

Preserving the historic hills



LINDA MOWERY-DENNING/Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter

Barbara and Glenn Walker of rural Brookville want to see their land in the Smoky Hills preserved for future generations.

Walkers retain land for grazing

BY LINDA MOWERY-DENNING

Ellsworth County I-R

The early morning light this late spring Monday has painted the rolling Smoky Hills on both sides of K-140 a vivid green.

Since 1967, the Walker family — first Ray and then his son, Glenn, have grazed cattle in the pastures that cover these hills like a vast shag carpet.

Now, thanks to an easement agreement between the younger Walker and his wife, Barbara, Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) and a federal conservation program, about 4,000 acres of the Walker ranch will remain intact for future generations.

"Mulberry Township up here has been cattle country for a long time," said Glenn Walker, 64. "This is tied to what the land is being used for now forever. They purchased the development rights. No windmills. No mining."

More than 170 area landowners and others attended an easement dedication celebration

several weeks ago at the Walker Ranch, which includes pastures at the intersection of K-140 and K-141.

This is the first voluntary easement in the Smoky Hills, according to Stephanie Manes, rural Kanopolis. Manes is the area coordinator for the Ranchland Trust, an affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association.

She said the trust is working on other easements between Salina and Ellsworth.

"The Flint Hills region of Kansas has led the way for the donation and purchase of conservation easements for this state," Manes said. "Up to now, most all conservation easements have been donated."

"In 2007, Horizon Wind Energy decided to voluntarily mitigate for the impacts that their project may have on grassland birds and the native prairie. They provided funding to purchase voluntary conservation easements on at least 13,000 acres of prairie in the Smoky Hills region. It was decided that RTK, a land trust by ranchers — for ranchers — would be

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Ranch

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the best entity to hold and distribute these funds."

This is the first and only voluntary mitigation project for wind development in the country, Manes said. Horizon Wind Energy developed the Meridian Way Wind Farm in Cloud County, north of Salina.

Manes said there are typically three reasons for ranchers to grant easements:

- To protect the conservation values of the land, including open spaces, scenic beauty and wildlife habitat.

- To honor their family's heritage and protect the family ranch from subdivision and development.

- To protect the land for agricultural use and ensure that future generations are able to farm and ranch successfully.

The Walker Ranch was a natural for such protection.

After Ray Walker returned to Kansas following service in World War II, he worked at several area ranches, including the CK Ranch owned by the Vanier family and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a ranch owned by late Ellsworth attorney, Paul Aylward, near Kanopolis Lake. Walker purchased his first section-and-a-half in 1967 in Saline County. In 1975, Glenn Walker acquired his first land and the ranch continued to grow.

"It became a nice ranch in a pretty area," Glenn said.

The property's historical significance is impressive. Ruts from the

original Smoky Hill Trail — considered the most dangerous across Kansas — and the Butterfield Overland Stage route can be clearly identified on one of the four tracts included in the easement. Bison hunting is depicted on Native American petroglyphs on another tract.

Glenn Walker has heard the many stories of the area, including the origins of the rock structure on the north side of K-140. Several cowboys on the nearby Gregory Ranch, now owned by the Vanier family, became bored one afternoon and decided to start a rock pile.

"A lot of the things we think are significant were just things people did, just some men with nothing to do," Walker said.

He also is old enough to remember Terra Cotta, a major cattle shipping point in the area into the 1960s. Walker said cattle would arrive by train, be herded north to pasture and then moved out by truck in the fall.

"Several years ago, the railroad took everything out. I can't guarantee you I could even go where the pens used to be," Walker said.

The Walkers have one of the first conservation easements involving a private-public partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service Grassland Reserve Program. About half the money used to purchase and retire the development easement came from the grassland reserve, with the other half coming from Horizon Wind Energy.

Ray Walker originally enrolled

land in the grassland reserve in 2004. The Walkers tried to add more in 2008, but were not accepted. By coincidence, Glenn Walker met Manes at a Kansas Livestock Association meeting in Ellsworth and she told him about RTK.

According to a March article by Todd Domer in Kansas Stockman, "The Smoky Hills is a stronghold for grassland species requiring large-scale habitat, including prairie chicken, eastern meadowlark and upland sandpiper. Nearly 700 species of vascular plants are found in the Smoky Hills, with big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian grass, blue grama and sideoats grama being the characteristic grass species.

"Range scientists suggest occasional burning, about which RTK is providing education outreach to landowners, is an important part of maintaining the ecological health and function of this and other native prairie."

Walker said his family has worked hard over the years to maintain range health and condition.

The conservation easement is a step in that process.

"Right now, the Flint Hills are the hot place, but in time, the Smoky Hills will be just as important," Glenn Walker said.

The easement also is in line with a promise he made to his father.

"He mentioned before his passing he would like to see it put in a conservation easement to protect it for ranchland use in the foreseeable future," Walker said in the "Kansas Stockman" article.

Ellsworth, City of Salina, Kansas

Ray Walker

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