

# Like A Good Neighbor

Montana organizations join together to address the changing land ownership in their state and offer guidance for being good neighbors.

by *Kindra Gordon*

There's an old saying that "good fences make good neighbors." While that may have some merit, in today's changing world of agriculture with its influx of new — and often absentee — landowners, being neighbors in the country can be a challenging relationship.

Recognizing this transition of land ownership in Montana during the past decade, the Bozeman-based Rural Landscape Institute has taken the reins toward helping new and longtime landowners coexist. Their effort has culminated in an informational DVD titled "Path to Eden," which is designed to assist new landowners in transitioning into Montana's rural way of life.

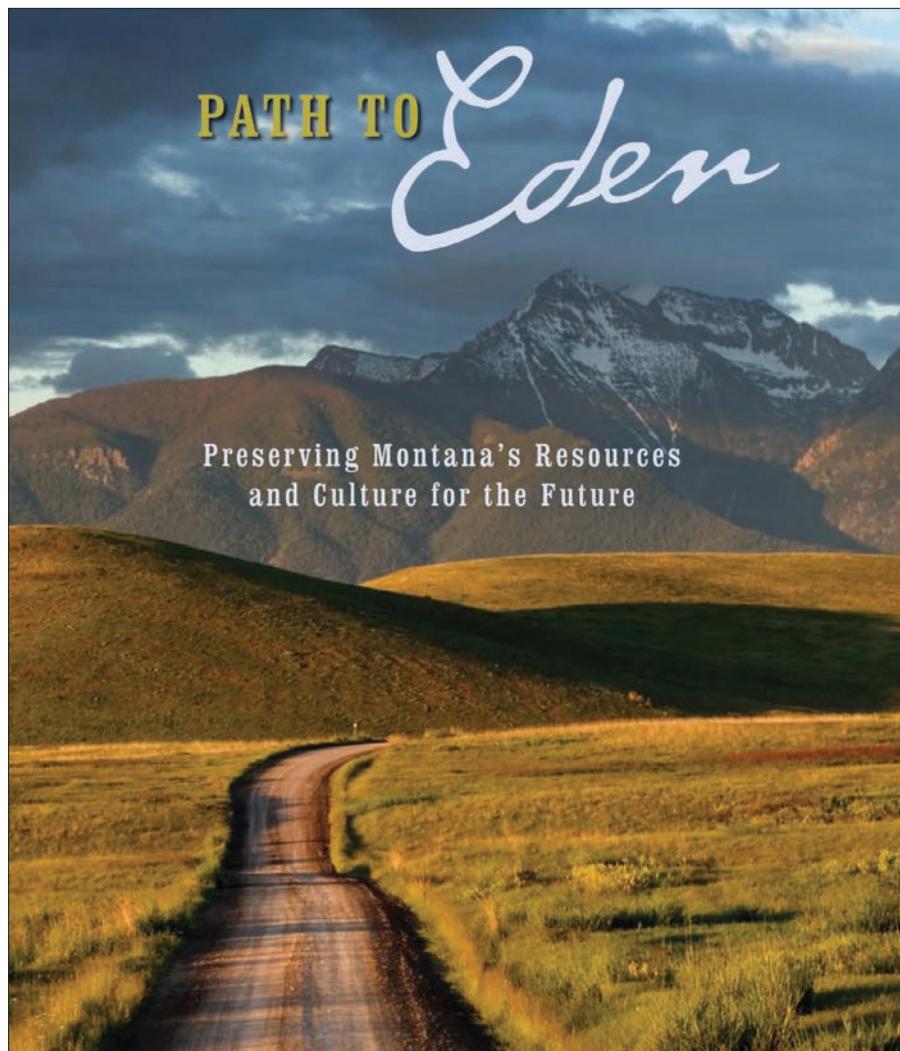
Shelley Chauvet Von Stein, a project specialist with the Rural Landscape Institute, led the development of the project and says the goal behind the DVD is to create awareness among new landowners of the responsibilities and challenges that accompany owning property with regard to Montana's ranching heritage, diverse wildlife and natural resources. Ultimately, Von Stein says, "Path to Eden" seeks to be proactive in encouraging landowners to be good neighbors and active community members.

## Many partners

Development of the "Path to Eden" project evolved after a positive response was generated from an earlier DVD titled "Owning Eden," which was created by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and supported by the Montana Stockgrowers Association. This 12-minute film addressed changing landownership in Montana.

From that beginning, Von Stein says it was recognized that a more in-depth DVD on the topic could be beneficial. Thus, with monetary support from 19 organizations, including the Montana Stockgrowers Association; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Undaunted Stewardship; Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, "Path to Eden" was created.

The 26-minute film includes introductory and closing comments by Tom Brokaw,



himself a Montana landowner, who donated his time to the project. The DVD also features longtime Montana ranchers sharing their ideas on topics such as community relations, wildlife management, noxious weeds, water rights, historic preservation and responsible construction. Ranchers spotlighted include Roger Lang, Chase Hibbard, Bob Sitz, John Carrel, Allan Hamilton, George Trischman, Harold Peterson and others.

Of the DVD, Von Stein says, "I encourage 'Path to Eden' to be used as a welcoming tool — a 'welcome to the neighborhood gift' that in turn will hopefully stimulate conversation between the new and existing landowners in an area."

