Land Trust ensures the property will continue to provide at least 250 hunter days during the fall hunting seasons for elk, deer, upland game birds, black bear, and bighorn sheep.

"Montana's hunting heritage depends on healthy wildlife populations, connected habitats, and the working landscapes that sustain them. Conservation easements, strategic land acquisitions, habitat restoration, and strong partnerships with private landowners all play an important role in keeping central and eastern Montana productive for elk and other wildlife. These conservation tools help maintain migration corridors, protect critical habitat, and support public access opportunities, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy Montana's rich hunting traditions."

– **JENNIFER DOHERTY, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF MISSION OPERATIONS, ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK FOUNDATION**



WESTERN MONTANA
Ravalli County

PARTNERING LAND TRUST
Bitter Root Land Trust

BY THE NUMBERS

Montana Hunting & Fishing

$163M

TOURS & OUTFITTING

Contributed to Montana's GDP by guided tours and outfitting

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. 2024. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account.

$118M

HUNTING

Contributed to Montana's GDP by hunting

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. 2024. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account.

32,000

JOBS

Supported by Montana outdoor recreation

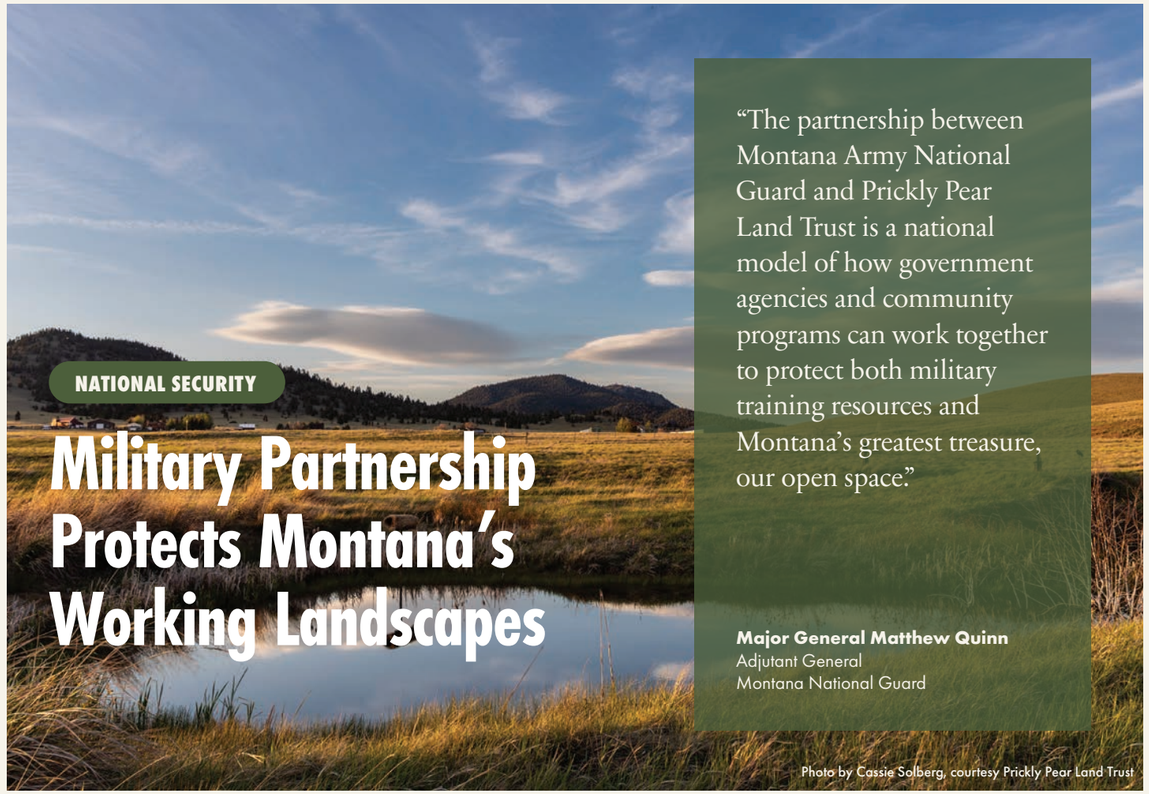
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. 2024. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account.

