Working for Working Lands

We can predict with some certainty that the future of conservation will focus on working lands. Working lands are those portions of the landscape from which we as humans derive our sustenance. They are the lands we actively manage to meet our needs as a species.

People chose to settle these lands for the same reason wildlife depend so heavily on them. They are in most cases, the most habitable, biologically diverse and well-watered portions of the landscape. Because they form the cornerstones for both human communities and ecosystems, the conservation and stewardship of these lands is obviously vitally important.

But the approach to conserving working lands must be fundamentally different than traditional preservation strategies. When we designate wilderness, for instance, we are segregating people from a wild place. This can be done by drawing a line on a map, legislating and enforcing, and has often been done from afar.

In the case of working lands, it is almost exactly the opposite. Here, we need to integrate people and natural systems. Land managers face a tremendous challenge in trying to support multiple interests and values, from production to conservation. It is a constant juggling act requiring tradeoffs, on-going negotiation and adaptive management. This is very context specific. It is not something that can be governed from afar.

This is why we are seeing community-based collaboratives emerge as a solution. These collaboratives allow for the necessary flexibility and adaptive management and have proven effective in many landscapes.

And, when it comes to working lands conservation, economics matter. In our current economic system, land is a financial asset and, in many cases, the foundation for a land-based business. At the end of the day, as with any business, more money has to come in than goes out. Until we better align economics with ecological stewardship, healthy lands and biodiversity will continue to decline.

Economics also matter for the sake of equity. Unless working lands can sustain reasonable livelihoods, only the wealthiest will be able to afford to own land. If we are to be serious about conserving these essential lands, we must invest in them. Not just in easements, not just in cost share programs—both of which are important—but in creating the economic conditions and positive human relationships needed to support conservation and stewardship long term.

The good news is that given the right resources and support, people have the capacity to enrich the living community of the land. More good news is that landowners and managers across the country are already doing tremendous work in conserving and restoring habitat, streams and watersheds, continuously learning how to improve soil health and building collaborative partnerships. These stories generally take place out of the public eye, but some of the very best conservation today is taking place on working lands.

That's why the work of the Western Landowners Alliance remains so critical. That's why I'm so proud of everything we accomplished in 2019.

Lesli Allison
Executive Director
The Western Landowners Alliance was established by landowners to keep working lands in the West whole and healthy. Our mission is to advance policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species. Simply stated, we recognize that ecological health and economic prosperity go hand-in-hand.

As private landowners, we are critical for meaningful conservation and a thriving western economy. Up to 80% of wildlife species depend on private land for survival. We bring nuanced and pragmatic insights based on real world experience to the table that can help reveal new paths forward.

Western Landowners Alliance advances policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species.

We envision a future in which private and leased public lands in the West are resilient to stressors, healthy and biologically diverse, and provide for prosperous rural livelihoods and critical ecological services.
Summary

The Voice of Stewardship
WLA promotes and supports private stewardship in the West. We do this through landowner-led advocacy, shared knowledge and communications. We ensure landowner interests are represented in policy matters that affect our lands and operations. We provide opportunities to participate in a community of practice and share knowledge on a peer-to-peer basis. We communicate the value and perspectives of private stewardship to policy makers and the public.

In 2019 we worked to advance:
- economic support for working lands
- regulatory support for landowners working to protect threatened and endangered species
- opportunities for hundreds of landowners to share and connect with each other
- the story of the private stewardship through all kinds of media around the West and nationwide
Increasing investment in stewardship

New Mexico Agriculture and Natural Resources Trust Fund

Together with the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts and a multitude of others, we brought agriculture and conservation groups together in New Mexico to create legislation that would establish a trust fund to protect the state’s enchanting but fragile land and waters. In 2019 the bill passed both the state house and the senate but ran short of time for concurrence. WLA and partners then expanded the coalition, refined the proposal and filed new bi-partisan-sponsored legislation for the 2020 session.

Expanding Farm Bill programs to the West

WLA continued to advance changes we successfully championed in the 2018 Farm Bill, meeting on multiple occasions with officials in DC, engaging partners and preparing public comments on the rule making process.

As a result of our advocacy, more land in the West will be eligible to use the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program to support sensitive ecological habitats, threatened and endangered species and wildlife corridors.

Tax reform that promotes stewardship

Landowners in several states have consistently cited property tax policy as an impediment to sound stewardship, conservation investment and keeping land ownership affordable. In New Mexico, we are leading statewide efforts to study and improve policy.

In December 2018 we published Conservation Economics on Western Working Lands, that asked and answered the key question, "What policy conditions would empower landowners to allocate more time, talent and resources to biodiversity and connectivity?"
Protecting threatened and endangered species on private land through smarter regulation and active partnerships

In 2019, we worked with the Western Governors Association (WGA) and additional stakeholders to identify collaborative strategies for conserving at-risk species.

WLA was one of four presenters at a forum in Washington, DC, hosted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as part of a new initiative, “Conservation without Conflict”. We also participated in a forum of experts on the ESA hosted by the University of Wyoming to provide recommendations on improving relations between the FWS and state wildlife agencies to achieve better outcomes.

