

# Open Lands

News from the Green River Valley Program

2023



Alexandra Munger

## Dear Friends & Neighbors,

My name is Kerry Gold and I am thrilled to step in to the position of Green River Valley Program director. Since starting with the Jackson Hole Land Trust as a land steward in spring 2022, I have been very impressed by what JHLT has already accomplished in Sublette County and I also see enormous potential for the Green River Valley Program to be a beacon of conservation in our community. With the support of our community and the entire JHLT organization, I have no doubt that we will make tremendous strides in protecting what we value most in our region.

Growing up in the rust belt of the northeastern U.S., I always felt very confined and unable to experience natural landscapes as much as I wanted to. My solution was to attend Colorado State University where I earned my B.S. in wildlife biology with no anticipation of how much I would come to appreciate the extraordinary nature and heritage of the Rocky Mountains. My entire career has been dedicated to ecological conservation and promoting sustainable working lands that support our ecosystems and livelihoods.

From my experience, I know that we have many tools and techniques at our disposal for protecting our values, but most pale in comparison to the strength



Alexandra Munger

and longevity of conservation easements. To me, the most meaningful gesture anyone could ever make towards conservation is the dedication of their land to be protected in perpetuity. In 20 years, we will be so glad that we made these commitments, and in 100 years, the people who play and live in Sublette County, will be eternally grateful that we made the choice to protect this place for future generations.

With Gratitude,

Kerry Gold  
Green River Valley Program  
Director

## GRVP Projects In Motion

We are actively picking up the pace of conservation in the Green River Valley Program. We currently have six active conservation projects in the area totaling 5,400 acres and we have just closed our newest easement, protecting 853 acres along Middle Piney Creek.

Collectively, our easement projects underway span our work area and protect a variety of

conservation priorities: working ranch lands, critical migration corridors and winter ranges, wet hay meadows, riparian habitat, and upland sage-steppe. These projects include critical acreages along the New Fork River and Horse Creek as well as just outside Boulder and into the Red Desert.

Perhaps most importantly, each of these projects represents a long-time ranching family's vision

for protecting the Green River Valley. These easements will provide permanent protection of critical acreages as well as allowing generational changes of ownership, reinvestment in ranching operations, and thoughtful management of our lands.