She adds that initially the DVD was primarily targeting newcomers, but says, "I've found Montanans love the content and the film as a whole. They feel it does a good job of telling the rural story, and I think it serves as a good reminder to all landowners of the importance of being a good neighbor."

Both Carrel and Sitz say they agreed to participate in the project because they recognize the face of agriculture is changing, with more absentee landowners in Montana and fewer ranches being run as traditional family operations.

"We live in an area that's pretty, and as a result we've lost 70% of the working ranches and are seeing some subdivision

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encroaching,” Sitz says. “To operate our ranch, we lease a lot of land from out-of-state owners — many are executives who have bought land here for the scenery or the wildlife. So, I thought the ‘Path to Eden’ video was a good opportunity for educating others about the importance of the land for ranching and emphasizing the values of being a good neighbor.”

Carrel has heard that many people have seen the DVD, and he hopes it will make a difference in getting new and absentee landowners to work with traditional ranchers. His advice to newcomers is “to work to fit into the community and be cognizant of fencing, spraying weeds and other stewardship issues.”

Sitz is also hopeful the DVD may help create awareness among absentee landowners of opportunities for the next generation of ranchers.

“Anymore, young kids can’t get into ranching [either due to finances or finding land], so possibly some opportunities can be created for the next generation to manage or lease some of these lands from absentee landowners,” he says.

### Keeping it going

Response to the DVD since it was released last summer has been very positive from both longtime landowners and newcomers, Von Stein reports. More than 3,000 copies of the DVD have been distributed based on individual requests.

In addition to individual distribution, distribution of the DVD has been through realtors, banks, land trusts, conservation

### More resources for country newcomers

Escaping the traffic and congestion of city life and moving to the country may sound like a dream come true for many — but there are many factors to consider in making the transition.

To that end, Kansas State University (K-State) Extension specialist Morgan Powell and his colleague Kerri Ebert have developed a K-State Extension publication titled, “Living in the Country.” It includes sections on risks and rewards, government, legal issues, public services, buying or building a home, utilities, agriculture, trash removal, being a good neighbor and others. The 15-page booklet also contains a list of resources, as well as common acronyms used in everyday conversation by country dwellers. Download it at [www.oznet.ksu.edu/library](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library); type in MF2798 before pressing “Go.”

Similarly, the Wyoming Farm Bureau is offering a “Moving to the Country” brochure for individuals considering a move into the wilds of Wyoming. The brochure highlights the importance of understanding water rights, easements, landscapes, livestock and farming operations and how these issues relate to living in the country. The brochure is available online at [www.wyfb.org](http://www.wyfb.org); click on the publications tab.

If you are an absentee landowner seeking information about conservation programs that may suit your property, the Center for Absentee Landowners has designed a web site at [www.absenteelandowners.org](http://www.absenteelandowners.org) with helpful information. The center aims to help landowners understand the different available programs, which agencies to contact and the tools needed to implement conservation. It also offers tips to farmers who would like to use land under absentee ownership.

groups such as Extension and conservation districts, chamber of commerce groups, and county planners.

Von Stein has also given presentations at more than 25 large group meetings across the state to help introduce the film and encourage communities to use it as a tool.

“I want people to be proactive versus reactive to the challenges of changing land ownership,” she says.

Looking ahead, Von Stein plans to continue doing presentations as funding allows. “I feel it is critical to get this message out, so I will continue to do the most with what funding is available,” she says.

Overall, Von Stein says she hopes the DVD will help new landowners be better able to make informed decisions with regard to Montana’s resources — and that through working together the Eden that is Montana can be maintained for generations to come.

“We’ve gotten people talking about a topic that no one wanted to talk about,” she says. “That is a huge success.”



**Editor’s Note:** To request a copy of the “Path to Eden” DVD, visit [www.pathtoeden.org](http://www.pathtoeden.org) or call 406-522-7654. A suggested donation of \$10 is requested to order the DVD.

## That Old West Magic

Don’t miss the 2008 Angus Foundation Benefit Auction and Gala, scheduled to take place Aug. 30 at the world-renowned



National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Okla.

Themed “That Old West Magic — A Saturday Night at Prosperity Junction,” the event will be hosted and underwritten by Bob Funk of Express Ranches, Yukon, Okla., and features one-of-a-kind entertainment, an auction and fine dining. Proceeds from the event will go toward the Angus Foundation’s *Vision of Value: Campaign for Angus*.

To request your personal invitation and respond with a \$100-per-person donation by Aug. 8, visit [www.angusjournal.com/foundevent08](http://www.angusjournal.com/foundevent08).

For more information contact one of these event organizers:

- Milford Jenkins, president, Angus Foundation; 816-383-5163; [mjenkins@angusfoundation.org](mailto:mjenkins@angusfoundation.org)
- Julie McMahan French, event co-chair; 989-435-2599; [juliefrench@nethawk.com](mailto:juliefrench@nethawk.com)
- Wynn Dalton Herbers, event co-chair; 434-384-3667; [wynnherbers@verizon.net](mailto:wynnherbers@verizon.net)
- Jenni Beck Winegarner, auction coordinator; 806-683-4634; [jdibeck@gmail.com](mailto:jdibeck@gmail.com)

Seating is limited, so sign up today!

