



NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

CONSERVATION SHOWCASE

Above: Photo courtesy Wallowa Land Trust

Agricultural Conservation Easements Protect Rural Way of Life in Wallowa County, Oregon

EASEMENTS COMBAT THREATS OF SUBDIVISION DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAIN AGRICULTURE FOREVER

Producer Profile:
Woody Wolfe

Programs:
Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE)

Location:
Wallowa County



Oregon Natural Resources Conservation Service

In a county without a single traffic light, the threat of development is real. Wallowa County, nestled in the majestic Wallowa Mountains in northeastern Oregon, is home to about 7,000 year-round residents. But with a bustling tourism economy, the county receives over 700,000 visitors per year.

Vacation homes and cabins scatter communities like Enterprise and Joseph, driving up real estate prices and making an attractive investment opportunity for tourism development.

Many farmers and ranchers, especially those with a view, can earn more capital by sub-dividing their property

and selling it for housing development, rather than keeping it in production. This is especially true when farms change hands between generations.

Parcels of farmland are being subdivided and sold into lots for housing and commercial development. What was once large swaths of ranch lands are being slowly converted into sub-divisions, mini-mansions and vacation homes.

And local farmers like Woody and Megan Wolfe are determined to take a stand and protect their way of life.

“It’s become much more profitable to sell off farm land for development



Above: For sale signs for subdivided parcels of farmland, like the one pictured here, have become more common throughout Wallowa County due to climbing real estate values

rather than to farm the land,” Woody says. “You can drive around here and see the ‘for sale’ signs popping up more and more.”

Agriculture is an integral part of Wallowa County’s rural economy. The county’s top commodities are hay production—primarily timothy and alfalfa—and livestock and wheat. Wallowa County boasts 452,559 acres of farm land and generates an estimated \$46.6 million in ag product market value, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Expanding development and population pressures pose a threat to keeping farmland in agricultural production.

But there’s a new tool to help farmers combat those pressures, a tool that is gaining popularity and momentum across the West—agricultural conservation easements.

Easements Keep Land in Agriculture Forever

Woody and Megan are protecting hundreds of acres of their family’s farmland forever through agricultural conservation easements. By working

with the local Wallowa Land Trust, they secured two easements on 463 acres of prime farmland to ensure the property stays in agriculture for generations to come, while also protecting valuable fish and wildlife habitat.

“It’s worth it to me if I can protect this land forever from subdivision and population pressures, and it stays in agriculture,” Woody says.

One of the easements was completed in 2017 for 266 acres, in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service through its Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE). This is a program in the Farm Bill that pays half of the appraised easement value cost to make easements a more affordable and realistic option for farmers and ranchers.

The remaining amount is offered up through a non-governmental group and other partners. In this case the Wallowa Land Trust secured matching dollars through the Bergstrom Foundation,

Right: Landowner Woody Wolfe works closely with the Wallowa Land Trust, the Nez Perce Tribe, and other partners to protect and conserve natural resources on the family’s century farm in Wallowa County, Oregon.



Right: The Agricultural Lands Easement on the Wolfe Farm protects the property forever from development while sustaining ecological habitat and agricultural production.



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—Woody Wolfe
Landowner

the Penstemon Fund, and the Nez Perce Tribe. Additionally, the Wolfes generously donated 25 percent of the easement value.

Woody also has another easement on 197 acres with the Wallowa Land Trust, which was completed in 2011.

The Wolfe Farm has quite the legacy in Wallowa County. It’s a 555-acre century farm, and has been in the family since 1897. He acquired additional neighboring acres over the years and currently farms more than 2,000 acres.

Woody believes that permanent conservation easements are a valuable tool to protect the rural way of life in his community and to leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

“There’s very few great places left,” Woody says. “And the ones that are great—eventually you get enough people coming in and it will change things, and it becomes not so great anymore.”

Easements are like Negotiating ‘A Bundle of Rights’

Securing an easement is not an easy process. It presents many challenges, and can take several years from start to finish.

But Woody says the end result is totally worth it.

Kathleen Ackley, executive director of the Wallowa Land Trust, describes it as negotiating ‘a bundle of land rights.’

“When you own land, you own certain rights to the land, such as the right to develop, the right to build homes, and the right to mine minerals,” Kathleen says. “Working with a land trust, you remove some of the land rights from the bundle and they go away forever. The landowner agrees to give up certain rights to the land, such as the right to subdivide or develop, for example.”

“It’s a privilege to have that kind of a relationship with the landowners,” she added. “It’s really a partnership. Landowners are willing to work with us because what we do is voluntary and non-regulatory. It’s one of the best tools available to help farmers and ranchers stay on the land and keep it in agricultural production.”

Easements are a negotiation, and each one is different based on the objectives of each party and the various programs involved. “We have conservations with the landowner about our mutual goals, then we seek the right program that will allow us to be successful while meeting everyone’s needs,” Kathleen said.

Right: Through partnerships and conservation easements, the Wolfe Family is protecting critical salmon habitat on the Lostine and Wallowa rivers while also supporting cultural values of the Nez Perce Tribe.



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”

—Woody Wolfe
Landowner

Through the ACEP-ALE program, the Wolfe’s have a management plan to use no-till farming practices. No-till causes less disturbance in the soil, resulting in higher organic matter, better water infiltration, and less erosion.

They also manage healthy streamside habitats on the property to provide quality habitat for fish and wildlife. The property is teeming with life. Sounds of crickets, woodpeckers, song birds and frogs abound as the Lostine and Wallowa rivers flow through healthy meadows.

“It makes sense to manage the land for ecological purposes,” Woody says. “I believe if we want healthy farm land, we have to have healthy habitats adjacent to it.”

Easement Economics

Easements are a great way for landowners to earn additional income. In Woody and Megan’s case, they were able to use the money gained from the sale of an easement to pay down debt and invest in the farm’s operation.

“I can sleep easier at night knowing that I was able to pay down some debt because of the easement capital,” Woody says.

However, he cautions other farmers to avoid the process if the financial incentive is their only motivation.

“If you’re just in it for the money, then don’t do it,” Woody says.

“It’s challenging to enter into an agreement that lasts forever. You need the flexibility to farm, but you also are obligated to ensure that the conservation values that are being protected actually are being protected. You have to have the stewardship ethic and values in order to make it successful. My goal is sustainability – to keep the land healthy and thriving for as long as it can.”

Partnerships Are Key

Woody started working with the land trust in 2004 and now 13 years later he has secured two easements on the property. He has future plans to do more conservation work on the farm including re-opening 100 acres of functioning natural flood plain. He wants to continue using easements as a tool in his land management.

Partnerships with local, state and federal natural resource groups and

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—Kathleen Ackley
Executive Director,
Wallowa Land Trust

Right: Woody Wolfe discusses his land management goals with Eric Greenwell and Kathleen Ackley of the Wallowa Land Trust and with Abe Clark of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

with the Nez Perce Tribe are critical to getting the work done.

“Working with good partners is essential to creating success,” Woody says. “They have research and science behind what they do; it’s important to partner with people that have the capital and the knowledge to get things done.”

“It’s been a pleasure working with the Wolfe Family and to see their genuine

stewardship ethic come to fruition on the property,” Kathleen said. “We couldn’t have done it without help from many partners, including the NRCS, the Nez Perce Tribe and others. Perhaps most importantly, the benefits will be shared with the community forever.”

For more information about conservation easement programs offered by NRCS in Oregon, visit www.or.nrcs.usda.gov



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