

This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land – A Montana Dilemma

The Montana Farm Bureau's recent motto is "We care for the country." It's marvelously ambiguous. "Care" has two meanings in this context; and "country" has even more. I believe most Montana owners of agricultural land, including stockmen, embrace both meanings of "care" in this motto. I am not so sure what they mean by "country".



I know a rancher who lives in the house where he was born. His "caring" for the land has deep, personal roots. I can only imagine how growing up, playing, working, and seeking to understand, all in one place for a lifetime can develop connections, wrapped in memories, that evoke such caring for the land.

Likewise, many ranchers and farmers trace their roots back through two or more generations of family traditions. Caring involves an obligation to grandparents and great-grandparents who labored in times that were tougher and lonelier than today. The land and its family history must become inseparable parts of the same whole.

My rancher friend also takes "care" of the land, hoping to pass it along as a productive resource to his son. He observes how stocking rates and pasture rotations affect the grass and the soil. These days, the ranch barely supports a single family, and his wife's part-time job in town is needed, at least in some years. There will not be better times ahead for his family if the productive capacity of the ranch is degraded.

But, like the rest of us, all ranchers and farmers are not alike. I don't know if they are new on the ground, but some are ready to abuse the land and its future. Some are absentee landowners seeing the farm or ranch only as a capital investment, a tool to be bought, used and sold to maximize often short-term profit. Very large land holdings of individuals or corporations have been given the name "industrial agriculture", emphasizing their difference from the family farm that Willie Nelson praised in public concerts. Whatever the group, ranchers, hunters, the sight-seeing public, liberals, conservatives, etc., the bad apples among us are often used unjustifiably to portray and vilify an entire group.



Likely, that is part of the reason for ranchers and farmers being so sensitive to their public image. Their abundant and sometimes costly use of mottos such as "We care for the country." and "Undaunted stewardship" suggests a degree of paranoia over being misunderstood. But public mistrust and misunderstanding persist.

While I've cited two ways to "care" for the country, I wonder what "country" the Farm Bureau embraces in "We care for the country."

When I was a youngster growing up in an Illinois city, my parents would sometimes pass the weekend taking a ride in "the country". Our city was surrounded by mostly agricultural land. In those days, this land included a few remaining woodlots with fox squirrels to be hunted in fall, and Osage fence rows where wild grapes still grew and pheasants took refuge in winter. A few rivers

still held fish – mostly bluegills and bullheads – to be angled for in summer. We also scavenged for freshwater clams, the shells of which would become ash trays in my father’s shop. Though infrequent, those trips to the country played a large part in tilting me toward forestry in college and ultimately to a career in wildlife biology. Today, few woodlots remain and the hedgerows are gone from that rich land that once supported a diverse tallgrass prairie. Mostly, there is only corn and soybeans, except in winter when plowing turns the world to black.

But I digress. In this sense, “country” is the open space outside of urbia and suburbia. It’s the different kind of place that we city folk appreciate and wish to see preserved for all sorts of reasons, including Sunday drives in the country. Many of the reasons involve some form of escape from the monotony of so many shared tasks in town. I guess the Montana Farm Bureau wants us to believe that without agriculture, at least some of this country would be converted to something less desirable, perhaps condominiums. The rationale is used to defend all sorts of activities promoted to benefit and retain agriculture and livestock. It has merit in some places – near cities and in areas with attractive recreational value where development of second homes is likely. However, the idea is often overstated in reference to many less attractive locations.



“Country” might also refer to “our country”, the good old US of A. In this sense, caring for the country is a patriotic endeavor. Obviously, the nation needs food, and caring for the country, in this sense, implies we shall always eat well. Arguments to maintain federal subsidies to agriculture and livestock have been bolstered by claims that such subsidies are needed to keep our country strong. It’s largely a self-serving argument. Nationwide, most agricultural production comes from lands where subsidies are least needed. Moreover, the quality of food produced has sometimes been sacrificed in order to maximize farm profits. Still, the Montana Farm Bureau might be trying to influence the rest of us by appealing to our patriotism.

“Country” may also refer to the “collective harmony” of the land with its productive soils, clean streams and all its wildlife and wild plants, as described by Aldo Leopold. It is country as intended in “wild country”. However, much farm and grazing land is domesticated and the rest is only semi-wild at best. Often agricultural interests take credit for maintaining wildlife habitat and wild country. This claim reveals a limited understanding of the complexities of habitat and of the meaning of “wild”.