85%

OF MONTANANS

Say loss of habitat for fish and wildlife is a serious problem

SOURCE: Colorado College. 2026. Conservation in the West Poll. https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2026.html



NATIONAL SECURITY

Military Partnership Protects Montana's Working Landscapes

"The partnership between Montana Army National Guard and Prickly Pear Land Trust is a national model of how government agencies and community programs can work together to protect both military training resources and Montana's greatest treasure, our open space."

Major General Matthew Quinn
Adjutant General
Montana National Guard

Photo by Cassie Solberg, courtesy Prickly Pear Land Trust

The Montana Army National Guard, much like other industries across the state, requires wide open spaces to operate and train. Land trusts, like Helena's Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT), specialize in maintaining such open spaces and have partnered with the Department of Defense to strategically deploy conservation easements to secure military installments like Helena's Fort Harrison.

The partnership took flight in 2016 when PPLT and the National Guard joined forces. Fort Harrison is a vital Montana Army National Guard facility with an annual economic impact of nearly $42 million to Helena's economy. Residential development of all or part of the land adjacent to the facility threatened to diminish the military training and operations mission at Fort Harrison and reduce the significant economic contributions of the base.

PPLT and the National Guard first partnered in 2016 to purchase 205 acres of pastureland adjacent to Fort Harrison and Tenmile Creek, an important acquisition that ensures training at the base may continue in perpetuity. This collaborative momentum quickly extended across the valley, fueling the conservation of an additional 358 acres along Sevenmile Creek.

For the National Guard, the strategy is a matter of operational readiness. High-density residential development right next to Fort Harrison creates compatibility conflicts that restrict vital military training. By utilizing military funding alongside the Lewis and Clark County Open Space Bond, this partnership successfully established an open space buffer zone around the Fort. This keeps the military fully operational while ensuring the historic valley landscape remains intact.

"The partnership between Montana Army National Guard and Prickly Pear Land Trust is a national model of how government agencies and community programs can work together to protect both military training resources and Montana's greatest treasure, our open space," said Major General Matthew Quinn, Adjutant General for the Montana National Guard at the time of the project.



Photo by Cassie Solberg, courtesy Prickly Pear Land Trust

The benefits of this partnership stretch far beyond national security; the properties act as a natural defense system for the community. Every spring, the conserved lands at Tenmile and Sevenmile absorb floodwaters and recharge groundwater. In the summer, they serve as crucial wildfire breaks. This natural mitigation was put to the test in 2020, when the Birdseye Road Fire swept toward residential areas. The restored streambed, wetlands, and managed grasslands at Sevenmile Creek acted as a natural dampener, stopping the fire in its tracks. With wildfire suppression costing four times more than proactive mitigation, this open-space buffer provides an invaluable economic safeguard.

Today, these properties prove that conservation works for a wide array of Montana industries. Tenmile Creek Park hosts over 75,000 annual visits for recreation, while Sevenmile Creek serves as a living laboratory for local students studying water conservation. By protecting these floodplains and keeping the land functional, PPLT and the National Guard ensure that Montana's military heritage, agricultural roots, and natural resources can thrive side by side for generations to come.



Photo courtesy Prickly Pear Land Trust

WHY THIS MATTERS

- Supports annual economic benefit of $42 million to local economy
- Protects military training resources
- Provides crucial wildfire breaks
- Provides scientific study opportunities



