

Press Release

Contact:

The Nature Conservancy
Mitch Maxson
503.802.8137
mmaxson@tnc.org

The Climate Trust
Kasey Krifka
503.238.1915 ext. 211
kkrifka@climatetrust.org

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Tracy Robillard
503-414-3220
tracy.robillard@or.usda.gov

The Common Ground Between Grazing and Conservation

New Conservation Easement in Eastern Oregon Protects Zumwalt Prairie, Ranching Livelihoods

Portland, Ore. – It is no secret there can be tension between conservation interests and cattle grazing, but the owners of the Lightning Creek Ranch in eastern Oregon have found some common ground.

Lightning Creek Ranch owners the Probert family, led by Dan and Suzy Probert, have teamed up with The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and The Climate Trust to ensure their 12,225-acre ranch will be managed to benefit both ranching livelihoods and the native habitat and wildlife it supports. The Proberts have sold a conservation easement on the property that will prohibit conversion of native grassland caused by tilling or energy development, while allowing the property to be used for livestock grazing that follows a grazing management plan.

“Wallowa County is a very special and unique place, and I believe it is absolutely critical that we protect our resources for future generations,” said Dan Probert. “Because of this conservation easement, Lightning Creek Ranch will always remain a working ranch while also protecting some of the most beautiful and ecologically important lands in the country.”

Conservation easements protect land for future generations while allowing owners to retain certain property rights. Through an easement, landowners willingly sell or donate only those rights necessary to protect specific conservation values, such as fish and wildlife habitat. Easements are individually tailored to meet a landowner's goals and the landscape's needs. Because the land remains in private ownership, with the remainder of the rights intact, an easement property continues to provide economic benefits for the area in the form of jobs, economic production and property taxes.

“We know grazing is an important factor for grassland conservation,” said Jeff Fields, Zumwalt Project Manager for The Nature Conservancy in Oregon. “On large landscapes like Zumwalt Prairie, native species thrive with occasional disturbance, such as fire and grazing. Just like fire,

it is critical that grazing happens under the right timing and intensity, which is what we guide with our grazing management plans on these easements.”

In addition to helping conserve North America's largest remaining grassland of its type and supporting the local ranching community, this conservation easement prevents the Lightning Creek Ranch from any conversion for residential or commercial energy development or crops. Preventing these changes and maintaining the native grassland will keep an estimated 55,000 tons of carbon in the ground, a benefit that secured funding for this transaction from The Climate Trust.

“Lightning Creek Ranch is the first grasslands project to join our Climate Trust Capital Fund I portfolio, and we are elated to be able to provide capital to this charismatic project in our own backyard,” said Mik McKee, Land Asset Manager for The Climate Trust. “The environmental benefits to be gained from preserving native grasslands are vast, with impacts ranging from improved water quality and soil erosion prevention to the safeguarding of carbon stored in the ground. This investment grade project reflects our ongoing strategy of supporting quality projects in the early stages of development to elevate their impact.”

The majority of funding for this purchase—\$1.3 million—was provided by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through its Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE). This program provides financial and technical assistance to provide long term conservation and protection of agricultural lands and wetlands and their related benefits. Created in the 2014 Farm Bill, this is the first ACEP-ALE project to be completed in Oregon.

“The ACEP-ALE program is a critical tool in our toolbox to sustain pristine, working grasslands of special significance in the Zumwalt Prairie landscape while supporting the rural economy,” said NRCS Oregon State Conservationist Ron Alvarado. “The Lightning Creek Ranch ALE easement expands connectivity with other NRCS conservation programs in the Zumwalt Prairie, such as a multiyear, \$3.1 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project awarded this year, with The Nature Conservancy as the lead partner. The RCPP funding will help private landowners maintain and improve soil health through innovative on-farm conservation practices and permanent ALEs, ensuring productive agricultural lands are never converted to other uses.”

The Nature Conservancy is still privately fundraising \$1,100,000 for the purchase of this land easement, which the Proberts sold to the Conservancy for \$200,000 less than its appraised value.

“Ranch real estate values in Wallowa County and in other scenic areas are valued far above a fair market value for a ranching enterprise,” Probert said. “By granting the development rights to The Nature Conservancy, we were able to reduce the land cost to one that is manageable for our family. If we, as ranchers and farmers, want our children to be able to afford a farm or ranch and remain land owners rather than tenants on "legacy" ranches, then we need to find a way to reduce land costs to our heirs. Conservation easements are a great way to do this while ensuring the Zumwalt Prairie remains an intact grassland with the same characteristics that make us proud to call this beautiful place home.”

About The Nature Conservancy:

The Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans at unprecedented scale, and helping make cities more sustainable. Working in more than 65 countries, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. To learn more, visit www.nature.org.

About The Climate Trust:

Building upon a legacy of innovation and leadership in the carbon market, The Climate Trust mobilizes conservation finance to maximize environmental returns. We value air, water and soil through the development, purchase and sale of qualified offsets and a relentless investment in people and projects with environmental purpose | www.climatetrust.org | [@climatetrust](https://twitter.com/climatetrust) | facebook.com/TheClimateTrust

About Natural Resources Conservation Service:

NRCS works with farmers, ranchers and forest landowners across the country to help them boost agricultural productivity and protect our natural resources through conservation.