



| 2024 Park County Open Lands Newsletter



Open Lands

Dear Supporters

I first fell in love with the West while standing on the steep, gravel-covered slopes of Mt. Ruth, peering down onto the Emmons Glacier — the largest glacier in the contiguous United States within Mt. Rainier National Park. Over 20 years ago, I didn’t fully appreciate the difference between landscapes preserved as national parks and the working wild landscapes cared for by people like you. The key difference? People — those who tend, work, and steward the land they call home, often for generations.

With a nearly 15-year career at the working-wild interface and the personal journey of nurturing my own family’s first-generation farm in Powell for the last eight years, I’ve come to understand the deep connections and commitment to the land. The challenges of running a business and stewarding a working landscape demand blood, sweat, tears, and courage.

Whether we own property or not, we all share the role of steward in this remarkable landscape. We choose to live here for the open space, wildlife habitat, and agriculture that define our home. These are not just features; they are integral values cherished by our community.

By choosing Park County as our home — whether as first-generation residents or as sixth — we have embarked on a journey through a landscape that is both working and wild. This landscape is vital not only to our cultural identity but also to our economy. It attracts nearly five million visitors to Yellowstone National Park each year and supports an agricultural sector that generates \$186.7 million



in annual economic output. We are part of a reciprocal relationship — people and landscape.

Writing this letter in mid-September, we are all amid our annual harvests. Be it beets, beef, or beans, we share a common hope for an abundant yield. At Park County Open Lands, our harvest is measured in the relationships and connections we foster throughout the county and, ultimately, in acres permanently conserved. It is with great hope for a connected Park County, full of life, both wild and domestic, that we share our early progress less than two years after opening our doors. We have:

- Met with 119 landowners inquiring about conservation easements at kitchen tables across the county
- Spoken with 1,813 individuals at 37 meetings and events about the role of conservation easements in the communities of Park County
- Approved 13 conservation easement projects currently underway, representing 6,296 acres of working farms and ranches, big game habitat, and wetlands from Sunlight to the Southfork and Wapiti to Powell
- Closed one 364-acre conservation easement on the Four C Ranch in the Middle Southfork area

I am grateful for the momentum behind this work and look forward to sharing the news of our program’s next completed conservation easements soon!

This is a pivotal moment for Park County Open Lands. We are entering our second season of annual giving, and your support will help us ensure a vibrant 2025 filled with more outreach and new partnerships. Together, we can continue to nurture this unique landscape that we love.

Thank you for being an essential part of this journey.