WEST CENTRAL MONTANA
Lewis and Clark County

PARTNERING LAND TRUST
Prickly Pear Land Trust

BY THE NUMBERS

Montana & National Security

85,871
VETERANS
Living in Montana

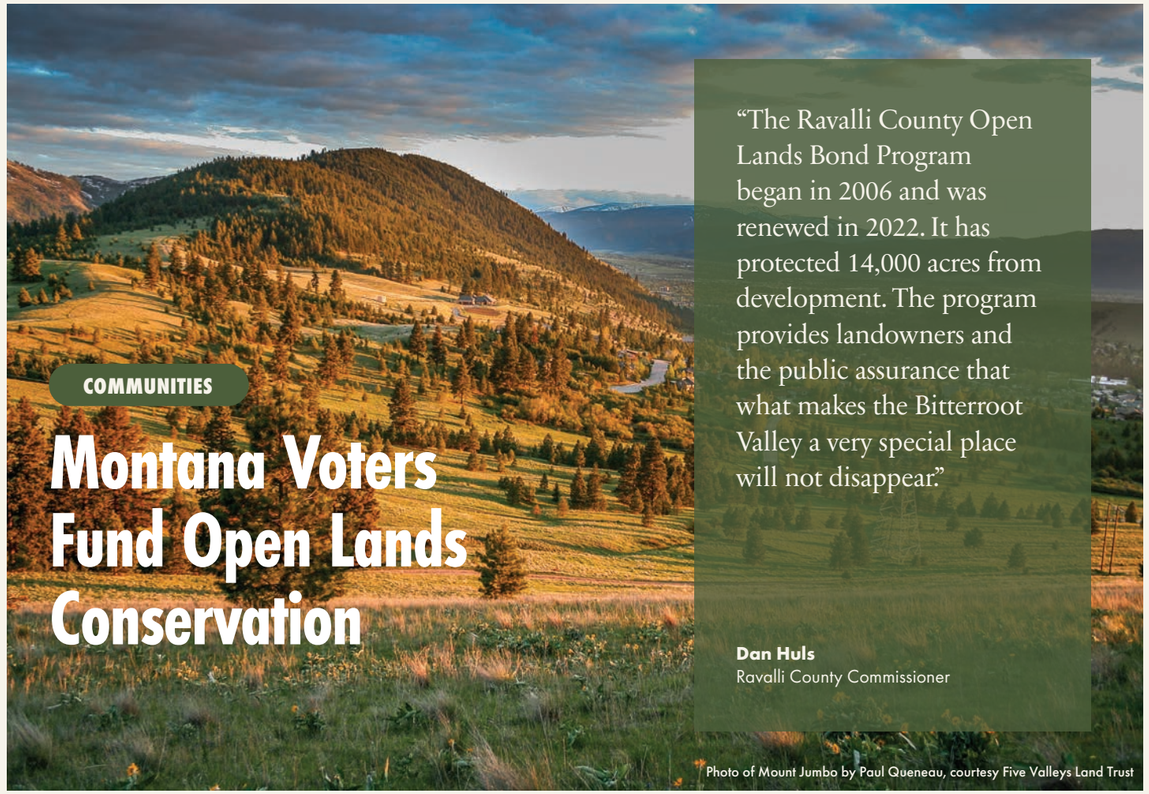
SOURCE: Montana Veteran Affairs Division. 2025. Fort Harrison, MT. https://veterans.mt.gov

9%
VETERAN POPULATION IN MONTANA
Third-highest percentage in the country

SOURCE: Montana Veteran Affairs Division. 2025. Fort Harrison, MT. https://veterans.mt.gov

97%
OF MONTANANS
Say outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life

SOURCE: Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks. 2025. Montana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Helena, Montana. https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/stateparks/scorp/scorp-2026-2030-digital-version.pdf



COMMUNITIES

Montana Voters Fund Open Lands Conservation

"The Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program began in 2006 and was renewed in 2022. It has protected 14,000 acres from development. The program provides landowners and the public assurance that what makes the Bitterroot Valley a very special place will not disappear."

Dan Huls
Ravalli County Commissioner

Photo of Mount Jumbo by Paul Queneau, courtesy Five Valleys Land Trust

Across Montana, in Gallatin, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, and Ravalli counties, voters express their support for open space and community recreation. In Missoula and Ravalli Counties, a series of voter-approved Open Space and Lands Bonds have conserved thousands of acres of open space, agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, and community parklands through investments in conservation easements and open lands that protect the area's open spaces. These programs are supported by neighboring communities because they are driven by landowners, respect local values, and are rooted in the voluntary exercise of private property rights.