Leopold distinguished clearly between country and mere land. Land is an economic resource. It may grow beef, wheat, mortgages, and – hopefully – happy farm and ranch families. Along the way, it may absorb federal subsidies, pesticides and artificial fertilizers. The land’s biota may be limited and monotonous. Not so with country, where all the native plants, animals and invertebrates coevolve with the rocks and the weather. Leopold noted that poor land may be very rich country.

The Farm Bureau may not distinguish between land and country in the manner of Leopold. Frequent demands to manage Yellowstone National Park more like a ranch suggest this is so. Likewise, the long lists of wildlife species and native plants that are unwelcome or ignored on productive farms and ranches indicate that the Farm Bureau promotes caring for the land, but not necessarily for the country.

Wildlife species that are seldom “cared” for on the farm or ranch include coyotes, wolves, bears, mountain lions, bison, beaver, prairie dogs and ground squirrels. Elk might be tolerated in modest numbers. Deer are more acceptable, but not too many. Pronghorn are OK, except in spring wheat fields. Abundant fencing may minimize the number of pronghorn anyway. Without prairie dogs, there are no black-footed ferrets and few, if any, burrowing owls and swift foxes. For sheep ranchers, nearby wild bighorn are unacceptable - to avoid any controversy generated by death of bighorn due to disease carried by domestic sheep. Removing any of these species has cascading effects on many other species.



Boosting economic production from farm or ranch land always involves practices that monotonize the vegetation. The obvious though unintended result is a loss of

many native plant species, especially broad-leaved forbs. Whole plant communities, such as sagebrush steppe, willow thickets, marshes and riparian woodlands are replaced. Wildlife dependent on these communities, or needing a diversity of plant communities to fulfill their seasonal needs, are diminished or eliminated. This is especially true for bird species including prairie-chickens, sage and sharp-tailed grouse, piping and mountain plovers, long-billed curlew, sedge wrens, sharp-tailed sparrows and several others.

Most water management in Montana is designed to benefit agriculture. The Farm Bureau opposes legislation requiring minimum stream flows. Streams are dewatered to the detriment of native fishes and surrounding riparian habitat. Arctic grayling have been the most notable casualty. Other fishes such as pearl dace and sturgeon chub have been diminished along with their roles in wildlife food chains.

Given the above, I must conclude that the Farm Bureau cares for the land, but not necessarily for the country. But that's OK. Private land rights are enshrined in law and in the state constitution, and I concur. However, about 35% of Montana is federal or state land, owned jointly by people of the nation, or at least, the state. It has been said that federal lands should be managed "for the greatest good of the greatest number, in the long run." Montana agricultural organizations, including the Farm Bureau, have been active in politics to determine how our public lands shall be used. They have been successful in gaining special access for using our public lands for private gains; and they limit public options for using the public's land. This is especially true of the livestock industry.

One may argue that private uses of the public lands generate public benefits. Most state lands leased to agriculture for reasonable fees produce funding for state schools. However, federal grazing rates are so low that net public benefits from federal grazing management are negative. Moreover, agriculture has initiated Montana laws that prohibit state participation in wildlife programs on public, even federal, lands whenever such programs pose a possible threat to agricultural or livestock production on the public or nearby private lands, and "nearby" is never defined. In response, federal agencies have allowed this private control over public land to continue. One result is that we have cattle on most of our federal public lands, but we have no wild bison. Montana law specifies that the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Department must allow livestock trailing across its wildlife areas, may not charge for the forage used, and may not even analyze the ecological impacts.

These and other examples demonstrate that the public/private balance for using our public lands is often skewed toward private benefits at public costs. Agriculture is an important industry, practiced on most of the Montana landscape where economic necessities and profit motives are appropriate. But uses of our

public lands should be skewed toward public, not private, benefits. Diversity is the hallmark of democracy and the bedrock of freedom. Much of our public land should be used to produce rich country, as Leopold defined it.

We're glad the Farm Bureau cares for its lands. We, the public, care just as deeply for our lands, that is, our country.

James A. Bailey
Belgrade, 2012