With Gratitude,

Alex Few
Park County Open Lands Director

By the Numbers

6,296

**Acres in Partnership
with 13 Local Families**



608

**Acres of Farmland of
Statewide Importance**



2,699

**Acres of Crucial Big
Game Ranges**



6.5

**Miles of Streams
and Rivers**



6,085

**Acres of Family
Farms and Ranches**



903

**Acres of Greater Sage
Grouse Core Area**



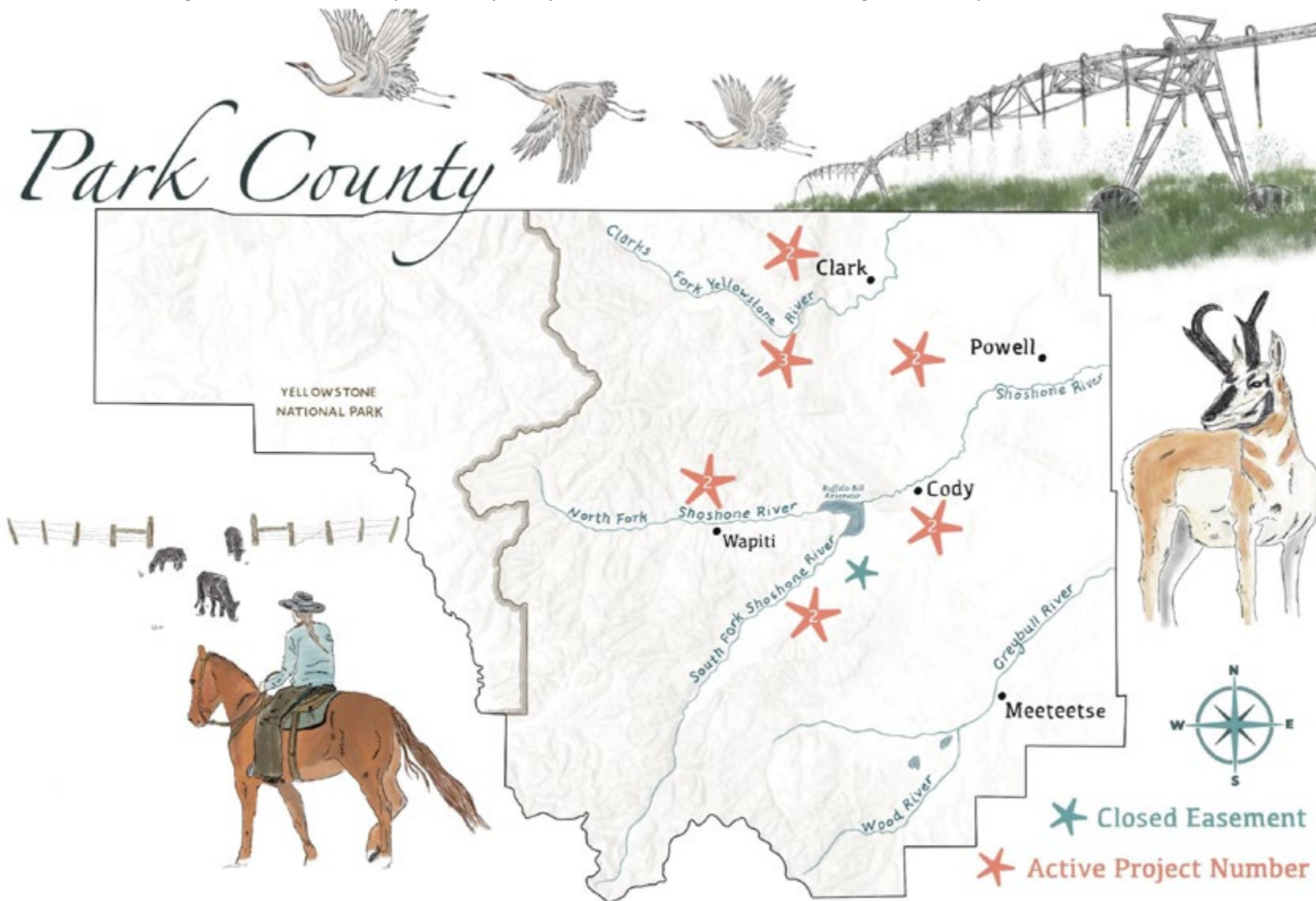
| Completed Projects Update

The First Easement

In November of 2023, less than a year after opening its doors, Park County Open Lands closed its first easement on the Four C Ranch in partnership with Chuck and Marilyn Walker. Park County Open Lands is grateful to the Walkers for being willing to share the success of this conservation easement and trusting Park County Open Lands to protect their working lands for future generations. This first easement marks this community's shared desire to protect open space,

agricultural heritage, and wildlife habitat that is fundamental to life in Park County.

To learn more about the Four C Ranch conservation easement's lasting impact on wildlife habitat and the next generation of ranching, watch the short film "A Legacy on the Land." Scan the QR code with your smartphone.



"Continuing growth threatens our private lands, which provide year-round grazing for resident and migratory wildlife herds, farming and ranching opportunities for the next generation, and open space for all to enjoy." - Chuck Walker



Four C Ranch Conservation Easement

364 Acres | Protected by the Park County Open Lands Program of the JHLT Since November 2023

Situated at the crossroads of the rural residential areas of the Lower Southfork and the expansive ranchlands of the Middle and Upper Southfork, the Four C Ranch easement embodies the landowners' commitment to limit subdivision and preserve the property's working lands and agricultural heritage. By maintaining the continuity of ranchlands, Chuck and Marilyn Walker will leave a legacy of agriculture.

The Four C Ranch boasts a landscape composed of diverse plant communities. It includes irrigated fields east of Marquette Creek and hilly pastures to the west, which offer habitat for mule deer, whitetails, pronghorn antelope, sandhill cranes, and many more species. Nearly 1.5 miles of now-protected Marquette Creek provide important habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat trout, while the cottonwood gallery along the creek banks supports migrating songbirds and birds of prey.

Originally from Texas, Chuck Walker's easement on the Four C is a full-circle success story, both in conservation and the viability of ranching in today's

world. Chuck's family came into some land in 1857 as settlement for a debt. His grandfather took to ranching full-time, and Chuck's father followed in his footsteps, though began another business to make ends meet. "When I came along," Chuck recalls, "he told me I'd better get a good education and a good job because the ranch was no longer viable ... It was surrounded by subdivisions."

In 1994, the Walkers bought the Four C and have since returned to ranching. By leasing part of the ranch, they have also created a foothold for the next generation of ranchers.

