

# LEARNING FROM LANDOWNERS

A conversation series with Keep It Colorado

## Conserving a Legacy and a Way of Life

For Kip Gates, there has never been a question about what he was meant to do. This fifth-generation rancher, who lives in Eagle County near Burns, was born to be a cowboy. In his day-to-day work running a 1,500-acre ranching operation, Kip is grateful for his ancestors' work to make the family ranch what it is today. The property is "smack in the middle if you were to draw a triangle between Vail, Steamboat and Aspen," Kip said. It is beautiful and remote and full of family history.

### A window to a family's history

Kip's ancestors left Germany in the 1600s and made their way to Colorado in the 1860s. His great-great-grandfather built a stage stop near Steamboat and started trapping, eventually finding and settling on the land where Kip now lives. After the Homestead Act gave the family its first acreage, they dug in, moving tons of rock and creating six miles of irrigation ditches to bring water onto the property. The family's water rights date to 1905, and those rights have been an integral part of the family's success. "Water is white gold. Without the water, you'll never survive," his grandfather said.

Kip's ancestors' rigorous work is part of the legacy he feels compelled to protect and share with others. His way of life is about conservation, so it made sense in 2012 to put the family ranch into a conservation easement that would preserve the land from development or subdivision. Kip loves that he can see his family's history every time he rides over the property. There are several old homesteads on the property that Kip maintains. "I love what my ancestors built and spend a lot of time keeping up the old homesteads," he said.

**Landowner:** Kip Gates

**Partner land trust:** Eagle Valley Land Trust

**Location:** Eagle County near Burns

**Topics:** generational land, evolution of agricultural work

**"Water is white gold.  
Without the water,  
you'll never survive."  
- Kip's grandfather**



## The right solution

While preserving history is part of Kip's approach to work, he didn't explore a conservation easement until a decade ago. His grandfather originally sold his shares to Kip's father, Kip and his brother. As many multi-generational landowners know, it's difficult for several families to make a living on the land together, so Kip bought out his brother. When he became the sole owner, Kip put the land in a conservation easement at the same time, which made the process easier. It also provided additional financial incentives for the two brothers and ensured that Kip could safeguard the family's legacy.

Kip's dad, George, was a county commissioner in Eagle. Through his dad's work for the county, Kip became familiar with the Eagle Valley Land Trust, which eventually became his primary partner in conserving the property. The easement protects the land's agricultural aspects as well as wildlife habitat for elk, deer, bears, mountain lions, eagles and, recently, moose. Kip is a strong supporter of the land trust, serving on its board for four years and continuing to help the nonprofit however he can.

## A passion for the land

Under the terms of the easement, Kip is required to preserve the agricultural aspects of the land. Until recently, that included maintaining a cattle ranch of about 200 cows, which he has sold to neighbors who still graze the cattle on Kip's land. He, his wife Leslie, their son Tel and their daughter-in-law Ashlie continue to maintain an outfitters business, which brings hunters from across the country to explore Colorado's high country, stay at their home and enjoy Leslie's delicious meals. At 8,000 feet of elevation, few crops will grow, but they can grow enough hay to feed the 100 horses used for the outfitting business and cattle from neighboring ranches.

Kip's father used to say, "If you let the land slip, you'll never keep it up." So Kip is constantly at work, feeding animals, haying and keeping up the irrigation ditches to ensure water can reach the areas where it's needed. But Kip wouldn't have it any other way. "I work about 8 to 10 hours a day, but it's not work to me. I was up at 4:30 this morning getting the tractor ready to hay," he said. He particularly likes training and working with horses.

Leslie is a critical part of the recipe for success for the entire operation. "She's better at riding a horse than most cowboys I could hire. And while she was raised in Minnesota, she was willing to come out to this land, and she loves it," Kip said.

Kip has two sons and five grandsons. He recognizes it's an increasing challenge for future generations to live on this land, given how remote the property is. It is more than 60 miles from the closest school, and the family lives in one of a dwindling number of houses without internet or mobile service.

While there are no clear plans for the family ranch once Kip hangs up his spurs, he loves what he's doing and is happy to share this slice of paradise with anyone who wants to learn more.



**At 8,000 feet of elevation, few crops will grow, but the family can grow enough hay to feed the 100 horses used for the outfitting business and cattle from neighboring ranches.**



*Produced in partnership:*



Contact Linda Lidov  
with questions:  
linda@keepitco.org