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2 ranches protecting thousands of acres of grassland from development

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The Price family has established the largest conservation easement in Nebraska on its 25,537-acre ranch northwest of Burwell. That's the equivalent of about 40 square miles. Bob Price is center, flanked by daughter Lindsey and son Aaron in this family photo, which was provided by the Nebraska Cattlemen.

Two more Nebraska cattle ranches are permanently protecting thousands of acres of grassland from potential development with a preservation tool that's tighter and sharper than a barbed-wire fence.

Both ranches are near Calamus Reservoir in central Nebraska, a popular recreation area less than four hours from Omaha that's attracting buyers of scenic hilltop acreages for weekend cabins and retirement homes.

They're also not far from places in the Sand Hills where farmers are tearing up sandy grassland to grow corn.

The two operations — Gracie Creek Ranch and Switzer Ranch — independently sold what are known as conservation easements, designed to protect natural and historic resources from incompatible land uses and excessive development.

The Gracie Creek easement is the largest ever established in Nebraska, covering the entire ranch's 25,537 acres — the equivalent of about 40 square miles. The owners include Bob Price and his children, Lindsey Smith and Aaron Price. The Sandhills Task Force holds the easement.

The Switzer easement includes 1,742 acres along the Calamus River, or about 14 percent of that 12,000-acre ranch. The owners are Bruce and Sue Ann Switzer and their children, Sarah Sortum and Adam Switzer. The Nature Conservancy holds the easement.

Before the two easements were signed, Nebraska had about 50,000 acres — or less than one one-thousandth of the state's land area — in conservation easements held by nonprofit conservation organizations. The latest additions increase by more than half the state's acres covered under conservation easements.

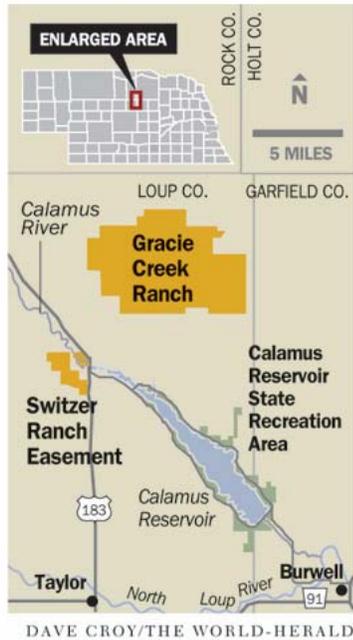
The coincidental decisions by neighboring ranchers in the eastern Sand Hills — ranchers who feel squeezed by acreages and ranchettes on one side and plows and corn on the other — has created a buzz among conservation organizations that work with ranchers to protect their land for future generations.

Jim Luchsinger of Valentine, the Nature Conservancy's Sand-hills program director, said the two easements preserve a slice of a landscape that conservationists have long wanted to focus on.

"These are grasslands and wetlands that have been well cared for by many generations of ranching families," Luchsinger said, calling the lands biologically diverse and intact.

Mark Brohman, executive director of the Nebraska Environmental Trust, said the two easements protect large tracts of unique land from increasing development pressure, whether it's housing, cropland, cattle feedlots or wind farms. The trust provided state lottery proceeds to both projects.

Conservation easements are voluntary, legal agreements used across Nebraska from metropolitan Omaha to the Panhandle. Landowners keep ownership of the property and retain the right to live on the land and continue current agricultural practices and other routine activities. Most easements prohibit new confined-livestock feeding operations, mining and the destruction of



wildlife habitat, native plants and historic sites.

The land remains on county tax rolls as agricultural property, which ensures that school and local governmental budgets are unharmed.

But some conservation easements spark controversy. Some opponents don't approve of restricting development or other uses of private agricultural land for future generations.

To be sure, final approvals by the Nebraska Environmental Trust board to help fund the Price and Switzer easements were not unanimous. The votes were 7-5 on the Switzer easement and 7-2 on the Price easement.

