

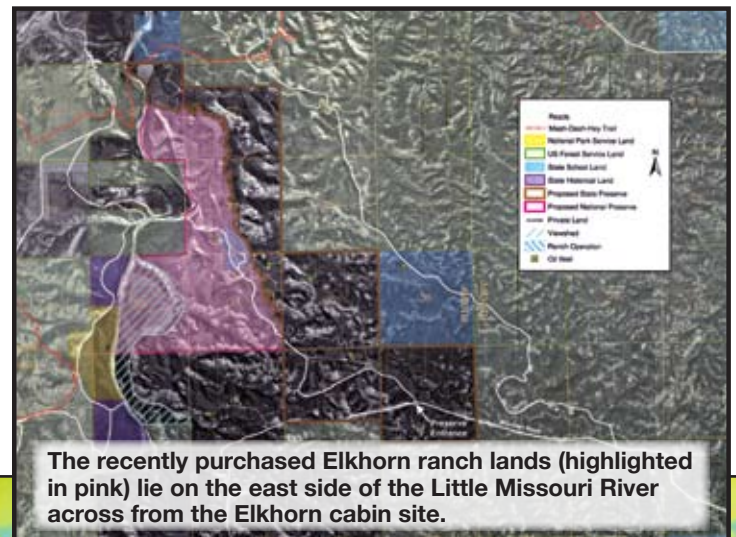
Prairie PONDERings

North Dakota
Natural Resources Trust

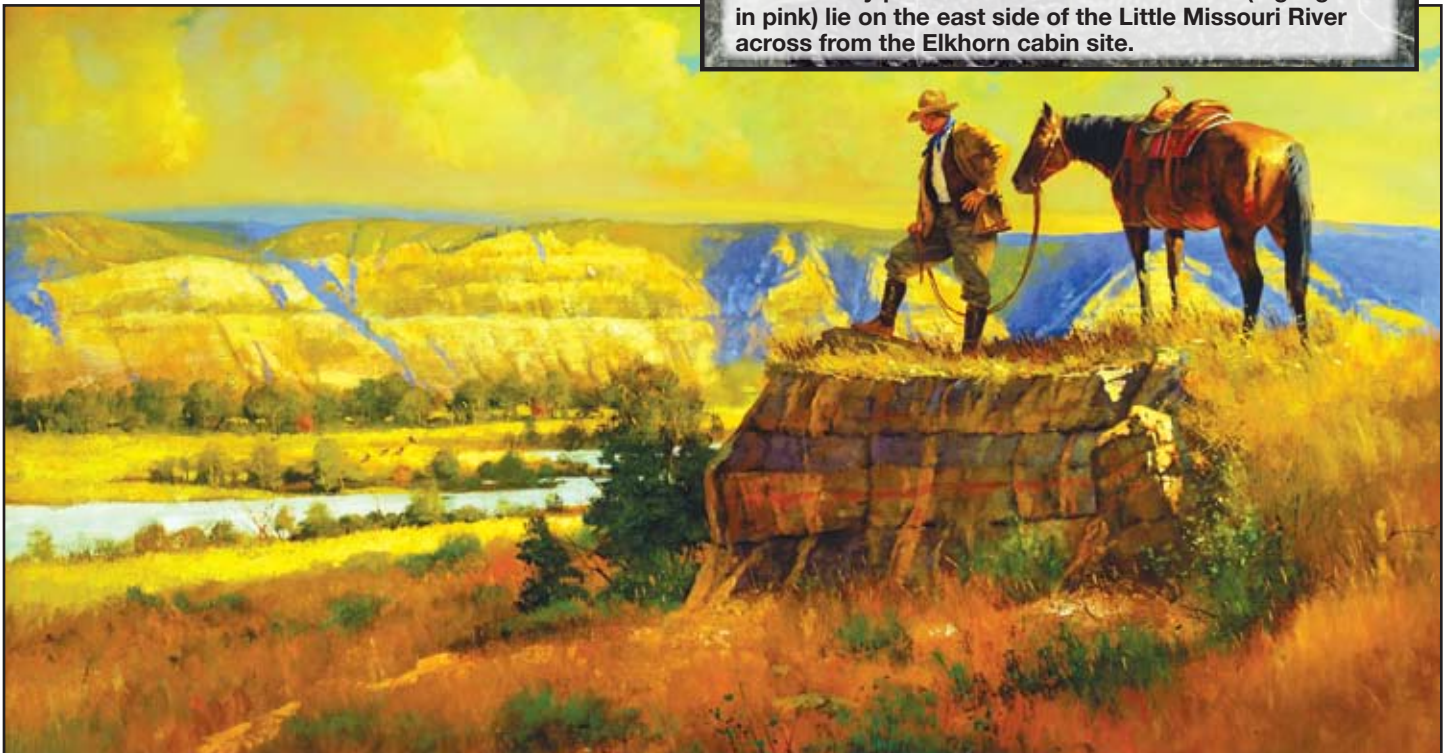
Federal Purchase of Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch Remains Controversial

