

JH Land Trust secures Dubois easement

420 acres on east side of Togwotee Pass is important range for bighorns.

By Thomas Dewell

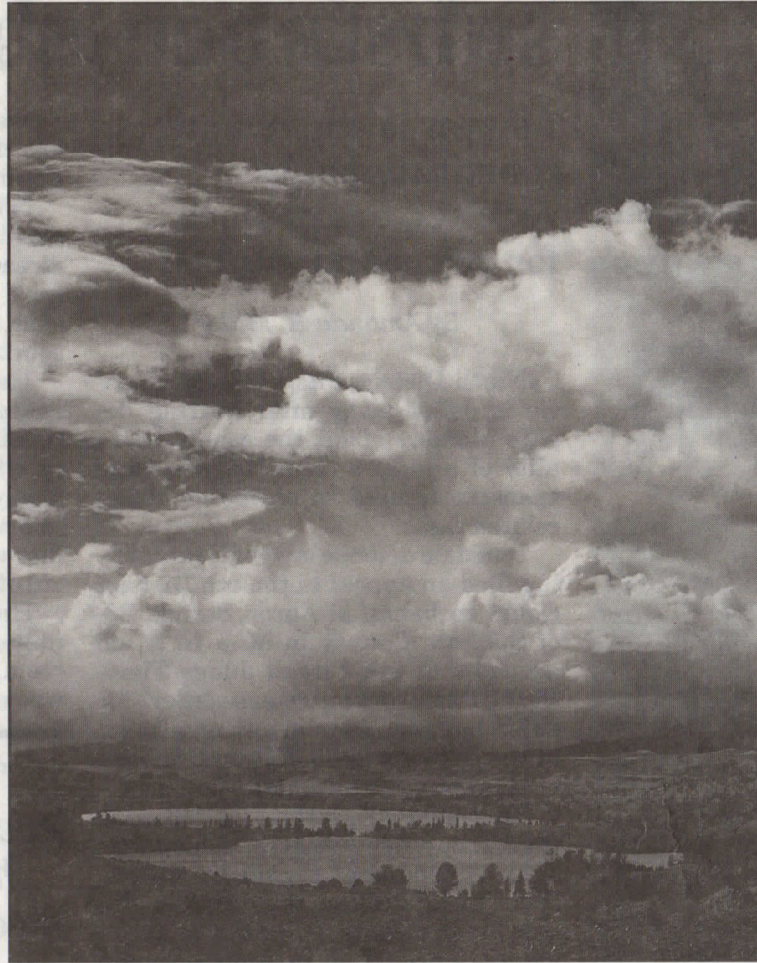
The Jackson Hole Land Trust recently announced the purchase of a conservation easement that protects bighorn sheep habitat near Dubois.

The trust and partners ranging from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to the Dubois Anglers and Wildlife Group paid \$800,000 for an easement on the 420-acre Ring Lake Ranch, a seasonal retreat center southeast of Dubois. The agreement limits development to the current cabins and other facilities used by the center and requires that livestock not graze on the property to protect the Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep herd.

"The Ring Lake Ranch project was an extraordinary opportunity for us to protect a beautiful landscape and help out one of the really special, character-defining animals of western Wyoming," said Laurie Andrews, executive director of the trust.

Under Fremont County land-use regulations, the property could have been subdivided into a maximum of 420 lots, or one per acre.

Four property owners control the land in the lake-studded Torrey Creek drainage that leads to the popular trail to Lake Louise in the Fitz-



STEPHEN J. LUNSFORD PHOTO COURTESY JACKSON HOLE LAND TRUST

The view from the Ring Lake Ranch lodge shows the property the Jackson Hole Land Trust recently helped conserve. Fremont County regulations would have allowed up to 420 lots on the 420-acre property.

patrick Wilderness. The trust hopes the Ring Lake easement will encourage the other three landowners to protect their parcels in an area that is important wildlife winter range.

The Whiskey Mountain Herd was once the largest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorn

sheep in the world. Between 1949 and 1995, some 2,000 animals were transplanted to boost populations elsewhere in the West.

In recent years, the herd has suffered significant declines caused by loss of habitat and illnesses transmitted by

domestic sheep and goats.

Dubois residents backed the easement because they want to protect bighorns, Mayor Mark Harrison said Tuesday.

"The general community supports the herd," Harrison said.

As for the Jackson Hole Land Trust opening an office in the town and embarking on what it calls its Wind River Program, Harrison said community members want to make sure conservation easements don't hamstring growth in the upper Wind River Valley.

"The real question is, how do you balance the economics of the area?" Harrison said. "How do you balance – or not destroy – reasonable development and also the tax base."

Dubois is an attractive place for the land trust because it can stretch private dollars further there than in Jackson Hole, Andrews said. Public officials are willing to provide matching funding because they see taxpayer dollars can buy more on the east side of Togwotee Pass than in an expensive resort community.

Even with its recent success in Dubois, the land trust remains focused on Jackson Hole. The organization is working to close deals – one south of town and one on the west bank – before the end of the year, Andrews said.

The current economic climate makes raising money more difficult than it has been in the past, but at the same time distressed landowners may be more willing to do deals with the trust,

Land trust accredited

The Jackson Hole Land Trust this fall became one of 82 land trusts, out of more than 1,600 in the country, to be accredited through an independent program.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, part of the Land Trust Alliance, awards an accreditation seal to community institutions that meet national quality standards for permanently protecting natural places and working lands. The first land trusts were awarded accreditation in fall 2008.

"The accreditation seal lets the public know that the accredited land trust has undergone an extensive external review of the governance and management of its organization and the systems and policies it uses to protect land," said Tammara Van Ryn, commission executive director. "Accreditation provides the public with an assurance that land trusts meet high standards for quality and that their conservation work is permanent."

Since its inception in 1980, the Jackson Hole Land Trust has protected more than 21,000 acres of open lands in and around Jackson Hole.

For information, visit www.jhlandtrust.org.

Andrews said.

"We weren't considered someone able to be at the table," Andrews said. "Now we've become a viable partner."