Chuck remembers, "My dad had always told us kids that our grandfather wanted the Texas ranch to be preserved for his grandchildren. That didn't happen, so in some ways, conserving this ranch fulfills his wish for the next generation."

This achievement would not have been possible without the generosity and foresight of the Walkers and the founding donors who helped turn Park County Open Lands from an idea into a reality.

Our County's Lifeblood

The American West has always been dry. As prolonged droughts become more frequent and growing populations place increased pressure on the limited water supply, these wetlands will become even more important.

Water is essential to the past, present, and future of Park County. Despite the region's high desert climate, it benefits from a relatively abundant water supply that flows into the Mississippi River, resulting in fewer downstream demands than neighboring regions reliant on the Colorado River. However, water has not always been as accessible as it is today. This article focuses on the development of settler-led water infrastructure and agricultural practices, highlighting how innovations like flood irrigation shaped both the landscape and local economies. Harnessing the Shoshone River required years of engineering efforts, but the result has been a robust agricultural economy and the creation of critical wildlife habitat, with continued innovations to improve fish

passage. Water continues to shape both the environment and life in Park County.

Water: The Vital Force Shaping Park County

Park County's modern history is defined by water usage and irrigation. Ranching operations began in the late 1870s and 1880s, with the Two Dot Ranch on a tributary of the Clark's Fork River and the Carter Ranch along the Shoshone River. Many early ranchers would dig out small irrigation ditches to grow hay, but the lack of large-scale water infrastructure limited the operations. Everything changed with the implementation of the Shoshone Project in the early 1900s.

Traveling through the West in the 1870s, John Wesley Powell wrote that most of the land was too arid for agricultural development and recommended flood irrigation for the minimal amount of land he deemed suitable. William F. Cody, inspired by the rich soil and grand scenery, became determined to fulfill this vision of irrigated land and create a farmland paradise in the Bighorn Basin. In the late 1890s, he obtained the water rights to flood irrigate well over 100,000 acres in the Basin using the Shoshone River. Another man, Solon Wiley, worked at the same time to divert the Shoshone to flood irrigate the Oregon Basin and start a town named Wiley. Both men soon found they lacked the capital to build the necessary infrastructure. However, while Wiley's town and vision fell through entirely, the federal government took over Cody's project. With the help of the newly formed Bureau of Reclamation, the Buffalo Bill Dam was finally constructed by 1910.

Creating the dam and reservoir meant that water was abundant enough to support large acreage crop operations. Thousands of homesteaders arrived following the construction of the dam, with the county's population nearly doubling by 1920. Agricultural settlement began largely with the Garland Division by Powell, followed by the Frannie, Willwood, and, ultimately, Heart Mountain divisions. Today, with over 110,000 acres of irrigated cropland, Park County contains nearly 30% of all irrigated land in Wyoming despite making up only about 7% of the state's area.

Flood irrigation also aided ranchers, creating more forage for sheep and cattle to graze and allowing for larger-scale hay operations. Cody utilized irrigation to support his own TE Ranch still in operation 130 years later.



Edmund Clarence Messer

Harnessing the Shoshone River

Flood irrigating the land for the last century has gradually allowed lowland areas to saturate with water, creating wetlands and marshes perfect for migratory birds. The American West has always been dry. As prolonged droughts become more frequent and growing populations place increased pressure on the limited water supply, these wetlands will become even more important.

Take Sage Creek Ranch, located right outside of Cody. Sage Creek provides habitat for approximately twenty different bird species. Almost all of these birds are migratory, spending time in Wyoming during the warm months before flying south for the winter. Some species found on Sage Creek, including sandhill cranes, western bluebirds, and sage thrashers, use the wetlands and grasslands of northwestern Wyoming as critical breeding grounds to build their nests. Others may just pass through briefly, but as the West grows drier and drier, Sage Creek plays a crucial role as a refuge for these birds on their long journeys home.

A long-term resident of Park County, Anne Young, calls Sage Creek Ranch home and is a passionate steward of the land. “When I first moved here, it was a wreck. The sheds were falling down, it was terribly overgrazed, the streambanks of Sage Creek were all worn down, and the pond barely existed. It really wasn’t much of a place for wildlife at all,” Anne says. “But after me and my husband spent a lot of time working on it ... The sandhill cranes wake you up in the morning, and down at the pond in the spring the pintail ducks arrive. There are mergansers down there, mallards, muskrats, otters. It’s an amazing place.”