The Cradle of Conservation. The Walden of the West. These are just a few of the names that refer to the Elkhorn Ranch, the place where Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States went to seek solitude and healing following the death of his first wife and mother on Valentine's Day 1884. It was here that he developed his passion for conservation, and some of his most eloquent writing was done while looking at the viewshed of this ranch near present-day Medora.

While the site of Roosevelt's cabin has long been protected by the National Park Service, the most scenic remnant of the lands once ranched by Roosevelt remained in private hands until it was formally

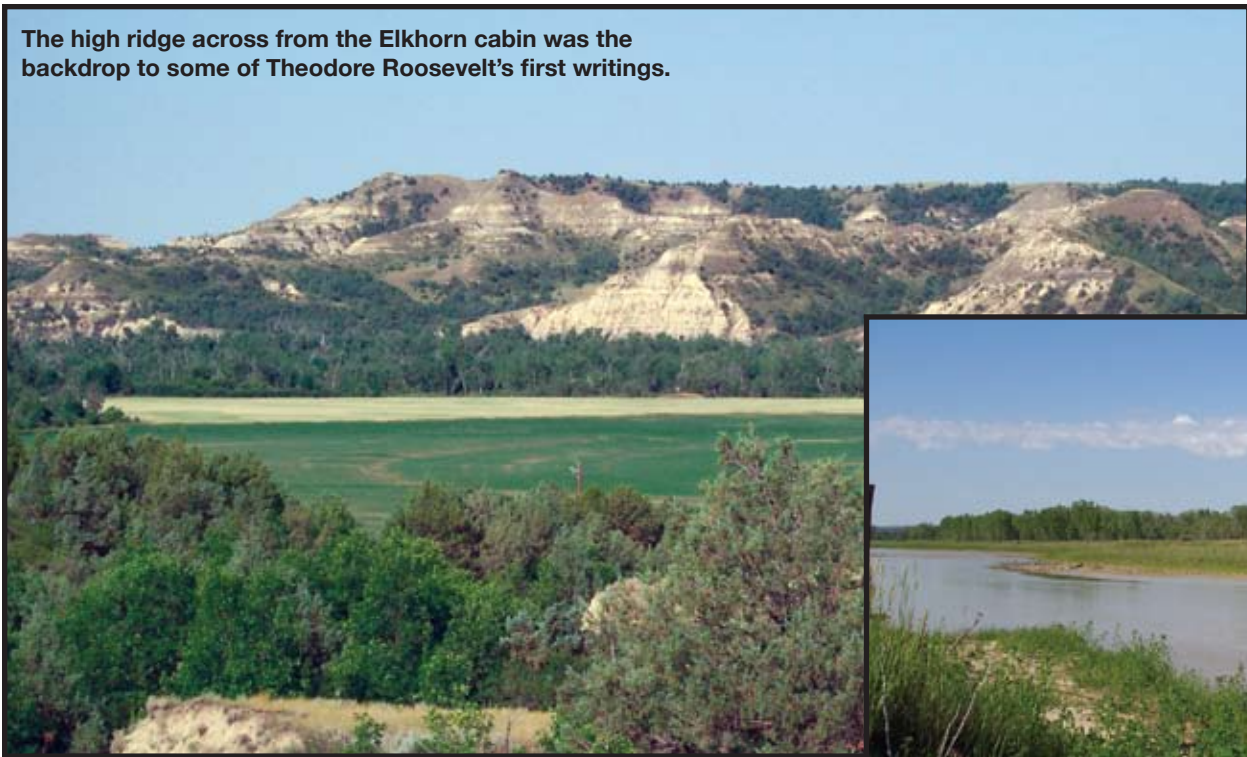


The recently purchased Elkhorn ranch lands (highlighted in pink) lie on the east side of the Little Missouri River across from the Elkhorn cabin site.



This painting, commissioned by Lowell Baier, commemorates the U.S. Forest Service's acquisition of the 5,200-acre Eberts Ranch, which was once part of Theodore Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch. The painting is by wildlife artist Brett Smith.

The high ridge across from the Elkhorn cabin was the backdrop to some of Theodore Roosevelt's first writings.



Photos courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation



The Little Missouri River, North Dakota's only state design scenic river, shaped the Badlands and was the centerpiece of Theodore Roosevelt's ranching operation.

