

## **Conservation easement forever protects scenic ranch's tallgrass prairie near Fort Riley**

Rod Moyer enjoys the feeling of freedom that comes with being on his nearly 7,000-acre tallgrass prairie ranch in the Flint Hills.

"I like that you're here with nature and not with cars, people and concrete," Moyer, 66, said from the comfort of his ranch house about 11 miles east of Junction City. "When I go to some of the large cities in California or somewhere, I can only be there for a few days and it starts to really have an adverse effect upon on me. I need green space and open air."

The Moyer Ranch and its headquarters sit just off a gravel road, south of Interstate 70 and the Konza Prairie near Fort Riley. In mid-July, the vista beyond the roadside fence is a spectacularly green landscape of hills dotted by trees, and a seemingly endless sky.

Because of Moyer's efforts to work with the Kansas Land Trust (KLT) and other partners to protect his land, it is an enthralling view that will remain intact for generations to come.

The agreement represents the largest conservation easement for both KLT and the northern Flint Hills. It keeps the land in private ownership and allows its continued use for cattle grazing and recreational activities.

Moyer and KLT received assistance in creating the easement from Fort Riley's Army Compatible Use Buffer Program, the Natural Resource Conservation Service's Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, and the Kansas Dept. of Wildlife and Parks.

Moyer represents the third generation of his family to farm and ranch in the area. The easement allows Moyer to preserve not only the tallgrass prairie but also his family's way of life.

"My family has been in agriculture since the turn of the last century and my father worked very hard to give me an opportunity to be successful in agriculture," said Moyer, whose family farmed and ranched in and east of what is now Tuttle Creek Lake north of Manhattan. "He instilled a real work ethic in me."

Moyer and a neighbor initially bought the site of what would become the Moyer Ranch in 1991. Five years later, he acquired all of the former Simpson Ranch and sold or traded his land east of Tuttle Creek. He has since added several other tracts of land to the ranch.

Moyer said he has no family interested in succeeding him in actively managing the ranch. But the easement will help ensure that ranching remains a primary use of the land into the future.

"I would like future Moyers to understand somewhat of what their background was about," said Moyer, whose son, Grant, works in New York City as an investment banker. "Also, that other people would be able to travel through and understand something about a working cattle ranch."

### **'Long-term thinking'**

For KLT, the easement represents an opportunity to permanently protect a very scenic area and prominent "viewshed" from the encroachment of development, KLT executive director Jason Fizell said.

The ranch sits in the Heart of the Flint Hills, an area of several million acres where then-Gov. Kathleen Sebelius pushed for Kansas utilities to honor a moratorium on new wind farm

developments. However, there is no binding legal agreement and no way of requiring out-of-state developers to follow the moratorium.

"This basically affords rock-solid, permanent protection rather than short-term political assurances," Fizell said.

Fizell said the Moyer easement will also help the Army protect the integrity of a radar system recently installed at Fort Riley's Marshall Army Airfield. The effectiveness of that system would have been diminished by a once-planned wind farm on the property.

The easement will also preserve the habitat of potentially threatened species, including the Greater Prairie Chicken, preventing the base from becoming an isolated enclave for those animals. The preservation of nearby wildlife areas can help military installations avoid or reduce any training restrictions that could be associated with complying with the Endangered Species Act.

Jeff Keating, program manager for Fort Riley's Army Compatible Use Buffer Program, said the easement would help sustain the Army's training missions and secure the Army's long-term presence at Fort Riley by protecting airspace from wind farm development for helicopter traffic and by preserving large blocks of native, tallgrass prairie.

Keeping the Moyer Ranch's well-managed and visually stunning tallgrass prairie intact also represents an important step forward in preserving the existence of a unique ecosystem.

Valerie Wright, a KLT board member and environmental educator for the Konza Prairie Biological Station, said the area's plant and animal species would benefit from the preservation of a large expanse of tallgrass prairie.

"If you have little islands of habitat, then it's more difficult for species to survive, to mate and find food to live on," Wright said. "Their range shrinks terribly when they're on an island and it's easy to lose species."

Margy Stewart, who raises cattle and hosts tourists along with her husband on land to the east of Moyer Ranch, said she believes that Moyer's decision makes sense economically, too. By preventing inappropriate development, Stewart said the easement would help allow this part of the northern Flint Hills to continue to flourish as ranch land and as a growing destination for agri-tourism.

"We think he's setting a great example of long-term thinking," Stewart said of Moyer.

The easement also stipulates that good conservation measures be maintained on the grassland, Moyer said. Yet it was also important to him that the agreement be flexible enough that the land remains usable for agriculture in subsequent decades.

"As one tries to look forward and anticipate how agriculture will be in 50 to 100 years, I don't know that very many have the crystal ball to even have a slight idea," Moyer said.

By Chris Green, Freelance Journalist