Irrigation Supports Habitat, Fields to Wetlands

People steward waterways just as they steward land, and the futures of many of these waterways are up in the air as farmers and ranchers across the county struggle with decisions about succession and impending residential development. Take, for example, the Antler’s Ranch in Meeteetse. The property contains 18 miles of private rivers and creeks supporting a thriving cutthroat trout population. These waters also help support extensive habitat for over 330 species, including bears, elk, deer, moose, and antelope, as well as the bison the May family raises. The May family has owned the 16,532-deeded acre ranch since 1895, and now it is up for sale.

Sam May, the current steward of Antler’s Ranch, has managed the property for the last 37 years. He hopes that the land will remain in agriculture. But with the property up for sale, it is unclear what lies ahead for the ranch.

“The younger generation sees a better way of living, outside of agriculture,” May told the Cowboy State Daily. “The hours, the amount of work, the seven days a week and things like that — it doesn’t appeal to a lot of people ... Then when your average tractor is plus or minus \$100,000, people wonder why farmers and ranchers are having trouble paying for things.”

Not too far from Antler’s Ranch is the oldest ranch in Meeteetse — the 13,886-deeded acre

Pitchfork Ranch, founded by Otto Franc in 1878. The Pitchfork Ranch, where the last black-footed ferrets were captured in the wild to start a captive breeding population, also went up for sale earlier this year. With almost eight miles of the Greybull River on the ranch, it supports critical waterways and habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat. However, the fate of the Pitchfork is much more certain — it is protected from development by a conservation easement.

The Future of Park County’s Ranches

The Pitchfork and Antlers Ranch are far from the only ranches entering transition periods. When faced with uncertainty, conservation easements can ensure a family’s legacy persists even as landownership changes in the future. People, water, and wildlife are all intimately connected — and by stewarding our lands and waterways, the people of Park County have allowed life here to truly flourish.

Josh Metten



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Leading Locally

For years, a group of long-time Park County residents engaged in discussions around the need for a local land trust to address the development pressure encroaching upon Park County’s open spaces. To meet the pressing demand for conservation easements, the group forged a partnership with the

Jackson Hole Land Trust, drawing upon its extensive four decades of expertise and experience. These Park County residents now form the 11-member advisory council that ensures our work is rooted in local values.

Park County Open Lands is thrilled to welcome a new member to our advisory council.

Tiffany was born and raised in Cody. She splits her time between working as the director of the Allen Wyoming Foundation and overseeing operations as barn manager at the J Bar 9 Ranch. She holds a BA in English literature from the California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo. She has worked on ranches her whole life, including at a cutting horse operation in Texas, prior to permanently moving back to Cody.

Tiffany has always been passionate about youth organizations that encourage healthy, active lifestyles. While in high school she was a founding member of Cody CAN Youth, a local nonprofit providing education, health, and recreational services to reduce illicit drug use among youth in Park County. Today, Tiffany acts as an advisor, assisting the youth leadership so they can manage a successful program. Further, she serves in a leadership role for Park County Youth Cycling, a local club that provides access to safe gravel cycling and leadership skill development, while sharing the joy of cycling with young people.

Finally, she serves as vice president of That Other Project, which initiates infrastructure development projects to improve local safety and accessibility among pedestrians, cyclists, and horseback riders in and around Cody.

Conserving open space in Park County is important to Tiffany because she is a fourth-generation rancher with a deep appreciation for nature and the outdoors. She knows firsthand how a strong farming and ranching economy is integral to the community, and recognizes how vital open spaces are. She is committed to working with a wide variety of users to keep open spaces a priority for our community.



Tiffany Manion



Jarren Kuipers
Advisory Council Chair



Mark Fisher
JHLT Board Member



Garrett Growney
JHLT Board Member



Rebekah Burns



Buzzy Hassrick



Allen Hogg



Abby Scott



Kelly Spiering



Anne Young

James Seckman

| Donor Spotlight

A Chamberlin Inn Win

Located in the heart of Cody, the Chamberlin Inn provides visitors with a luxurious hospitality experience rooted in the region’s history. Originally built in 1901, the Chamberlin Inn was restored with a focus on Western elegance and local charm. The Chamberlin Inn is dedicated to protecting the heritage and legacy of Park County, and in partnership with Kind Traveler’s Every Stay Gives Back program, \$5 per stay at the Chamberlin Inn is donated to Park County Open Lands.

“As an owner, along with my wife Becca, it makes business sense to partner with the Park County Open Lands and it’s just the right thing to do,” says Mike Dailey.

If your business is interested in supporting conservation, please contact alex@jhlandtrust.org.



Explore

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Alexandra Munger

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