Because we believe that landowners who do good things for endangered species should be rewarded, not penalized, we’re working to strengthen and streamline regulatory assurance agreements.

The ESA is a critical piece of American environmental law. But it can have the perverse effect of discouraging habitat restoration by landowners who fear losing control of management decisions on their property. We’re working to resolve this conflict in a win-win for people and wildlife.

"to provide a means whereby the ecosystems upon which endangered species and threatened species depend may be conserved, [and] to provide a program for the conservation of such endangered species and threatened species..."
- The Endangered Species Act
Improving outcomes for wildlife and working lands

The key to conserving wildlife corridors is to support the working lands that sustain them. We’re working with state and federal agencies and private landowners to develop better approaches to protecting migratory wildlife like pronghorn, elk, and deer.

Tools for managing wildlife migrations

Landowner perspectives gained through one-on-one interviews and focus groups throughout the Upper Rio Grande region provide the foundation for the recommendations contained within our Habitat Conservation Strategies for Migrating Wildlife toolkit. These perspectives are shared side-by-side with concise strategies for policymakers, funders, and organizations looking to improve wildlife habitat in this dynamic trans-boundary region of Colorado and New Mexico. 200 unique downloads by public agencies, NGOs, and stakeholders in the first month following publication demonstrated its usefulness.

Leadership in major efforts

Western Landowners Alliance led an effort to ensure landowners were at the table as Wyoming developed its migration policy. Governor Mark Gordon appointed rancher and WLA board member Marissa Taylor to the wildlife migration advisory committee. WLA also weighed in on legislation and executive orders on the issue in Colorado and New Mexico.

WLA also partnered with the Ruckelshaus Institute, the National Wildlife Federation, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and The Pew Charitable Trusts to convene workshops in Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada to identify common ground and next steps for managing and conserving wildlife migration corridors.
Major new initiative to reduce conflict with wildlife in the northern Rockies

With grizzly bear, wolf and elk populations on the rise in the northern Rockies, ranchers, farmers and conservationists alike are seeking ways to reduce losses of livestock, crops and wildlife. Thanks to multi-year support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, in 2019 WLA launched a new landowner-led initiative to tackle this challenge.

The initiative continues to engage landowners, partners and non-profit organizations in coordinated efforts to share knowledge, provide increased resources, and improve practices that help reduce losses to both wildlife and livestock.

Our work is based on the latest science and best practices, presented clearly in our publication Reducing Conflict with Grizzly Bears, Wolves and Elk, which had 2000 print copies distributed to key stakeholders and has been downloaded more than 1000 times.

Alder Firehall meeting sparks change in SW Montana

Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) teamed with two local watershed-based collaboratives, the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance and Madison Valley Ranchlands Group, to gather ranchers, agency personnel, and conservation-based NGOs for a meeting that marked the beginning of a regional landowner-led effort to reduce conflict between grizzlies and ranching communities. The event, "Sustaining Working Lands Amidst Large Carnivores," was attended by over 100 people, and follow up engagement in 2020 directly led to a new range rider on the ground in the Gravelly Mountains, preventing conflicts between grizzly bears and livestock.
Stewardship Stories

Peer to Peer Knowledge Sharing

WLA hosted six stewardship tours, four in New Mexico and two in Colorado, attracting more than 250 participants. These events featured a range of topics, including grazing, soil health and forest management. WLA also partnered with Holistic Management International and the Quivira Coalition, to convene working lands summits on advancing regenerative agriculture in CO and NM.

More than a story per week

WLA earned a key media mention on the value of private stewardship or a critical challenge facing Western Landowners on a weekly basis in 2019.

Earning media and shifting narratives to support hard working land stewards


Our Stewardship with Vision film series debuted another episode and earned over 50,000 impressions, 10,000 engagements, and 590 hours of view time.

Photo by Virginie Pointeau

Photo by Adam Schallau
Women in Ranching took root and thrived in its new home

WinR provides opportunities for women who work the land in remote rural areas to grow personally and professionally and to support and improve land stewardship through shared learning. In 2019, WLA hosted five Women in Ranching (WinR) circles, helping more than 80 women ranch leaders make ‘Big Leaps’ in their ranch operations and their communities. Program alumni started new businesses, joined community boards, improved management practices on their land, acquired land to restore using managed grazing, and took dozens of other concrete steps into leadership roles.

Women in Ranching community pitched in with more than $250,000 in lodging, food, and services to produce the 2019 circles in California, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming.

Community beyond the circles

The power of the WinR program is in the lasting bonds and powerful network that supports women in ranching, even those who have yet to attend a circle, as they lean in to leadership and stewardship around the West. The WinR listserv, started in late 2019, has proven to be a vibrant hub of discussion and source of information during trying times.
### 2019 Income
- Restricted Foundation Grants: $626,825
- Unrestricted Foundation Grants: $290,000
- Donations and Dues: $261,331
- Event Sponsorships: $19,034

**Total Income: $1,197,190**

### 2019 Expenses by Category
- Programs: $799,694
- Administration: $133,992
- Fundraising: $148,175

**Total: $1,081,861**

### 2019 Expenses by program
- Stewardship: $369,423
- Policy: $297,248
- Communications/Voice: $133,023

**Total Program Expenses: $799,694**
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