



## Protecting the land

by JEFF SCHMERKER - Ravalli Republic Jan 5, 2010 [0](#)



Two weeks ago the Ravalli County Commission agreed to sign a conservation easement to protect in perpetuity the 428-acre Lost Horse Creek Ranch. The agreement, which will cost taxpayers \$409,000, saves open lands, long-distance views and tons of wildlife habitat and uninterrupted corridors.

And what a save it was.

The land had already been platted and approved for subdivision into 44 plots ranging from a few acres on up.

The platting had been done by Joe Klucewich and his wife Sherry. They did not want to see homes on the land but did it as a precaution in case the family needed the money later.

Joe died, but his dream of keeping one of the last big ranches in the Bitterroot intact did not. Sherry remarried Stan Swartz 13 years ago on a small rise overlooking the Como Peaks and a pond they built on Moose Creek.

On Monday, as the mountains hulked under a heavy sky, Stan said not only did finalizing the conservation easement for the land protect it for future generations, but hopefully preservation of the Lost Horse Creek Ranch will spur other Bitterroot landowners to secure their own easements.

The agreement signed on the Lost Horse was the third signed by commissioners; a fourth was signed New Year's Eve.

The easements, which protects against any future development except for what is written into the finalizing document, are purchased by the county using the \$10 million in bonds approved by voters. The easements are then transferred immediately to the Bitter Root Land Trust. The land stays privately owned; the money is commonly used by the owners for ongoing maintenance.

"The money will allow us to be able to live here and enjoy the property for many years and to help cover some of the costs of maintenance and stewardship of the property," Sherry Swartz said. "That was the fear - as we get older and can not do all the work we need help to do that and pay to have it done. Some of that money will allow us to do that in the future. Each property protected by the county so far has unique characteristics, said Gavin Ricklefs, director of the Bitter Root Land Trust.

The Lost Horse Ranch occupies one of the most iconic Bitterroot landscapes - long-range mountain views, bold streams, prime elk, moose, deer, black bear and mountain lion habitat, and open pastures which can easily be viewed from along Lost Horse Creek Road.

"In the past 30 years we have seen what has happened to all the open space," Stan Swartz said. "If we don't start now to protect some of what we have here in the Bitterroot Valley - open lands and wildlife habitat - then we are going to lose it forever."

The Swartz family put a lot of work into restoring the land, Stan said. They removed trash, repaired meadows, and modernized barns while keeping a rustic look. They also put a lot of work into maintaining and restoring large riparian areas.

"We have done a tremendous amount of stewardship work on this," Sherry Swartz said.

Sherry said she started talking to members of the Bitter Root Land Trust about a possible easement just over a year ago. She had talked to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation about a similar deal but ultimately chose to keep the easement title in local hands.

While the public does not gain the right to use the land or hunt it, the public is getting a good deal for its \$409,000, Stan said. The easement protects something that no money can buy - prime wildlife habitat, open space, water and wetlands, and agricultural practices.

“These kinds of places are disappearing from the valley, especially places of this size,” he said. “Does the public getting its money’s worth? In my own personal opinion it’s one of the best returns they can get.”

Hopefully the successful signing of easements on more parcels will get even more landowners interested in being a part of the conservation easement process, Stan Swartz said. The key for her, Sherry Swartz said, was knowing that while she was giving up some rights to her land she was not giving up control, nor lifestyle. The big test for her was how she felt waking up the next morning - was she changed? No, she said, she felt no different.

“We have really appreciated working with the Bitter Root Land Trust and the people who make the group up,” Stan said. “Having been through it there is nothing I would change about the process. Now, with the bond money, we have an avenue where if landowners want to put their land into a conservation easement they can do that. A lot of folks don not have the money to pay the costs. So if some costs can be taken care of - it’s a small price to pay for that.”

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