

Press Release – August 2005 Montosa Ranch

THE MONTOSA RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT: PRESERVING AN IMPORTANT PART OF NEW MEXICO'S LAND LEGACY

For many, the American West conjures up images of wide open spaces, including vast unbroken tracts of rangeland where herds of cattle graze alongside wild deer, antelope and elk. But, in the face of growth pressure and economic change, this image of the West has been rapidly changing over the last few decades as ever increasing numbers of large family ranches are being broken up, subdivided and developed with each new generation of heirs. Lifelong ranchers, B.W. and Billie Cox did not want to see their beloved Montosa Ranch in west-central New Mexico succumb to this same fate.

Located along U.S. Highway 60 between Magdalena and Datil, approximately 70 miles southwest of Albuquerque, the Montosa Ranch comprises an area of over 30,000 acres of mixed pinyon-juniper grassland between the Gallinas Mountains to the north and the Plains of San Augustin to the south. The ranch, which is adjacent to the Cibola National Forest, is known for its prime elk habitat, but it also supports a variety of other important wildlife species, including mountain lion, black bear, coyote, muledeer, pronghorn antelope, Merriam's wild turkey, Gambel's and scaled quail, and mourning dove. The ranch is also located near the Very Large Array of radio-satellite dishes, operated by the National Radio Astronomy Observatory and featured not so many years ago in the science-fiction film *Contact*. The ranch is part of a remote, starkly beautiful and distinctly western landscape, which is precisely what makes it a potential candidate for development.

"Billie and I love this ranch, and we want it to always be a cattle ranch," said B.W. Cox, who grew up in the area and is a partner in RCF Properties, L.P., the ranch's owner. "We want the ranch to be protected so that it looks like this for the next fifty generations and beyond. We want the land left as is. We want people to see that nature can be managed for the future and that it doesn't have to be abused."

Through an interesting partnership with a private, non-profit land trust and a conservation-oriented landscape planning/architectural firm, the Coxes found their solution. Through their combined efforts, the Montosa Ranch will now be protected forever as a working cattle ranch through a perpetual conservation easement combined with an innovative limited development.

The New Mexico Land Conservancy (NMLC), a statewide land trust based in Santa Fe, will hold the conservation easement and is responsible for its monitoring and enforcement. "We are grateful to the owners of Montosa Ranch for protecting their spectacular property for all time," said Clare C. Swanger, NMLC president. "As New Mexico continues to develop, it becomes more important that the state's land heritage is conserved to ensure a reservoir of agricultural and scenic lands, wildlife habitat and the continuity of culture."

The conservation easement was completed and recorded in May of this year. In addition to donating the easement, the Coxes made a significant cash donation toward NMLC's Stewardship Fund, which will be used to cover the annual costs of monitoring and any potential legal defense of the easement in the event of violation.

Under the terms of the easement, the Montosa Ranch retains the right to sell seven homesites that look out on the pristine vistas that stretch across the vastness of the ranch toward the Cibola National Forest and beyond to the Magdalena and San Mateo Mountains. Restrictive covenants provide that the owner of each of the 640-acre homesites can only build within a prescribed ten-acre area. With the exception of the seven reserved homesites, the easement specifies that there can be no further subdivision or development of the ranch, although it permits those improvements necessary to support the cattle ranching and other agricultural activities.

Land use planning for the Montosa Ranch project was done by Anthony Anella, a principal in Conservation Development Partners and the head of Anthony Anella Architect AIA, an Albuquerque architectural firm. Anella employed the design technique of "sieve mapping" to first identify those areas on the ranch that should not be developed, such as wildlife habitat, drainage areas, hilltops and ridgelines and other sensitive areas. Those portions of the ranch that fell through this design "sieve" were then further assessed for their suitability as potential homesites. The final selection of homesites was based on another set of design criteria, which specified that no homesite be visible from any of the adjacent homesites or from U.S. Highway 60. Unlike many real estate development projects, the final homesites were not placed on the tops of hills or ridges to maximize views; rather, they blend with the terrain so as to minimize their visual impact on the ranch and to the other homeowners. The land use plan/design for Montosa Ranch received a 2003 Citation Award from the Western Mountain Region of the American Institute of Architects.

The 30,000-acre Montosa Ranch conservation easement is a remarkable accomplishment in and of itself, but it is important to note that the project actually contributes to the protection of a much larger landscape. When put into the context of being adjacent to the 95,000 protected acres on the Double H Ranch to the north, donated to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 2002, and the approximately 300,000 acres of Cibola National Forest land to the east, the Montosa Ranch conservation easement represents a major conservation achievement for a significant New Mexican landscape and a tremendous legacy for generations to come.

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