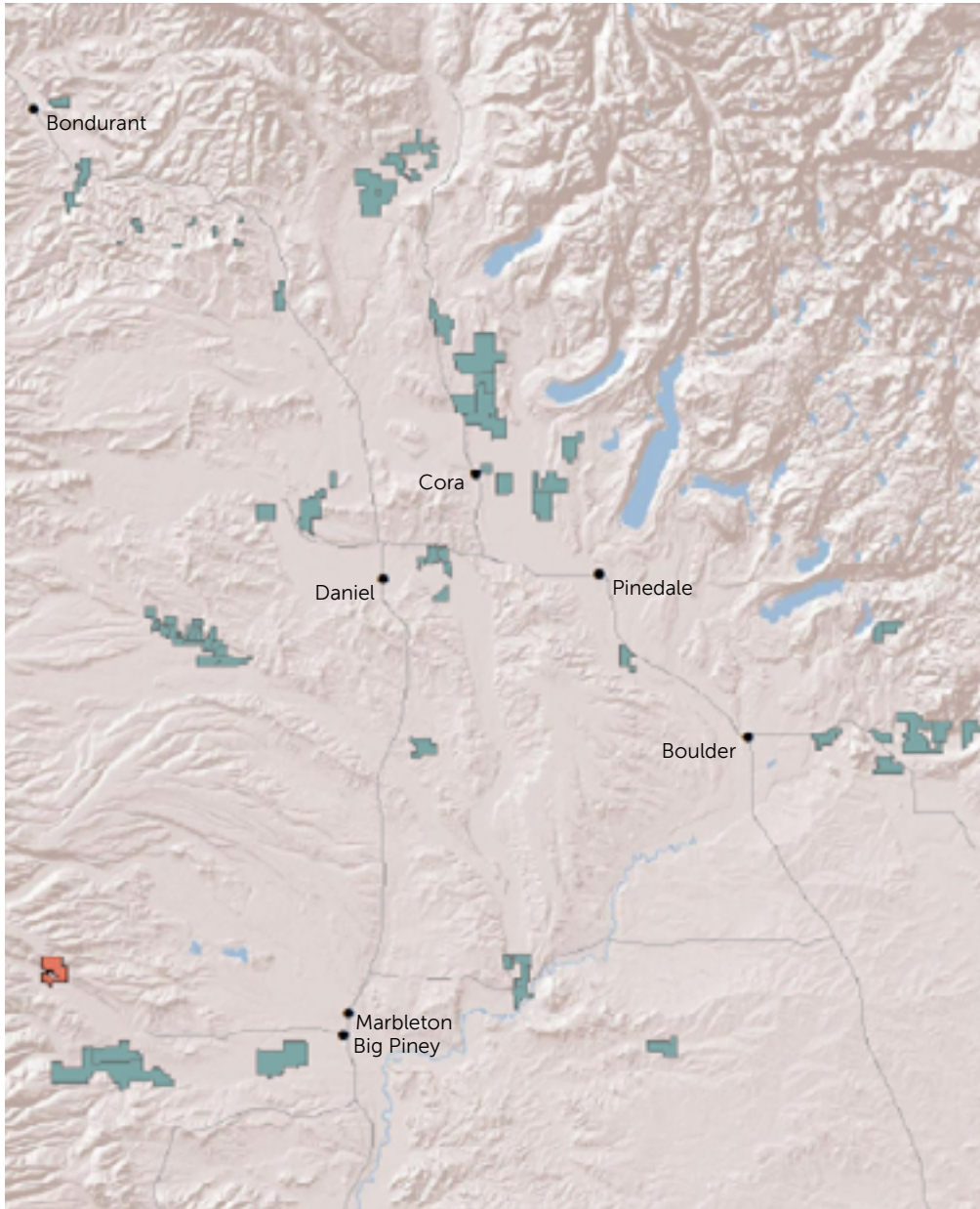


Rob Tolley



[kerry@jhlandtrust.org](mailto:kerry@jhlandtrust.org) for more information on the easement process and details on how conservation benefits wildlife, community, and you as a landowner.

Interested in learning more about conservation easements and their potential benefits? Contact GRVP Director Kerry Gold at

## Recently Completed GRVP Projects



### Legend

-  Existing GRVP Conservation Easements
-  P\T Livestock Johnson Ranch



### P\T Livestock Johnson Ranch Conservation Easement

583 Acres | Held in perpetuity by the Green River Valley Program of the JHLT since August 2023

Located just northwest of Marbleton and Big Piney, a new easement protects a ranch homesteaded by the Johnson family in the late 1890s and stewarded by the Thompson Family for the last 50 years. P\T Livestock Johnson Ranch's easement represents an important step in preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage.

Situated adjacent to Bureau of Land Management parcels, the Johnson Ranch easement establishes crucial connectivity to other large agricultural operations in the area. The lands encompass active cattle grazing and hay production, preserving the rich agricultural heritage that is deeply ingrained in the local community.

"This is a beautiful piece of property that we have been blessed to own," said landowner Pete Thompson. "We are extremely grateful to join with the JHLT and funders to sustain and protect this ranch as it is and know that it will be kept whole and protected from development for the years to come."

The easement protects 1.7 miles of Middle Piney Creek and 160 acres of wetlands that provide habitat for diverse wildlife populations including moose, mule deer, and elk.

## Fish in the Ditch

The ability to irrigate is culturally and economically critical in Wyoming and protected through water rights. As we face future water challenges, having the most efficient irrigation systems possible is going to become crucial in the Green River Valley. Irrigation diversions in rivers and creeks are a common water use practice, and every irrigation ditch risks trapping fish. The number of fish lost to an individual ditch may



Kerry Gold  
Colorado River Cutthroat Trout

be small, but cumulatively, the impact is considerable. The best-designed diversions have immense benefits to both irrigators and fish survival, which is especially important in western Wyoming where native fish species are still abundant.

When waterways like creeks or rivers are diverted for irrigation and other uses and fish follow

the diversion of water to a nonideal location, they can become stranded and die. This phenomenon is known as entrainment, and according to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD), entrainment is one of the biggest causes of fish loss across Wyoming and the United States. The exact factors that can lead to fish entrainment are very case-specific, but most water users experiencing entrainment have several things in common.

Typically, the diversion structures that have the most entrainment issues are also the ones that require the most labor and maintenance over time. Well-designed structures are low-maintenance for the irrigator and allow for sediment transport, fish passage, and efficient transportation of water to headgates. Other structures not built as well tend to have excessive sediment deposition, known as aggradation, and can have compounding negative effects on the whole river. Aggradation on one part of the river can adversely affect it upstream, and even change the course of the river entirely. This means a water user then must chase the river with push-up dams and other methods that are costly and time-consuming. Sediment can also build up in the

ditches themselves, reducing the efficiency of transporting water and increasing the risk of fish loss.

Replacing and redesigning irrigation diversions is admittedly going to have a cost to irrigators. For irrigators with fish entrainment concerns, one technique supported by WGFD is using flow cues to encourage fish to leave ditches. This is done by taking two to three days to gradually shut down a head gate and reduce the flow of water in a ditch while still giving fish the ability to leave. Fish screens are also an option to avoid losing fish and are required in some states for species listed under the Endangered Species Act. However, screens can be very

costly, high maintenance, and are not successful in all cases. A well-designed diversion structure has more benefits and needs less care than a fish screen.

If you are an irrigator dealing with high-maintenance diversion structures and fish entrainment, Pinedale Fish Division staff are available to assist in developing solutions that benefit both your infrastructure and fish survival. For more information, please contact Fish Biologist Alex LeCheminant ([alex.lecheminant2@wyo.gov](mailto:alex.lecheminant2@wyo.gov)), Aquatic Habitat Biologist Luke Schultz ([luke.schultz@wyo.gov](mailto:luke.schultz@wyo.gov)), or call the Pinedale Regional Office at 307-367-4353.