"My home ranch lies on both sides of the Little Missouri, the nearest ranch man above me being about twelve, and the nearest below me about ten miles distant. I would not have been president had it not been for my experience in North Dakota."

- Theodore Roosevelt

purchased by the federal government. While the ceremony that marked the acquisition of the 5,200-acre ranch formerly owned by the Eberts family was celebrated by many, it was denounced by others.

"The Elkhorn Ranch has a significant historic place in American history not unlike Valley Forge and Independence Hall," says Lowell Baier, founder of the Friends of the Elkhorn Ranch and executive vice president of the Boone and Crockett Club, a conservationist organization founded by Roosevelt in 1887. "It is the birthplace of conservation, a core value of our country."

Until this spring, 5,200 acres of the Elkhorn Ranch lands were privately owned, most recently by the Eberts family. For more than seven years, the Eberts family tried to sell the ranch into public lands so it wouldn't be broken up into "ranchettes," purchased by non-ranching interests wanting their small piece of "heaven" in the scenic North Dakota badlands.

The Eberts first tried to sell the ranch to the National Park Service, but land use restrictions inherent in park status caused that idea to lose support.

Next, the State of North Dakota considered purchasing the property, but the 2005 legislature nixed the purchase and management plans of Gov. Hoeven and several of his resource agencies. The property was eventually sold to the U.S. Forest Service at a total cost of \$5.3 million. As of April 25, the ranch officially became part of the Little Missouri National Grasslands, which is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, an agency established by Roosevelt in 1905.

The conservation community contributed \$500,000 for the purchase of the land, and has raised an additional \$500,000 for restoration, education, and interpretive

efforts. Some members of the conservation community, including Baier, would like to see the habitat restored to the state it was in when Roosevelt lived there more than 120 years ago. "We want to restore it to its native state, which will take a number of years. Then, once that happens, it could be used as a grassbank," he says.

Dave Pieper, supervisor of the Forest Service's national grassland units in North Dakota, is a major advocate of making the area a



Edmund Morris, an accomplished biographer of many influential figures such as Ronald Reagan and Theodore Roosevelt spoke at the dedication of the Elkhorn Ranch in September.

Photo courtesy of the Bismarck Tribune.

Badlands terrain is unique and hauntingly beautiful. It drew Theodore Roosevelt into his romance with the West.

Roosevelt's Conservation Legacy

From Friends of the Elkhorn Ranch

Theodore Roosevelt is one of the founding fathers of conservation in America and remains its greatest champion. As president, Roosevelt established:

- 150 national forests conserving 151 million acres as forest reserves
- Four federal game preserves, 51 federal bird reserves in 19 states and three territories, which is known today as the National Wildlife Refuge System
- Five national parks
- 18 national monuments
- 24 national federal reclamation (irrigation) projects in 14 states
- The U.S. Forest Service
- Convened four national conservation conferences

Roosevelt's total land and water conservation legacy was 230 million acres of wildlife habitat in his two terms, or 84,000 acres for every day he was president. This conservation legacy equals a remarkable 12 percent of the contiguous 48 states, or 10 percent of the nation's 50 states.

grassbank. "There are about 1 million acres in the Little Missouri Grasslands, and practically every one of them is accounted for by a rancher for grazing purposes." Pieper says now that the Eberts Ranch is sold, nobody relies solely on that land for grazing. A grassbank would help improve current grazing areas and help restore them. While someone's pasture is recovering from wildfire, drought, or restoration activities, that person can use the grassbank acres.

Some members of the conservation community, including Baier, would like to see exhibits and trails on the ranch so people can get a taste of what the Elkhorn Valley looked like in Roosevelt's time.

The Forest Service is currently gathering public input about what should be done with the land. Public meetings have been held in Medora, Dickinson, and Bismarck, and meetings are being held with the Medora Grazing Association. The Forest Service is currently in the process of compiling those comments and moving forward in accordance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) policy guidelines. While this process is expected to take six months to one year, Pieper says that the Forest Service promotes multiple uses of its lands, which means they will still be open to "traditional" uses such as oil and gas production, hunting, cattle grazing,

and non-consumptive recreational uses such as hiking and horseback riding. "The most difficult part of managing the land is balance. Everyone wants to protect the interests they are involved in, and that is why this issue is so controversial," Pieper says.

Jim Arthaud, rancher, oil man, and chairman of the Billings County Commission says that while it did support the state purchase, Billings County never supported the federal purchase of the Eberts Ranch. "We have an economy base that we want to preserve," Arthaud says. "That 5,200 acres is 600 units of cattle that is being taken out of the economic base. That, in a county with only about 800 people, is significant. And, Billings County already has 50 percent of its land in public ownership. Many people in the county feel that is more than enough."

