

The Telegraph

Cowboys dig in against conservationists in battle for soul of American prairies



Local families work together to carry out the spring cattle brandings CREDIT: JACKIE JENSEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

By Rozina Sabur, WINNETT, MONTANA | May 26, 2019

KC Weingart's family has been rearing cattle on Montana's Great Plains since 1913, when his grandfather Tony arrived with the first homesteaders.

Mr. Weingart, his wife Terri and their two children still see themselves as upholding the cowboy lifestyle of their ancestors – with some modern additions.

"We don't pack pistols but we move cattle with our horses, so I'd say that we're cowboys," he said. "We take a lot of pride in taking care of our land and having it produce."

But ambitious plans to create the largest nature reserve in the continental US on their doorstep, dubbed the 'American Serengeti', have left them fearing for their way of life.

The proposal is being pushed by a conservation group called the American Prairie Reserve. They want to create a 3.5 million-acre nature reserve to try and reintroduce native animals to the area, such as bison, elk and prairie dogs.



The Judith River in the Upper Missouri Breaks CREDIT: JACKIE JENSEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

The APR argue it is vital to preserving Montana's environmental heritage, allowing species that were once spotted by famous explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805 to return to the region.

The long-term vision includes establishing a population of 10,000 bison in the hope of restoring a fully functioning ecosystem on the prairies.

However, cowboys in the area say the plans are tantamount to wiping them off the landscape, and will eradicate the cattle-breeding culture of the American west that has been passed down for over a century.

Much of their current cattle grazing space is directly within the APR's target area for their wildlife haven - setting up what local ranchers describe as a David vs Goliath battle for their future.



KC Weingart is the third generation on the ranch in Winnett, Montana CREDIT: JACKIE JENSEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Speaking to *The Telegraph*, Mr. Weingart described his unease about the APR buying a neighbouring ranch and his shock at discovering they hoped to acquire the land he has been settled on for generations.

"They took a red marker on a map and drew a red line around our place and said their goal is to own this piece of property," Mr. Weingart said. "They don't really want people here. Their long-term goal is to get rid of us and buy land."

He explains what is at stake: "We won't ever sell, but we're actually at the end of our lives, I'm 62 years old... the APR is looking down at the next generation. They'll make life so miserable for my son and daughter if they come back to the ranch, and they plan to, that someday they won't be able to survive here."

Mr. Weingart is one of dozens of ranchers now fighting back with a 'Save the Cowboy' campaign, which has seen hundreds of "stop American Prairie Reserve" signs appearing across the landscape.

Two other families opened up to this newspaper about their fears that their livelihood could be destroyed if the APR's plans go ahead.



The ranchers say a community spirit defines their way of life CREDIT: JACKIE JENSEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Dan and Laura Boyce, whose ancestors have been in the small town of Winifred for more than a century, said greater wildlife populations meant an increased risk of disease which could kill off their cattle and potentially force them out of business. "If they accomplish their goal, it's just devastating to the whole area, and if you lose your community, then we won't be here. If there isn't a school then why would our kids, and their kids, want to stay here?" they said.

Coke and Terri Knox, who use land for grazing that the APR has its sights on, said the economic loss to the area would be huge. "It's them or us, we cannot co-exist with that number of acres taken out of production agriculture or with that huge number of bison," they said.

Next month the ranchers will take their fight to Washington DC where they will meet with representatives from the Department of Interior in the hope of blocking the APR's bison grazing proposal.

One of the architects of the campaign is Deanna Robbins, whose grandfather settled in the area in 1914. She says it is the next generation they are fighting for.

Her own grandchildren are only three, but already sport the cowboy hats and check shirts typical of ranchers in the area, and Deanna and her husband Mark hope their family ranch in Roy, Montana will one day pass to them.

But she said the APR's mission presents a huge obstacle to that dream. "They want us gone," she said, adding the group wants to "wipe clean" any evidence of human habitation over the last 200 years. "That would mean removing all the homes, the fences, the outbuildings. It's not like they're ok with us still being here, it's pretty much a clean sweep."



KC Weingart herding his cattle CREDIT: JACKIE JENSEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH

She described how close-knit communities band together to carry out longstanding customs such as cattle brandings, something she fears will be lost.

The APR has hit back at the criticisms levelled against it, saying it has already contributed nearly \$39 million to the area's economy and has spent \$8.6 million in local communities over the last four years.

The organisation argues its work is vital to saving the bison, "an iconic symbol" of the North American prairie. Once numbering tens of millions, bison are now defined as ecologically extinct.

"The narrative that we're going to be the death knell for the agriculture industry is absolutely ridiculous," said Beth Saboe, the APR's external relations manager, "what we see is a great opportunity for us to co-exist".

"We're an easy bogeyman for ranchers and the cattle industry to point to when they are dealing with all types of economic, social variables impacting their way of life," she told *The Telegraph*. She highlighted the APR's Wild Sky ranching programme, which offers financial incentives to farmers who adopt wildlife-friendly measures.



Hundreds of "stop American Prairie Reserve" signs appearing across the landscape

"We're saying we want to restore the native species on the landscape, and cattle were not a native species, so we just have two different views of the best use of this primary habitat," she said.

As the Weingarts map out their future on their ranch in the remote town of Winnett, they see years riddled with uncertainty.

Mr. Weingart fears if the APR's plans proceed, then families who can trace their roots back several generations will be forced to sell up. But looking across the hundreds of acres of grassland, he said: "we're going to be here until the bitter end".