For almost 50 years, the residents of Missoula County have shown their support for land conservation through voter-approved open space bonds. The continuous existence of the Missoula Open Space Bond has enabled the protection of thousands of acres of private lands and the creation of dozens of parks and trails across Missoula County.

The first bond, passed in 1980 and limited to lands within the City of Missoula, set aside $500,000 to support the finalization of the area's first conservation easement as well as parks and trails along the Clark Fork River. In 1995, city residents came out to pass a $5 million bond that enabled the public acquisition of Mount Jumbo from Five Valleys Land Trust as well as the creation of multiple open spaces and the protection of several private lands through conservation easements.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Many Montana communities value open space

Montana voters overwhelmingly support conservation easements

Conservation easements make our communities better places to live, work, and play

The $10 million 2006 Open Space Bond encompassed the entirety of Missoula County, with funds jointly managed between the City of Missoula and the County. The 2006 Bond was leveraged 1:4 to raise another $40 million from other programs and enabled the protection of both private lands and the creation of public lands, such as those on Mount Sentinel and on Marshall Mountain. In 2018, Missoula County residents again affirmed their support for conservation by passing a $15 million bond. The 2018 Bond is currently helping to fund conservation projects, including trailhead improvements, conservation easements, and public land acquisitions.



Skalkaho Bend Park, Hamilton / Photo by Jason Savage, courtesy Bitter Root Land Trust

Just over the county line to the south, neighboring communities in the Bitterroot Valley have also answered the call for community support of landowner-driven conservation.

In 2005, the Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board suggested that Ravalli County create a voluntary, non-regulatory landowner driven tool providing local farmers and ranchers with an option to keep their working lands in production. At the request of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board, an all Republican Board of County Commissioners put the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond on the ballot. The $10 million Open Lands Bond was passed by the voters of Ravalli County in 2006 with nearly 60% of the vote.

After 16 years and 38 funded projects conserving 10,367 acres, the Right to Farm and Ranch Board proposed County Commissioners ask voters to consider renewing the Open Lands Program at $10 million in November 2022. In Ravalli County, 71% of the citizens voted to renew the bond.

In Ravalli County, every $1 spent by the Open Lands Program is matched by $3 from other sources, making local investment in conservation go even further. The average Ravalli County residence pays less than $21 per year for the Open Lands Program renewal. It's a small price to pay for a legacy of family farms, healthy wildlife and fisheries, and access for hunting, fishing and recreation.

"Five Valleys Land Trust's conservation work in the Missoula Valley contributes to our quality of life and the strength of our economy. Their success creates the environment in which businesses want to invest and that attracts the workforce that allows them to grow. It's a great model for how communities can come together to shape a more vibrant and predictable future."

– **GRANT KIER, CEO, MONTANA ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP**



WESTERN MONTANA
Missoula County
Ravalli County

PARTNERING LAND TRUSTS
Five Valleys Land Trust
Bitter Root Land Trust

BY THE NUMBERS

Montana Community Support

92.5%

OF MONTANANS

Support allowing private landowners the ability to conserve their lands through voluntary conservation easements without government interference

SOURCE: Colorado College. 2025. Conservation in the West Poll. https://cwpoll.org/vis/

