

**NEWS RELEASE**

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**TRADITIONAL RANCHERS MAKING MODERN CHOICES:  
9400-ACRE CONSERVATION EASEMENT IN NEW MEXICO  
PROTECTS OPEN SPACE, PRESERVES RANCHING**

**Santa Fe, New Mexico** - Like many of their peers, ranchers Gary and Beth Hightower knew they had some tough choices to make if the 19,000 acre ranch that had been handed down to them from the two preceding generations was to survive and continue providing for the generations to follow.

Located in the plains of central New Mexico between Corona and Carrizozo, the Hightower's land, the Ancho Cattle Company Ranch, is one of the largest working ranches in Lincoln County. Due in no small part to solid land stewardship, and a series of sustainable ranching management practices – including a rotational grazing technique known as holistic resource management – the property is a noteworthy example of successful, large-scale ranching in an economy that has not always been kind to the agricultural community.

The ranch also buffers the Lincoln National Forest along the northern flank of the Jicarilla Mountains and provides significant habitat for a variety of wildlife, including pronghorn antelope, mule deer and elk.



With a strong desire to keep their ranch in the family and prevent the land from being subdivided and developed like so many other large ranches in the region – and after much deliberation with their family - Beth and Gary Hightower made a carefully considered decision; they worked with the New Mexico Land Conservancy to secure a conservation easement for 9,400 acres of the ranch's total acreage.

Through an innovative and collaborative partnership, the conservation easement will be co-held by the New Mexico Land Conservancy, a non-profit state-wide land conservation organization, and the New Mexico Division of Forestry. In addition, partial funding for the creation of the easement was provided through the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department with approval by Governor Bill Richardson's office.

Scott Wilber, executive director of the Santa Fe-based New Mexico Land Conservancy, explains that many agricultural landowners are often wary of conservation easements and that their skepticism is based, in part, on myths and a lack of awareness about what a conservation easement does – and does not – entail.

“By entering into a conservation easement, the Hightower family has not given up ownership of or the ability to manage their land for agricultural and other purposes compatible with the easement. It's the Hightower's land, they retain title and the right to sell it or hand it down to the next generation of Hightowers. Moreover, the land remains on the county tax roles and available for agricultural production. What a conservation easement does is protect the subject property from being subdivided and developed, thus protecting the wildlife habitat and open space values but also the ability for the owners to maintain their agricultural operations and rural way of life. Ranching and farming are integral to New Mexico's culture, heritage and economy. Maintaining the agricultural lands and the other important conservation values they provide into the future is an essential goal of the conservation easement.”

In addition, conservation easements provide other advantages that are increasingly critical to many agricultural landowners; state and federal tax incentives and estate tax benefits that affect both the current generation and the generation that stands to inherit the land and the family business.

As of January 1, 2008, New Mexico has one of the most progressive incentive programs in the country for conservation easements; a new, transferable state tax credit for easement donations equal to 50% of the appraised value of the easement donation up to a maximum of \$250,000 per taxpayer per year. These tax credits can either be used by the landowners to offset their state tax liability or they can be sold at a discounted rate on the open market.

The state's tax credit, combined with significant federal income tax incentives, is often what draws landowners to consider a conservation easement. For the Hightowers, both in their sixties, it was also about proactive estate planning. With estate tax rates being the highest rates faced by the American taxpayer, the Hightowers were looking for ways to ease the potential tax burden associated with passing the ranch down to their four adult daughters. Because a conservation easement reduces the taxable value of the property by restricting its development potential, it can greatly reduce the estate taxes owed by their heirs.

With these kinds of tax incentives – in addition to the knowledge that their land is being preserved for scenic beauty, wildlife habitat and agricultural viability - conservation easements

are an increasingly attractive tool for many landowners seeking sustainability *and* continued ownership.

“When landowners first contact us about putting their land under a [conservation] easement, they are often concerned about losing their private property rights,” explains Wilber. “Our response is always that the choice is theirs to make, the easements are tailored to their individual needs and the land and associated water rights remain in their private ownership and under their management. It is as much a private property right to protect land as it is to develop it.”

And, adds Wilber, protecting high conservation value land is really what is key to a healthy society and environment, especially in an economy where many landowners see selling their lands – in their entirety or in piece-meal parcels – as the only way to keep part of the property in the family. “Many agricultural landowners are not aware that there are options to simply selling, subdividing and developing their farms and ranches. Conservation easements provide a means by which private landowners can permanently protect the lands they have worked so hard to maintain and also realize some significant tax and financial benefits in the process. If we truly want to maintain the viability of agriculture and ensure local food production and security in New Mexico, we have to preserve a base of protected private land and water rights.”

In New Mexico, approximately 150,000 acres of land are currently protected by conservation easements held by state and local land trusts with another 500, 000 acres of land protected by easements held by national conservation organizations.

The New Mexico Land Conservancy’s mission is to preserve New Mexico’s land heritage by protecting key wildlife habitat, cultural and natural resources, productive agricultural lands, scenic open space and recreational lands for conservation purposes and public benefit. The New Mexico Land Conservancy currently holds conservation easements over approximately 70,000 acres of land throughout the state. More information about the non-profit agency can be found online at [www.nmlandconservancy.org](http://www.nmlandconservancy.org).

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*Note to media: JPG and TIF format images of the Ancho Cattle Company are available upon request as are interviews with key partners in the Ancho Cattle Company conservation easement project. To schedule an interview or to request a selection of images, please contact Scott Wilber at 505-986-3801 or [scottwilber@nmlandconservancy.org](mailto:scottwilber@nmlandconservancy.org).*