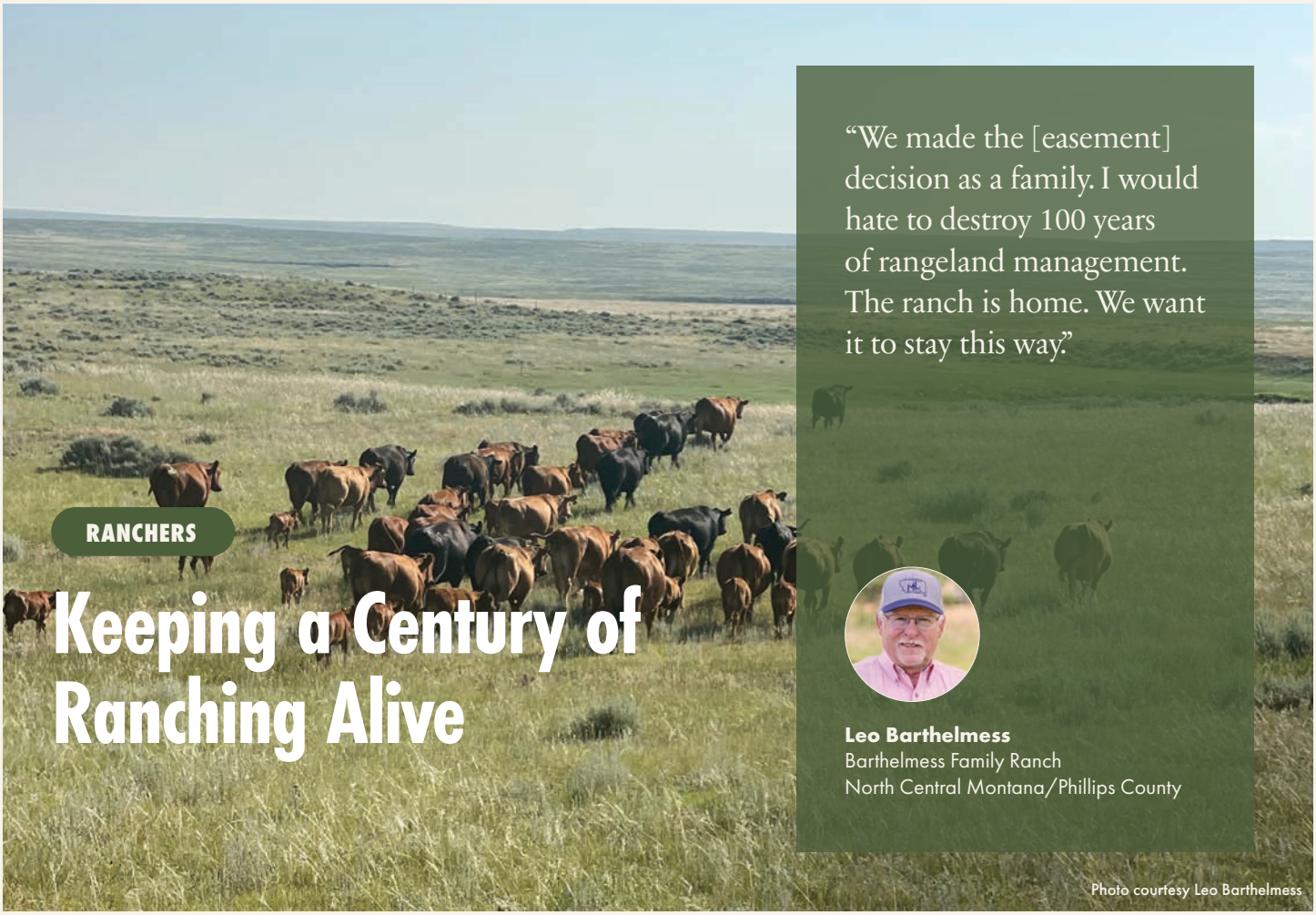


RANCHERS

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."

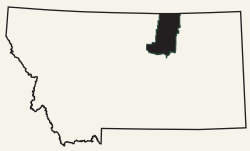
Conservation easements can help prevent the conversion and development of grasslands, protecting the land and our state's ranching for future generations.

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