$122M+

CONSERVATION FUNDS

Approved by voters through local ballot measures

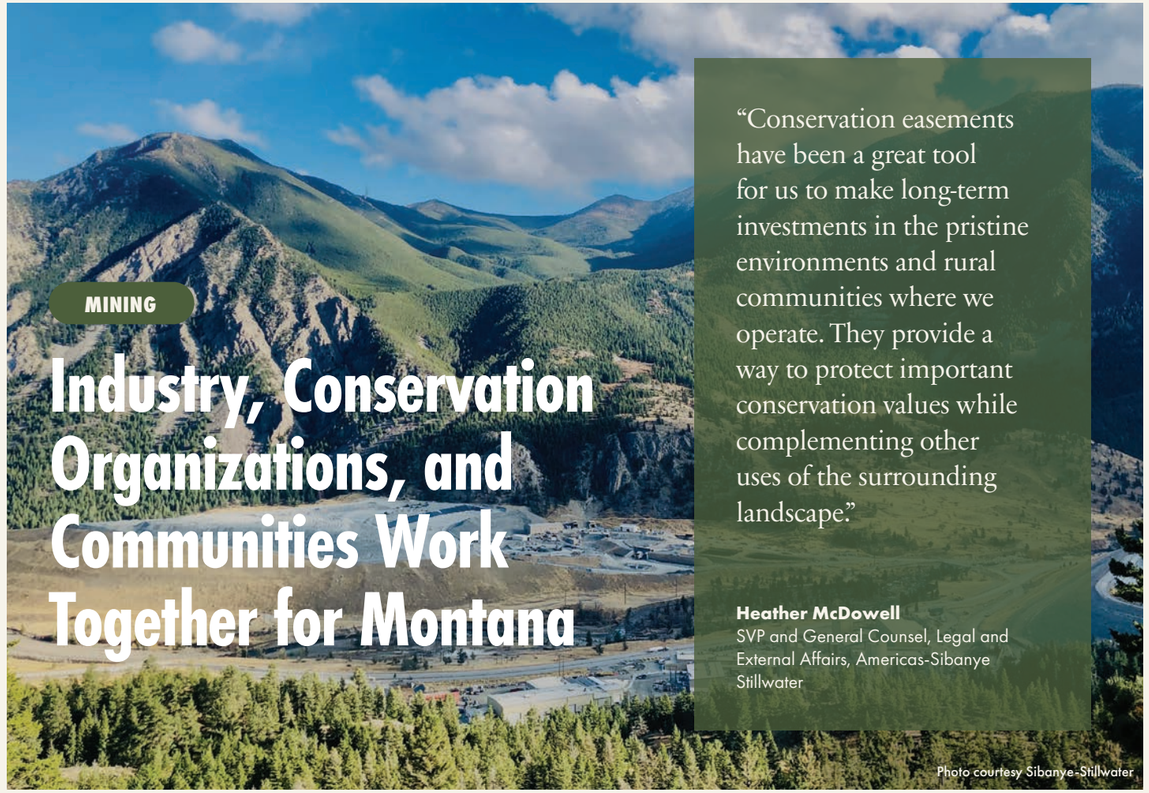
SOURCE: TPL LandVote® Database, https://tpl.quickbase.com/db/bbqna2qct?a=dbpage&pageID=8

84%

OF MONTANANS

Say conservation issues are important when deciding whether to support an elected official

SOURCE: Colorado College. 2026. Conservation in the West Poll. https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2026.html



MINING

Industry, Conservation Organizations, and Communities Work Together for Montana

"Conservation easements have been a great tool for us to make long-term investments in the pristine environments and rural communities where we operate. They provide a way to protect important conservation values while complementing other uses of the surrounding landscape."

Heather McDowell
SVP and General Counsel, Legal and External Affairs, Americas-Sibanye Stillwater

Photo courtesy Sibanye-Stillwater

The Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) between Stillwater Mining Company and Northern Plains Resource Council and its subsidiaries, the Stillwater Protective Association and the Cottonwood Resource Council, was signed in 2000 after nearly a decade of conflict between the company and the conservation organizations. Key objectives included minimizing mining impacts to local communities, protecting the environment beyond state and federal standards, fostering transparency into mine operations, and reducing future conflicts through collaboration.

While the formal conflicts between the parties were over water quality issues, protecting the Stillwater and Boulder River Valleys' rural character was of utmost importance. In addition to water quality, waste storage, traffic limitations, and other commitments designed to conserve the pristine environment around the nearly 15-year-old Stillwater Mine and the just-permitted East Boulder Mine, the parties agreed to protect significant ranchlands and open space in the Stillwater and East Boulder Valleys through permanent conservation easements held by The Montana Land Reliance.

