

Cheyenne Buttes forever protected

Land Trust easements keep 1,700 acres free from development

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Bighorn sheep habitat, scenic vistas and grazing cattle — together forever.

That's the result of the Nebraska Land Trust's use of a land preservation tool near Fort Robinson State Park in northwest Nebraska.

The organization's new voluntary conservation easements on a ranch in Dawes County and on Sioux County land owned by the Montana-based Chief Dull Knife College will protect nearly 1,700 acres in the rugged Pine Ridge from potential recreational or housing development.

The college land includes a state landmark: the towering, historic Cheyenne Buttes immediately west of Fort Robinson, said Dave Sands of Lincoln, the trust's executive director.

The buttes are part of the escape route taken by about 150 Northern Cheyenne Indians who broke out of a Fort Robinson barracks on a subzero January night in 1879 after the Army tried to starve and freeze them into submission. The 12-day running fight between the fleeing Cheyenne and pursuing troops left 64 Native Americans and 11 soldiers dead.

"I would hope that even people who are skeptical of permanent protection would agree that this is one property where the vast majority of Nebraskans would never, ever want to see some damaging land use," Sands said. "This is hallowed ground to the Cheyenne. ... The breakout is their exodus story."

The other protected parcel, in adjoining Dawes County, provides a wildlife migration bridge between Ponderosa Wildlife Management Area and Nebraska National Forest, southeast of Crawford.

Elk and bighorn sheep from the Barrel Butte herd cross ridges and meadows on ranch land owned by Gary and Nancy Fisher. The Fishers parceled off a piece of their property to protect the wildlife corridor between sprawling public lands that include Chadron State Park.

The picturesque Pine Ridge is a region of high prairie amid towering sandstone bluffs and ponderosa pines. Ranches in the area are under pressure from potential buyers to subdivide into ranchettes, often-upscale get-away homes on small acreages.

"The Fisher Ranch backs up to public land and would have been very susceptible to ranchette development," Sands said, "and that would create a barricade to the wildlife migration."

Gary Fisher said he and his wife have had offers to buy 40-acre pieces of their property but would never sell the land to be subdivided.

"We just didn't want that, and we didn't want to see it happen



NEBRASKA LAND TRUST

The Cheyenne Buttes loom in the background of a wetland on Chief Dull Knife College land near Fort Robinson State Park.



A bighorn sheep surveys the view on the Fisher Ranch in Dawes County, Neb.

down the road," he said.

The conservation easement program used by willing landowners and the Nebraska Land Trust is a legal agreement that forever protects natural and historical resources from incompatible conservation goals and excessive development.

Landowners who enter into an agreement continue to own the property and typically retain the right to live, farm, ranch, hunt, fish and camp on the land. Most easements prohibit new confined-livestock feeding operations, mining, logging and the destruction of wildlife habitat, native plants and historic sites.

Landowners can receive financial incentives from the sale of an easement or tax breaks from donated easements. The process is used across Nebraska, from metropolitan Omaha to the Panhandle.

The Nebraska Environmental Trust and a U.S. Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service program to protect working ranches provided most of the roughly \$820,000 used to purchase the two Pine Ridge easements. The combined sites cover less than 3 square miles.

Other funding came from the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation and the Iowa chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

In both easements, the land will

continue to be used for grazing cattle and will remain on county tax rolls as agricultural property, which ensures that school and local budgets are unharmed.

Some opponents of conservation easements say it's unfair to future generations to permanently lock up land for its agricultural, environmental, historic or cultural values.

"But isn't development just as permanent?" Sands asked. "Development changes land forever, whether it's housing or a strip mall. Landowners have the power to alter or preserve land forever."

Pine Ridge ranch land attracts buyers from California, Colorado, Florida and Texas, Sands said. Some buy it for hunting. Some continue cattle grazing, which promotes a healthy prairie. Others halt the practice, which can create fire hazards.

"Once land transitions from a local ranch family to someone in Florida, you never know what might eventually happen to it," Sands said. "Maybe the buyer uses it for hunting and is an excellent steward, but what happens when the kids or grandkids inherit it and they don't hunt, or they can't even find Nebraska on a map? All they know is that grandpa had a beautiful ranch, and that the land could be subdivided into ranchettes."

In a state where 97 percent of the land is in private owner-

FISHER RANCH

546 acres in Dawes County

Owners: Gary and Nancy Fisher of Crawford, Neb.

Conservation value:

» Cattle grazing. Selectively logged to maintain grasslands for grazing, restore forest health and reduce wildfire danger.

» Apple trees along Ash Creek suggest old homesteads.

» Bighorn sheep use buttes for protection from predators and as a migration corridor. West Ash Creek is a coldwater trout stream.

» Pine forest, open meadows, water and precipitous buttes.

A restored wooden barn was once part of a farmstead. Current and future landowners will have the option of selecting one of two potential sites for a residence.

CHIEF DULL KNIFE COLLEGE LAND

1,121 acres in Sioux County

Owner: Chief Dull Knife College, Lamé Deer, Mont.

Conservation value:

» Cattle grazing, currently leased to Tim Hruby. New fencing, wetlands and prairie restoration, and water improvements will remedy damage by past bison grazing.

» Site of Cheyenne Outbreak in 1879.

» Bighorn sheep use buttes for lambing. Large, closed-basin wetland is rare in the region and provides valuable aquatic habitat.» Many visitors probably assume that the property is part of Fort Robinson State Park because U.S. Highway 20 crosses the site and park Jeep rides take visitors to the top of the buttes.

» Site used for ceremonial purposes by the Cheyenne.

The college is allowed to build an education and visitor center on 22 acres south of the highway. An easement allows interpretive trails and a boardwalk to the wetland.

ship, Sands said, individuals and families have protected the vast majority of habitat, native landscapes and historic sites.

The Nebraska Land Trust helps provide conservation options for landowners who want to protect their property for future generations. The trust has 19 conservation easements on about 8,500 acres in nine counties across the state. Most are along the Platte River in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

Sands said all easements have unique merits, but he is especially pleased with the one that includes the Cheyenne Buttes.

"All things considered, this is arguably the highest-quality project we've ever completed," he said. "It's the poster child for perpetuity."