

April 22, 2015

To The House Agricultural Committee:

I would've liked to be present in person to tell you about our family's commitment to conservation easements, but it is calving season; a busy time on our ranch. Mother Nature won't wait for me to take a day to drive from Lake City to Denver and back. I hope you understand as I leave my voice in the competent hands of the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy.

The Whinnery Ranch is a cow-calf operation in southwestern Gunnison County on about 2000 acres just north of Hinsdale County along the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. We also own 2400 acres of high elevation grazing land adjacent to the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation on the mesas south of Blue Mesa Reservoir. Three generations of Whinnerys are actively working the ranch: My wife Carla and I, my two sons, and my mother Helen Whinnery. Dating back to the late 1800's, six generations of Whinnerys have made a living from our beautiful land.

We began donating conservation easements on our ranch in 2004. In December 2014 we finished our 18th easement donation, all with Colorado Open Lands. Like many ranching families, we are often short of cash but we treasure and are committed to our way of life. We take satisfaction in good, hard work. Our hearts are in ranching and we wouldn't change anything about it. But we needed to know that our land would always be kept open and intact for agriculture and wildlife; conservation easements have provided the solution.

Even though we only get less than 25% of the value of our land through the tax credit process, and we have to pay expenses for each easement, we are still willing to keep donating. It has taken far longer than it should have for us to put nearly 4000 acres in permanent easements. I am very supportive of the new bill you are considering because much more land can be placed into each easement with the higher tax credit limit. We would have done four easements instead of 18 with this bill! Since our ranch is in Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat, we could have gotten the habitat protected much more quickly, and each easement would have been much larger.

We also earn income from guiding and outfitting each fall. The same hunters and their friends return year after year. We are proud when they express their appreciation that our natural landscape is beautiful wildlife habitat and will be protected in this way forever.

I have grown up learning about agriculture and about wildlife and about the necessity of sound land conservation measures to protect both. The knowledge I gained about wildlife helps our ranch be a valuable resource for deer, elk, sage-grouse, leopard frogs, raptors and other birds, and all the other animals that share the resource with our livestock and our family. Conservation is important, and this bill will make it even better. Please approve it. I don't want to make a new world record of easements donated. One more large one should be enough!

Thank you so much for your attention.

Steve Whinnery  
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