As agreed in the Good Neighbor Agreement, Stillwater Mining Company donated conservation easements on six properties totaling more than 4,000 acres across Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties. These easements were granted to The Montana Land Reliance to ensure the long-term protection of important open space, agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, scenic viewsheds, and the rural and agricultural character of the region.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Montana is home to world-class mineral resources that are necessary for our modern, technology-based economy

Mining creates important jobs in rural Montana

Conservation easements can help mine operations secure access to minerals and compensate companies for maintaining open space

These conservation easements generally prohibit residential subdivision, commercial and industrial development, and other activities that could compromise the rural character of the valleys. While traditional agricultural uses and land stewardship practices are allowed, the easements are designed to permanently prevent fragmentation of the landscape and maintain the agricultural activities and scenic viewsheds that define the East Boulder and Stillwater Valleys. The easements are perpetual and remain in effect regardless of future mine ownership.



Photo courtesy Sibanye-Stillwater

More than 25 years after the original agreement was signed, these conservation easements remain one of the Good Neighbor Agreement's most visible commitments. They have permanently conserved thousands of acres of working ranchland and open space and are a living example of how industry, conservation organizations, and local communities can work together to create rural vitality alongside economic development.



Photo courtesy Sibanye-Stillwater





SOUTH CENTRAL MONTANA
Stillwater County

PARTNERING LAND TRUST
The Montana Land Reliance

BY THE NUMBERS
Montana Mining

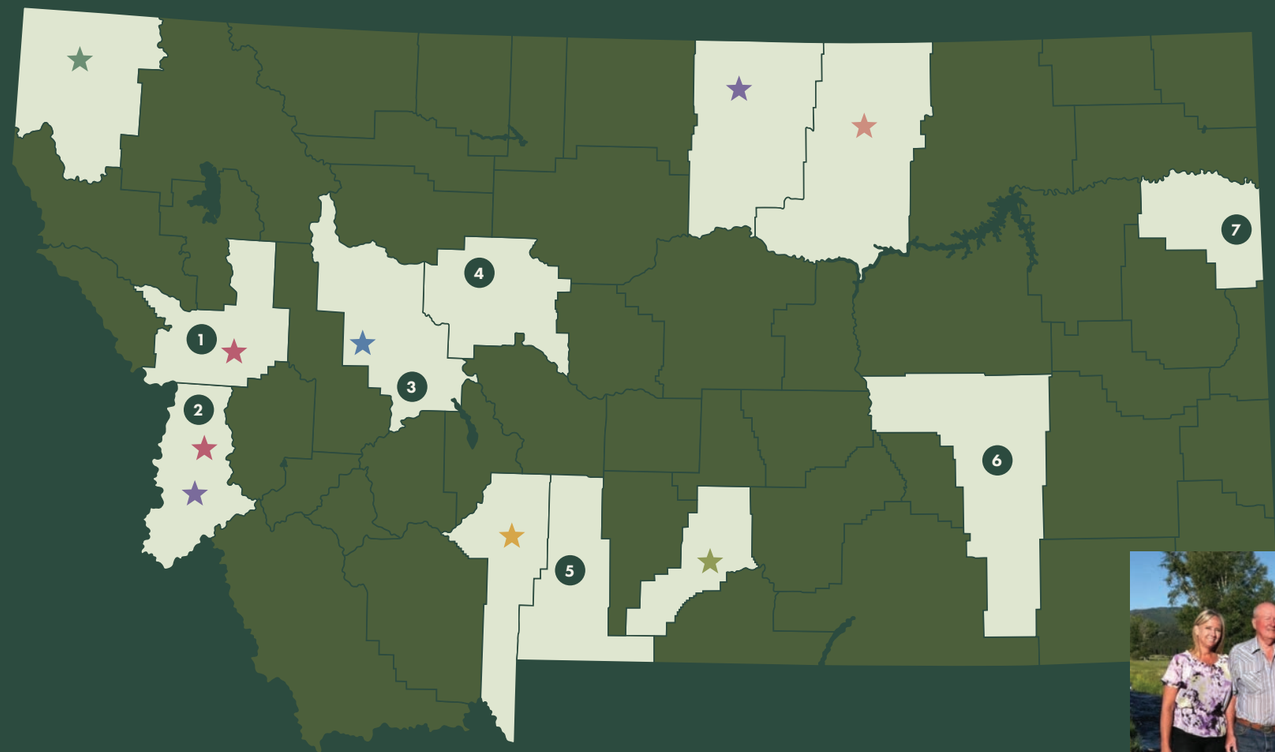
18,000+
JOBS
Created by Montana's hard rock mining industry across diverse sectors