Arthaud alleges that the federal government agreed to sell an equal amount of public land to the private sector prior to the sale of the ranch. Pieper says that clause isn't completed yet because the Forest Service can't sell any land until Congress gives its authorization. The Service is currently awaiting that legislation.

Arthaud also contends that the Eberts Ranch private and federal allotment was to be given back to the Medora Grazing Association to be reallocated according to its rules. "We were and are adamantly opposed to a grass bank

because of our net loss of 600 head of cattle that it would take out of our economy,” he says.

Baier says that the conservation community supports responsible grazing by the Medora Grazing Association consistent with its existing grazing agreement with the Forest Service, not the special rules of the Association for the benefit of a few. “Let’s not forget who paid for this land. It was the conservation community and Congressional funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is tax revenue from off shore energy production. In America, the people that pay for the land have something to say about how it is used.”

Pieper says the perception that the grazing associated with the Elkhorn Ranch will be taken away or somehow lost is erroneous. In fact, the national grassland grazing allotments associated with the Elkhorn Ranch are still administered by the grazing association. “The difference is that we want to graze these lands in a way that could not only benefit grassland health, but potentially benefit all the ranchers of the grazing association in times of need. The Elkhorn Ranch could provide much needed flexibility and opportunities we haven’t had before.”

To further complicate the issue, the Billings County Commission has been searching for a river crossing from east to west for a number of years. In 2005, the County Commission exercised eminent domain on a road that crosses the Eberts/Elkhorn Ranch for that purpose. However, because it is now federal land, the county must conduct an environmental impact study, which will take a significant amount of time and cost a significant amount of money. The United States Department of Transportation is currently funding an EIS to examine other alternatives. Arthaud says this EIS will cost the county over \$1 million in money not funded by DOT.

There is little argument that Theodore Roosevelt is one of the most prominent figures in American history. He was not only a United States president, but also a war hero, explorer, Nobel Peace Prize winner, author, rancher, sportsman, and conservationist. Baier has studied Roosevelt and his legacy in depth during his 43-year career. “I want future generations to be able to go back to the place where our 26th president conceived his conservation philosophy, and be inspired by the same landscape.”

“The Elkhorn project exemplifies how difficult it is to do conservation in North Dakota, even with the added significance of the Roosevelt legacy,” says Keith Trego, executive director of the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust. “Despite the wishes of the private landowners, this project took the support of the governor and federal administration, and literally an act of Congress.”

Trego says, “As with most controversial public issues, it is pretty easy to find a way to support any preconceived

notion. In a county with 800 people and a \$10 million annual budget, buoyed heavily by public land grazing and energy revenue, there was concern about the loss of \$1,800 in property taxes on the 5,200 former private acres. I suppose that’s one way to measure the value of the Roosevelt legacy.”

He continues, “And concern has been expressed about the potential loss of economic base from 600 units of cattle should a grass bank concept be implemented. But the Forest Service, who manages these lands for all the public, says grazing will occur on the lands in a grass bank and it will benefit all the ranchers in the community. So you’re free to pick your controversy, or simply look past them to the larger vision of celebrating North Dakota’s role in shaping the life of TR, one of the most amazing people who ever lived.”

Trego sums it up this way, “Scholars of conservation, public policy, and leadership, to name just a few disciplines, all consider Theodore Roosevelt a giant of his time, and in fact of all time. His ties to the great state of North Dakota are one of our proudest points of history. I expect, with the passing of time and a retrospective view, the public will fully appreciate the wisdom and courage of the private, state and federal leaders who made this project a reality.”

As a final step, the public has one last opportunity and obligation to the project. “The public should pay Roosevelt the ultimate compliment by helping the Forest Service ensure this wonderful land, which inspired a conservation legacy that is the envy of the world, reflects a fair allocation of resources and public opportunities, and is well managed for all people,” Trego says. “Roosevelt was clearly a man of the people, so management that produces the greatest good for the most people is how Roosevelt himself would have wanted it.”

Voice your Opinion on Elkhorn Ranch Management

The U.S. Forest Service welcomes and encourages comments regarding the Elkhorn Ranchlands management. Comments can be submitted to Dakota Prairie Grasslands, Attention Brenda Quale, 240 W. Century Ave., Bismarck, ND 58503 or via e-mail at: comments-northern-dakota-prairie@fs.fed.us.

Those who don’t have any comments now, but would like to be added to the mailing/notification list for the formal comment process, can contact the Forest Service at the addresses listed above.