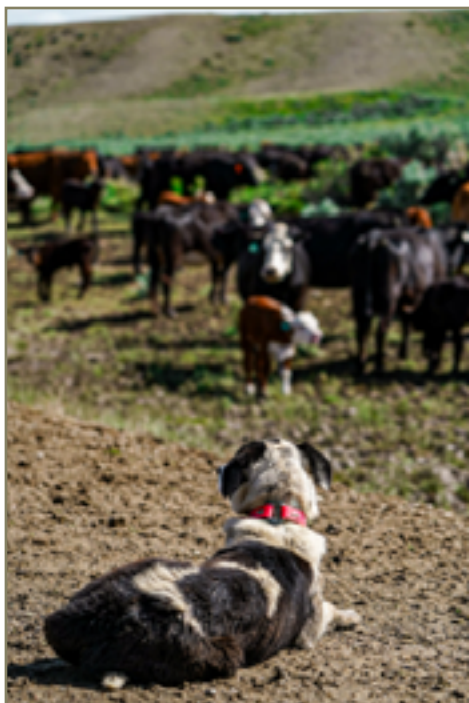
Before (left) and after (right) a diversion structure improvement. This work likely reduces entrainment and improves passage both directions past the diversion. *Nick Scribner, WGFD*

## Cowboys, Cowgirls, Cowdogs, and Cattle

Story and photos by Alexandra Munger

I pulled into the Sommers' homestead ranch at 4:46 a.m. with a meeting time of 5 a.m. If there's one rule to follow, it's to be ready and on time. I was greeted by a bright headlamp, a short introduction, and directions to hop in the passenger seat of the already heated-up side-by-side. Jonita Sommers, the family matriarch – my chauffeur and history teacher for the morning – began driving us out of the driveway where a few horse trailers were parked. A gentleman by the name of Albert Sommers, Jonita's brother, got

out of his pickup, walked over to the window, and said in a funny but non-joking way, "Hail might've moved some cows... the wrong way." The three of us lightly snickered in the dark as we



changed our plan of direction. For the next five hours, Jonita and I drove up and down muddy two-track roads making out the shapes of cowboys and cattle for us to photograph. We'd see a cowboy in the far distance atop the mesa as the light started to come through the misty clouds, then another cowboy, and suddenly cowboys and herds of cattle started popping into sight all around us as the Wind River Range decorated the backdrop.

Jonita knew all the best locations for photos considering she's been traveling these dirt roads since she was a child. We can't forget to mention the hard-working cattle dogs weaving in and out of the livestock listening to their owners' every command. Watching those dogs drive, sort, block, and communicate between cow and human was incredibly impressive – a valuable hand in managing livestock!

Although I was able to experience only one day of this iconic tradition, The Green River Drift

dates back to the late 1800s and is one of the longest and oldest cattle drives in the nation. Ranchers and their next of-kin from the Sublette community gather to drive their cattle north into high mountain pastures to graze for the summer until they start to drift back down to the winter grazing allotments. That's why they call it The Drift, a vital part of the valley's history. The drive covers a two-week period. Each day is not measured by miles but by watering holes.

The Drift is no easy feat for a





cowboy or cowgirl. The cattle drive calls for 3 a.m. alarms, long days in the saddle, and herding hundreds of cows over rough country and through harsh weather conditions. But when you're born into a ranching family, it's in your blood. Ranchers take much pride in their work and way of life, prioritizing the livelihoods of their livestock and land stewardship, and most importantly

how they raise their children to grow into the next generation of their operation.

Protecting working lands through conservation easements is an excellent tool that families of The Drift and across Northwest Wyoming can use to safeguard local agriculture and family heritage.



## Green River Valley Program Advisory Council

The GRVP is thrilled to welcome a new member to our advisory council. Meet Hadley Manning:



Hadley (left) is a lifelong Daniel resident. She grew up on her family's ranch where she learned the importance of constant care and stewardship of the land. She graduated from Clemson University in 2017 where she studied conservation management. She now works for Sublette County Weed and Pest while continuing to work with her family on their ranch where her

conservation passions were instilled. Hadley is also Chairwoman of Wyoming's Board of Agriculture and loves the outdoor recreation her home county provides. Agriculture is one of the most important parts of her life and she is dedicated to ensuring future generations are as fortunate to grow up with ranching as she has been.

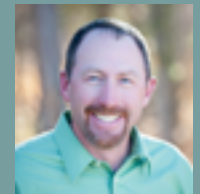
Thank you to our existing advisory council members:



Deborah and Jon Dawson



Mike Fenn



Brian Gray



Faith Hamlin



Sonja Rife



Jim Roscoe



PO Box 1580  
Pinedale, WY 82941

Find us on Instagram!  
[Instagram.com/GreenRiverValley](https://www.instagram.com/GreenRiverValley)



Alexandra Munger

Green River Valley Program of the Jackson Hole Land Trust  
7 West Pine Street | PO Box 1580 | Pinedale, Wyoming 82941  
[info@jhlandtrust.org](mailto:info@jhlandtrust.org) | 307.367.7007