$1.3B
IN HOUSEHOLD INCOME
Received annually by Montana households from the hard rock mining industry

$427.9M
IN STATE REVENUE
Generated annually in state tax and nontax revenues through the hard rock mining industry and related economic activity

25,000+
MONTANANS
Live in Montana because of the hard rock mining industry

SOURCE FOR ALL ABOVE DATA: Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research. 2023. Montana Hard Rock Mining Industry Economic Contributions. University of Montana, Missoula, MT. https://www.bber.umt.edu/pubs/Econ/Montana-Hard-Rock-Mining-Industry-Economic-Contributions.pdf



Also featured in this report

- Barthelmess Family Ranch, Phillips County (p. 8-9)
- Leep Hay & Grain, Gallatin County (p. 10-11)
- Stimson Lumber Company, Lincoln County (p. 12-13)
- Lazy J Cross Conservation Easement, Ravalli County (p. 14-15)
- Elloam Grazing Association, Blaine County (p. 14-15)
- Montana National Guard, Lewis and Clark County (p. 16-17)
- Open Space Bonds in Missoula & Ravalli Counties (p. 18-19)
- Stillwater Mining Company, Stillwater County (p. 20-21)

1 Indreland Family

Missoula County, MT

FIVE VALLEYS LAND TRUST

"I realized that it might not be here forever," Rory Indreland says, of the ranch his family has operated near Missoula for over 80 years. "Ever since, I've asked, 'What can we do to save it?'" One of the tools that the family is using to ensure the legacy of Indreland Ranch for future generations is a conservation easement. In 2025, they permanently conserved 1,667 acres of the property, which will continue to support cattle, hay, and timber production and remain important habitat for elk, deer, bears, and other wildlife.


Photo by Anastasia Wilde, courtesy Five Valleys Land Trust

2 Sutherlin Family

Ravalli County, MT

BITTER ROOT LAND TRUST

Lifelong Bitterroot Valley farmers and ranchers Bob and Laurie Sutherlin have spent decades establishing and growing Sutherlin Farms with a goal in mind: to keep their land in agriculture for generations to come. Resting on some of the richest soil in all of Ravalli County, Sutherlin Farms is primarily used for irrigated crop production, including hay, alfalfa, grain and silage corn, all of which are grown to feed their cow/calf operation and herd of Red Angus that has seed stock all over the world. "It takes good productive ground to raise enough hay to winter these cattle. You can't just let it go away," says Bob. Thanks to the decision to conserve their farm, the Sutherlin family has guaranteed the preservation and enhancement of one more section of open space in western Montana – forever.


Photo courtesy Bitter Root Land Trust

3 Birdseye Ranch

Lewis and Clark County, MT

PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST

Prickly Pear Land Trust acquired Birdseye Ranch with funding from the National Guard, the Lewis and Clark County Open Space Bond program, and the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust. The 1,472-acre property adjoins Fort Harrison, making it a key area for the military and the Helena community. The site was prioritized as open space due to its proximity to a military training area and its valuable natural landscapes, which encompass one of the last large tracts of native grasslands in the Helena Valley and provide habitat for birds, pronghorn, deer, and the occasional elk and moose.


