

Colo. officials praise large ranching easement in grouse territory

<http://www.eenews.net/eenewspm/2015/05/13/stories/1060018514>

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Published: Wednesday, May 13, 2015

Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet (D) and Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) announced the establishment today of a major greater sage grouse conservation easement designed to protect nearly 1,000 acres of habitat on a working ranch.

The owners of the Yust Ranch along the Colorado and Blue rivers in northwest Colorado have agreed to place 995 acres of working rangeland into a permanent conservation easement that will keep the land undeveloped forever, said Erik Glenn, acting executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

The trust, working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Sage Grouse Initiative and the state of Colorado, and using congressionally designated funds in the farm bill and money from a host of private donors, raised the money needed to pay the Yust family and place the land into the conservation easement.

Glenn declined to disclose the total amount paid for the conservation easement but said it was more than \$1 million.

The Yust family wanted not only to ensure the land would remain an intact working ranch but also to protect the sagebrush habitat there that supports a large and healthy population of greater sage grouse.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is evaluating the grouse for possible protection under the Endangered Species Act and must decide whether to propose doing so by Sept. 30.

The ranch near Kremmling provides good summer habitat for grouse because of its location along the Colorado and Blue rivers.

"As we've seen first-hand on this working ranch, active cattle production can co-exist with thriving sagebrush habitat and wildlife," Bennet said in a statement announcing the easement. "Everyone involved in finally making this conservation easement a reality should be very proud."

The Yust Ranch easement is the second announced in Colorado in recent months. It follows the establishment of a 16,000-acre conservation easement on the Cross Mountain Ranch in Craig, near Dinosaur National Monument, an area that contains the state's largest concentration of greater sage grouse.

The drive to raise money and secure the Cross Mountain Ranch easement was also spearheaded by the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

The 16,000 acres of ranchland in that conservation easement connected with existing easements on two neighboring ranches and tens of thousands of acres of federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, resulting in the permanent protection of roughly 250,000 acres of key grouse habitat in the state ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 14).

The Cross Mountain and Yust easements, officials say, illustrate how on-the-ground efforts by federal regulators, states and private landowners to identify and implement proactive measures can protect the bird and its dwindling sagebrush steppe habitat.

A February [report](#) by the Natural Resources Conservation Service revealed that since 2010, NRCS has spent \$296 million on programs partnering with ranchers and other private landowners that have resulted in restoring 4.4 million acres of sage grouse habitat ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 12).

The Yust Ranch also provides important habitat for mule deer, elk, pronghorn and moose. Bald eagles routinely roost in the cottonwoods that line the Blue River, according to the cattlemen's group.

"This area is one of Colorado's truly special places," Hickenlooper said. "Keeping this large landscape together provides not only important habitat for sage grouse, but also conserves river corridors that nourish ranchers, recreation and other wild animals. Protecting these elements sustains our environment, economy and quality of life."