Ranchland Dynamics 2.0:
Trajectories and Implications for Resource Management in Critical Conservation Landscapes

Project Summary
This project will examine ranch ownership dynamics in the western U.S. to consider how changing rural social dynamics affect natural resource management in this and other locales. Patterns and outcomes of acquisition and management of large agricultural properties by landowners with investment, conservation, and recreation priorities are the project’s main focus. We will quantify rates and volumes of land ownership change in 11 Montana counties and will collect and analyze qualitative information about landowner decision-making with respect to resource management and conservation at the property and landscape scales in several locations. Research participants will include private landowners, private land managers, federal and state land and resource agency personal, and various private land stakeholders associated within private land ownership, management, and conservation. The project’s publications and outputs will inform initiatives concerning natural resource management on private lands in critical conservation regions. The project is organized around ongoing engagement with local and regional stakeholders in the design, execution, and dissemination stages of the project.

Approach
This project uses mixed methods to:

1). quantify rates and patterns of ownership change affecting large rural properties
2). characterize landowner resource-management decision with a focus on key social and ecological influences via ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews
3). analyze cooperative elk-management institutions using social network and institutional history approaches

The project study area focuses on the northern GYE and central Montana and draws from other areas in the American West as needed.

Team
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Timeline
Data collection is ongoing from September 2018 through December 2019. The project end date is Summer 2020.

Participation and Confidentiality
Participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. The privacy of research participants is a key component of the project’s research design. To ensure participant confidentiality, the researchers will follow a strict protocol approved by the ethics review boards (IRB) at both MSU and OSU.

Publications and Outputs
The project aims to produce a series of peer-reviewed publications relevant to land and resource managers, natural resource governance actors and policy-makers, and academics. Findings from the research will be presented at professional conferences and regional stakeholder meetings. Publicly available summaries of the research findings will be available in print/online form and well as in presentations at local and regional venues.

Advisory Board
Our project advisory board provides vital links to key local and professional constituencies: specifically, the ranch real estate, private landowner and wildlife management communities.