Photo by Kevin League, courtesy Prickly Pear Land Trust

4 Hastings Family Ranch

Cascade County, MT

THE MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

For generations, the Hastings family has adapted their ranching operation while remaining committed to responsible stewardship of the land. What began as a small farm has grown into a nearly 6,000-acre cow-calf operation southeast of Ulm. Matt Hastings returned to the ranch after college and military service, eventually purchasing it from his parents and building on his father Hugh's legacy of careful stewardship. Matt partnered with The Montana Land Reliance and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to place 4,266 acres of the ranch under a conservation easement, permanently protecting intact grasslands and upland bird habitat overlooking the Smith River Valley. Today, Matt works alongside his son Preston to enhance fencing, water systems, and ranch infrastructure.

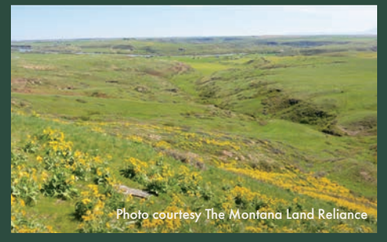


Photo courtesy The Montana Land Reliance

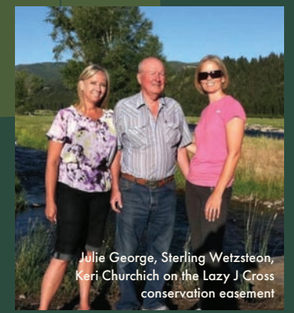
5 Warfield Ranch

Park County, MT

GALLATIN VALLEY LAND TRUST

Alan and Laurie Redfield know Paradise Valley's stunning landscapes, prime agriculture, and iconic Yellowstone wildlife well. Laurie's parents bought Warfield Ranch in 1947, and she and her sister, Sarah, grew up ranching. Laurie and Alan, a fourth-generation Montanan, raised their twin daughters, Katie and Jodi, there as well, as they continued to steward the family operation. As pressure to sell and subdivide in Park County continued to grow, the family chose to protect their ranching legacy through a conservation easement. Redfield says the decision was an important part of planning for the future of the family and the land. "It's part of a transition plan," he says. "A lot of ranches have to look at this. It makes us feel better that it's taken care of."


Photo courtesy Gallatin Valley Land Trust


Julie George, Sterling Wetzsteon, Keri Churchich on the Lazy J Cross conservation easement

"We wanted to honor the vision and dream of our father, Sterling Wetzsteon, to provide hunting on this property forever. It was incredibly important to him."

Julie George and Keri Churchich
Sibling Landowners
Lazy J Cross Conservation Easement

6 Dahlman Family

Rosebud County, MT

THE MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

The Dahlman conservation easement protects an important working ranch outside of Forsyth, helping ensure the land remains intact and available for agricultural use. By conserving the property's open space, wildlife habitat, and ranching heritage, the easement provides long-term certainty that the land can continue supporting both the Dahlman family and the surrounding landscape for generations to come.


Jean and Floyd Dahlman / Photo courtesy The Montana Land Reliance

7 Thiel Ranch

Richland County, MT

THE MONTANA LAND RELIANCE

In Richland County, the Thiel family donated a conservation easement to The Montana Land Reliance on 2,286 acres to prevent the land from being developed and conserve its agricultural future. The property supports a dry land farming operation and provides grazing for a family producer. The tax benefits were an important factor in the family's decision to pursue the perpetual protection of the property. Today, the land remains privately owned, productive, and protected from development.


Photo courtesy The Montana Land Reliance



"Conservation easements are an important tool for protecting family farms and ranches for next generation transitions and protecting existing ag and natural resource activities that are the economic backbone of rural communities. This tool isn't for everyone, but it should be available to anyone."

Todd O'Hair
President and CEO
Montana Chamber of Commerce

Photo by Joel DeMay

MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF LAND TRUSTS

Montana Association of Land Trusts
PO Box 7021
Bozeman, MT 59771

montanalandtrusts.org