Landowners can receive payments from the sale of an easement or income tax breaks from donated easements.

The Prices' easement with the Sandhills Task Force was valued at nearly \$1.8 million. The transaction involved funds from private, state and federal sources and a tax-deductible donation worth \$446,250 from the Prices, according to Nebraska Environmental Trust records.

The Switzer family easement was valued at \$275,000. The Nebraska Environmental Trust provided \$190,000 of that.

Funding also came from the U.S. Agriculture Department's farm and ranch lands protection program. Once a landowner and local organization start easement talks, the program provides matching funds to help buy development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural uses.

Craig Derickson, state conservationist with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, said easements help preserve a region's aesthetic, environmental, family and cultural values.

Dave Sands, executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust, said the easements ensure that the properties remain working ranches.

"That's very important in the Sand Hills because the economy is largely dependent on ranching," he said.

The Nature Conservancy acquired the Switzer easement on the ranch's Horseshoe Bend parcel. The site includes a milelong stretch of the Calamus River at the upper end of Calamus Reservoir. The site is used by breeding grassland birds, over-wintering bald eagles, migrating waterfowl and shorebirds, river otters, ferruginous hawks and other rare species.

Migrating whooping cranes stop at ranch wetlands. The endangered American burying beetle is found on the property. The threatened western prairie fringe orchid and small white lady's-slipper grow there. The Switzers also have planted the endangered blowout penstemon wildflower on the ranch.

The Switzer easement's location next to a highway and proximity to the reservoir made the property a prime candidate to be divided and developed, said Mace Hack, state director of the Nature Conservancy's Nebraska field office.

The Switzer Ranch is a cow-calf operation that has been in the family since 1904. It has become a destination for many wildlife enthusiasts and bird watchers. The ranch is a leader in outfitting and public education programs about Sand Hills grasslands and wetlands. Hack called it a model for other landowners nationwide.

Just a few dunes away is the Gracie Creek Ranch. Price said he sees development edging toward the ranch from Burwell to the south and has seen grassland to the north plowed up for irrigated cropland.

Jim Van Winkle, projects coordinator for the Sandhills Task Force, said it is rare to see any family more committed to the long-term health, stewardship and production of grazing land than the Prices demonstrate at Gracie Creek Ranch.

The nonprofit task force is governed by a board of ranchers and conservation agencies. It works on environmental and economic issues across 20,000 square miles of Nebraska.

Bob Price, a third-generation rancher, said conservation pays. Historic drought this past summer burned pastures and sent many cattlemen scrambling to find expensive feed for their herds or forced them to send livestock to sale barns. Price, however, is selling hay to others off his ranch. It's a consequence of three decades of fine-tuning land management practices.



The spring courtship rituals of prairie chickens drew bird-watchers to the Switzer Ranch near Burwell in 2008. The conservation easements on the Switzer and Price ranches protect their land for future generations. DAVID HENDEE/THE WORLD-HERALD

Price said his financial records show there is no doubt that good conservation practices and stewardship go hand in hand with profitability in the volatile cattle business.

"You take care of the land, and it takes care of you," he said.

Price said his objective in selling an easement on the ranch was to protect the asset for his children and the quality of life that goes with it.

"Preserving this lifestyle is precious," he said. "All it would take is one subdivision up here to change everything."

Aaron Price said he has invited friends from across the country — most of whom come from urban areas and know little about agriculture and ranching — to stand atop a grass-covered dune and see nothing else from horizon to horizon.

"There's inherent value in that space. It needs to be protected, and that includes the wildlife and the families on this land," he said. "Sharing that experience and seeing that switch turn on in somebody means a lot to me."

He said he hears critics say easements prohibit the land from realizing its highest economic value.

"Gracie Creek Ranch will not be developed into a luxury Sand Hills golf course or mined for water for desert cities. If it's about the highest value, then my family is in the wrong business. We love this ranch and hold it dear to our hearts."

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