



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald

Patti and Mark Bennett, left, meet representatives from LandTrusts, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Department of Agriculture during a recent tour of their property. To the right of Mark Bennett is Tim Copeland of the Blue Mountain LandTrust and Brian Ratliff with ODFW in Baker City.

BENNETTS

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During the June 28 tour, Mark and Patti took visitors to three stops on their land, showing collision markers on fences to warn low-flying sage grouse, a field cleared of water-guzzling juniper trees to restore more wildlife-friendly aspen and one of 27 monitoring points where the couple survey soil and plant growth to determine the grazing potential of a pasture.

Mark said they have seen an increase in the population of sage grouse, long a candidate for federal protection, since they started conservation work.

"The horses sniff them along, there's sage grouse in the yard, on the wood piles," he said.

One of the Bennetts' — and conservation groups' — biggest goals for the land is to keep the ranch under one owner instead of dividing it once the Bennetts retire.

"That's one of the best things we can do," Beamer said.

One of the stipulations is

the Bennetts' working lands easement prohibits subdividing the land, said Marti Martino with the Blue Mountain Land Trust.

"We've found that outside or absentee owners don't have the same values," Mark said.

The Bennetts have been members of the Conservation Stewardship Program with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for eight years, which creates a plan to make the land more productive and sustainable.

Mark, 65, and Patti, 54, said their children have no interest in taking over the ranch and they, too, would like to see the ranch stay intact.

"Our goal, if we can no longer provide or continue with the land, is that it continues on," Patti said.

Mark's father bought the land in 1979 and Mark took over the ranch in 1989.

He said his father began some "rudimentary conservation" and they'd been doing their best since then.

"We realized early on we really value the wildlife piece

and balance (with the business side)," Mark said.

However, all of the work can become expensive, and he said, they wouldn't be able to afford it without their partnerships with organizations such as NRCS and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, which help pay for conservation projects.

"We didn't have enough funds to do it on a large scale until then," Mark said.

Although the Bennetts talked of finding someone to take over the land and continue their practices one day, Patti said they plan to work the ranch "until we're beat up too bad to do it," citing injuries they've both had from working with livestock.

She recounted an offer they received to buy the land but declined because the prospective buyer's plans for the ranch weren't consistent with the Bennetts' objectives.

"The first thing he wanted to do was come in and punch five wells and triple the number of cattle," Patti said. "The downside of conservation is less money, less cows."

Another point of pride for



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Aspen care and regrowth is just one of the success stories that Patti Bennett and husband, Mark, explained during the tour of their ranch southeast of Unity.

the couple is the way they care for and raise their red Angus cattle. Patti spoke of their commitment to never overmedicating the cows, administering antibiotics or using electric cattle prods.

"It's not about the money," she said. "It's about providing for other families what we want for our family. We don't want to eat chemicals so why would we give them to other families?"

Patti said these methods have also paid off financially as they receive a premium price for their cattle, which helps make up for the smaller size of their herd.

The Bennetts received the

2015 Riley Freeman Stewardship Award, an honor that recognizes those who display Freeman's "passion for the cattle industry, good land stewardship and advocacy for partnerships," according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's website.

Mark said the ranch was initially made up of 11 homesteads, some settled by Swiss immigrants. Some of the small, dilapidated wooden structures still stand just off dirt roads that wind around the property.

Fire poses a risk in the wide open hills near Unity, and one year Mark and Patti even opened up their land

to their neighbor's cows that were in danger due to the smoke and flames.

Mark said having cattle helps lower their fire risk because as the cows graze they keep the grass shorter and therefore less likely to catch fire from a lightning strike.

Mark is also a Baker County commissioner, and because of this, Patti said, they have ties to Baker City and would consider settling down there when they retire.

Mark said this isn't the first time they've done a tour of their ranch.

"In the long run, we believe in being good stewards," he said.



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The Bennetts used cut and fallen timber from their property to create an experimental boundary around an aspen grove.

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