

## Miller Creek landowners recognized for decade of restoration work; wildlife returns



Dennis Anderson explains the stream restoration work completed at his Spooner Creek Ranch up Miller Creek. (Lau Lundquist/Missoula Current)

South of the burgeoning metropolis of Missoula, more houses are mushrooming up along Miller Creek Road as it climbs into the hills east of the Bitterroot River.

Follow that road as it winds east to parallel its namesake stream, and the buildings finally begin to dwindle. But before they do, Miller Creek looks a little forlorn in spots, its bare banks trampled, resembling a ditch more than a mountain stream.

The canyon eventually closes in, cradling the creek between forested slopes. Then, a few miles beyond the Inez Creek trailhead, the valley widens a bit, allowing the alder-lined creek to meander through large open fields belonging to the Spooner Creek Ranch.

If you look a little closer, you'll see that cottonwood, dogwood and aspen saplings have been planted among the alder, and the streambanks have been reinforced with woody debris and willow branches. Walk a little closer and you might spy some westslope cutthroat trout hanging out in pools newly formed by the addition of logs and rootwads.



That's just a fraction of the restoration work that Dennis and Rebecca Anderson have done on their 207-acre ranch that earned them this year's Missoula County Land Stewardship Award. On Tuesday, Missoula County commissioners, members of the Missoula County Open Lands Advisory Council and representatives of nonprofit organizations that have helped the Andersons over the past decade made the 12-mile drive up Miller Creek Road to honor the couple.

"When we first talked about creating this award, we asked how do we do something for a landowner who is taking care of the land," said advisory council member Patrick O'Herren. "What we learned here is it's not just taking care of it. It's bringing it back, it's making it better, it's passing it on. And you guys have done that."

Here, the suburbia that dominates downstream hasn't yet invaded. Thanks to a conservation easement provided by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, it never will.

RMEF Conservation Easement program director Stephanie Strickland knows all the work the Andersons have been doing, after having helped the couple create their easement in 2009. In addition to the easement, the Andersons have battled knapweed, hounds tongue and leafy spurge, cleaned all the deadwood out of their timberlands, and planted new trees and native grasses that benefit wildlife, especially elk.

So she didn't hesitate to nominate the Andersons for the stewardship award.

"It was an easy nomination," Strickland said. "We have 230 conservation easements in 16 states, and it's arguably some of the best elk habitat in the country, including the ground we're standing on. We owe a debt to you guys for protecting your property from subdivision and stewarding it."



Dennis and Rebecca Anderson discuss the restoration work at their Miller Creek Ranch. (Laura Lundquist/Missoula Current)

Dennis' parents bought the property 52 years ago, and he's lived on it ever since while he ran Gull Boats and RV in Missoula. But for the first 30 years, he never saw an elk.

"And now the other night, there were 100 head in my hay field. Ate up all my profits," Dennis said. "I can get 43 round bales out of that field. Last time I did it, I got three. But I don't care. They were here first. We love seeing them."

But elk aren't the only animals benefiting from the Andersons' care.

In 2017, Jed Whiteley, Clark Fork Coalition project manager, started trying to figure out how to restore the damage that Miller Creek has suffered over the decades. He'd learned from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists that the creek was home to a surprising number of trout but could harbor even more, especially native westslope cutthroat trout, if it was healthier.

One of the creek's main pollutants is sediment, which can come from poorly designed roads, eroding banks or straightened stream channels that cause fast water to cut into the stream bottom. But any restoration had to start upstream to ensure subsequent work downstream would be more effective.

Knowing that subdivisions are planned at the bottom end of the creek to allow another 4,000 people to move in over the next 10 years, the Clark Fork Coalition decided it had to move quickly to save what's left. But Whiteley needed to find a willing landowner to start with.

"It's kind of this little forgotten creek," Whiteley said. "We contacted every major landowner on the creek, from the Forest Service boundary 14 miles all the way to the Bitterroot. We looked at a whole number of factors, and what we came up with is this creek is hammered. Out of all the landowners we contacted, Denny and Becky were the most open, the most willing and the most welcoming. We started talking about projects, and it just was a natural fit."

Whiteley raised money for the restoration work from state agencies, RMEF and the Westslope Chapter of Trout Unlimited. And because of the conservation easement, he was able to snag an additional \$30,000 from state mitigation money for the Clark Fork watershed.

"They knew, with that conservation easement in place, that those conservation dollars would be protected," Whiteley said.

Last fall, the Clark Fork Coalition worked with the Andersons and the neighbor just upstream to stabilize streambanks, add large woody debris to improve fish habitat, and plant more streamside vegetation to help cool the water. The stream segment is already showing signs of improvement, and Whiteley would like to survey the trout population next year to see if it's grown.

In the meantime, Whiteley is looking for the next willing landowner as he works his way, a half-mile or mile at a time, to the Bitterroot River.

"This is one of the projects that we're going to use to show all the other neighbors. It's a great place to show what their land could look like," Whiteley said. "We already have two large stretches below here under design this year to go to construction next year. Ultimately, we're looking at doing almost 6 more miles of restoration linking up this mile of the creek. This project was just a shot in the arm."

When asked why he is so dedicated to preserving and restoring the area, Dennis cited his love for the land. He said a lot of landowners share that love and probably would like to protect their land but never get around to it before something happens and then they have to sell.

"It almost happened to this place with my dad," Dennis said. "My dad sold it to a developer, but I got the deal unwound."

Dennis' father had cancer and was trying to provide for his family. He didn't tell anyone what he was doing until it was almost too late. But Dennis was able to step in and buy it, and now, Dennis is looking forward to having his grandkids move

onto the property.

“You know what’s going to happen – Missoula is just creeping up the valley. There are so many people that a place like this will just be a gem,” Dennis said. “It’s the old ways. They’ll be able to come up here and saddle up their horse and ride. And they can do the things I grew up doing. It’s the right thing to do.”

Missoula County will soon be taking nominations for the 2021 Stewardship Award. For questions or to nominate a landowner, contact Missoula County Natural Resource Specialist Kylie Paul at [kpaul@missoulacounty.us](mailto:kpaul@missoulacounty.us).

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