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Vision of Prairie Paradise Troubles Some Montana Ranchers

By JACK HEALY

MALTA, Mont. — On fields where cattle graze and wheat grows, a group of conservationists and millionaire donors are stitching together their dreams of an American Serengeti. Acre by acre, they are trying to build a new kind of national park, buying up old ranches to create a grassland reserve where 10,000 bison roam and fences are few.

The privately financed project — now a decade in the making — has ambitions as big as the Montana sky, tapping private fortunes to preserve the country’s open landscapes. Supporters see it as the last, best way to create wide-open public spaces in an era of budget cuts, government shutdowns and bitter battles between land developers and conservationists.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” said George E. Matelich, the chairman of the conservation group, [American Prairie Reserve](#), and a managing director of a New York private equity firm. “It’s a project for America.”

The trouble is many ranching families here in northern Montana say it is not a project for them. As the reserve buys out families and expands its holdings — it now has about 274,000 acres of private ranches and leased public lands — some here are digging in their heels and vowing not to let their ranches become part of the project.

They say they know the transformative power of real estate out West: Western mining towns become ski havens, high mesas become ranch retreats for business moguls, and cultures inevitably change.

“We don’t intend to sell,” said Leo Barthelmess, 57, who was 8 when his family moved here and settled on a 25,000-acre sheep and cattle ranch. “We have children coming back. We’re working on a succession plan. We want this landscape to carry on to the next generation.”

Mr. Barthelmess and other ranchers say families like theirs have rebuilt the prairie, season by season, since the destruction wrought by the Dust Bowl. They work with conservation groups, rotate their herds to encourage a healthy mix of prairie grass and set aside ample room for sage grouse, plovers and herons. They are trying to till less ground, which can destroy an underground ecosystem. Some even allow small colonies of prairie dogs, which many farmers exterminate as pests.

“We’ve already saved this landscape,” Mr. Barthelmess said.

As more of their neighbors sell, some ranchers say they worry that this corner of Phillips County, population 4,128, will sacrifice its identity. Two years ago, people here railed against the whiff of a federal proposal to create a new national monument along the Canadian border. A billboard along the gravel roads informs visitors that the county can produce enough cattle to feed more than two million people.

“These are our livelihoods, these are our businesses,” said Perri Jacobs, whose husband’s family has run their ranch since 1917. “This is an agriculturally based economy. That’s about being able to fund our schools and our government and being able to support our businesses on Main Street.”

Officials at the American Prairie Reserve say they have done everything possible to be good neighbors and have not foisted their vision on anyone. They have installed electric fences to ensure that their 275 bison do not roam onto other people’s property. They allow hunting on the land. They lease back some of their land to allow ranchers to graze their cows.

They say they take an understated approach to buying land. They approach families after they have decided to sell, and sometimes negotiate arrangements that let ranchers live or work on their land for years after a sale goes through. Because the reserve project is nonprofit, officials say they can bid only fair-market value and do not artificially drive up property prices.

“It’s a misnomer that we’re paying top dollar,” said Sean Gerrity, the president of the American Prairie Reserve. “There are some properties we’re interested in, but they’re currently priced at above market value and we can’t go there.”

Still, the financial profiles of the reserve’s supporters have created a divide in a county where the average job pays about \$25,400, according to Montana State University. The group has several current and retired fund managers and retail billionaires on its board, and counts heirs to the Mars candy fortune as supporters. It has raised a total of more than \$63 million in donations and pledges.

Mr. Gerrity estimated it would take 15 to 20 more years to quilt together the patchwork of public and private lands that represent the group’s vision of three million acres of preserved prairie. Right now, the group owns about 58,000 acres outright and has grazing leases on an additional 215,000 acres of federal land.

The reserve’s goal is to revive a landscape that existed when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark passed through in the early 1800s. They have taken down 37 miles of fence. They have replanted some tilled ground with native grasses. They have pulled down barns and sheds and cleared away heaps of trash. Their bison saunter across dirt roads.

“The idea is to open this place back up,” said Dick Dolan, who oversees acquisitions and finances for the reserve. “The vision is to have an ecosystem functioning as naturally as possible.”

A public campground has been open for two years, and the reserve has also put the finishing touches on a camp of high-end yurts, complete with hot showers and air-conditioning. Some in the area have grumbled that sleeping in a climate-controlled yurt and eating chef-prepared meals hardly qualifies as roughing it.

But what binds the ranching families and their new neighbors is a fierce love of the land. One evening, just before sunset, Mr. Dolan stood astride a bluff overlooking undulating stretches of sagebrush and prairie grass. The Little Rocky Mountains lay to his left. The Missouri River ran behind him. In the riverbeds below, the leaves of cottonwoods and box elders were burning yellow. He spread his arms wide.

“It makes you feel like you’re in the middle of the ocean,” he said. “It’s a big, big place. It’s such a beautiful landscape.”