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**Starting in 2022, RTK will reduce print newsletters to two per year. RTK will now have a SPRING/SUMMER newsletter and a FALL/WINTER newsletter.**

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## Conservation Easement Closings in 2021

By Samantha Weishaar, RTK Associate Director

### Justin & Mary Janssen

Justin and Mary Janssen reside in Wabaunsee County near Alma. In June 2021, the family conserved 243 acres in Ellsworth County. Janssen grew up in the southern part of Ellsworth County, and his family operated a mostly cow-calf operation utilizing grass in the area. Their daughter and her husband and children operate a cow-calf business utilizing the same grass in the Smoky Hills.

“We are interested in conservation and leaving the land better in the future. We hope many future generations will continue to value and care for this land,” Janssen said.

The Janssen conservation easement is adjacent to the Peterson family conservation ease-

ment, which increases the footprint of conservation.

Janssen said, “The Smoky Hills area is more productive and prettier than most people appreciate, and we are pleased that RTK has invested time, effort and finances to encourage and identify these conservation easements in this area.”

RTK has 11 board members. As an affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), a majority of RTK board members are ranchers or landowners.



Justin & Mary Janssen Conservation Easement in Ellsworth County

RTK’s affiliation with KLA is important to the Janssen family.

“I hope ranching landowners continue to make up the majority of RTK board members who guide the organization. We have faith that RTK will adhere to minimal impact on the landowners’ day-to-day management decisions and respect the rights of individual landowners,” Janssen said.

EDP Renewables and the Natural Resources Conservation Service were key funding partners on the closing of this conservation easement. This is the second conservation easement the Justin and Mary Janssen family has completed with RTK. The first was in 2016, also in Ellsworth County.

Janssen said, “We feel relieved and satisfied. The process takes much longer than anticipated. We are satisfied that the productivity and beauty of these grassland hills will be enjoyed by many generations.”

### Gregg & Debbie Stewart

Gregg and Debbie Stewart are residents of Washington County. The Stewart family recently conserved the 2,500-acre Woody Ranch in Lincoln County.

Stories were passed down in Gregg’s family about how the native grass grew to the river’s edge with little to no trees. Hearing these stories that were passed down for generations is what made Gregg and the Stewart family so passionate about conservation.

“I was told that along the Little Blue River valley, the big bluestem, switch and Indian native grass grew taller than a man on horseback. The Oregon Trail ran through my maternal family’s property along the Little Blue River, and I’ve always tried to imagine what the Midwest looked like with virtually no trees and woody species,” Stewart said.

It has been documented that the land along the Oregon Trail and all over the Midwest once looked like a sea of grass.

“If a cattleman like myself could go back in time it would be as close to paradise as I can imagine,” Stewart said.

Much of the topography, and many of the species living in the Tallgrass Prairie in the Smoky and Flint Hills, have been unaltered for thousands of years.

Stewart said, “There are several leks of prairie chicken that are absolutely breathtaking at the top of the hills during their mating season. This area of the country and the beauty of these hills would turn anyone into a conservationist.”

The Stewarts chose Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) because the conservation goals of the family aligned with the organization.

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## OUR MISSION

To preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the conservation of working landscapes.

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- Sound Finances
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## Gregg & Debbie Stewart

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"RTK understands that cattle grazing plays a part in the sustainability of the species in this area, and it is important for the maintenance and survival of the native grass prairie. RTK's alliance with KLA played an important part, too. My son Tucker thought the goals for our ranch aligned perfectly with RTK's, and he was correct," Stewart said.

Gregg and Debbie's grandson is the seventh generation to reside in Washington County. Their three sons are pivotal in the family operation. Garrett is a practicing veterinarian, Brigham runs the ranch, and Tucker is an attorney who works as Senator Dr. Roger Marshall's senior policy advisor in Washington, D.C.

Stewart said, "The early mornings and late nights of working with cattle and replacement heifers at the Woody with my sons and our guys are among my fondest memories. There will be many more good memories to come! We couldn't operate without the help and professional guidance of our partners and crew on a ranch this size. Several of the guys have been with us for over 10 years and they often tell stories of events on the Woody Ranch themselves."

Gregg's brother Kent and his wife reside in Texas and raise cattle. Kent has two children, all of whom occasionally help with the family ranch. It truly is a family operation.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helped provide funding for this project. Stewart said they were great to work with and very helpful.

"It feels great to have completed this process. The fact that this land won't change is comforting to me and my family. The professionalism and attention to detail RTK provided



Gregg & Debbie Stewart Conservation Easement in Lincoln County

was amazing. The board of directors and staff have a real understanding of a working ranch and how it interacts with the land in a positive way," Stewart said.

The Stewart family conservation easement closed on November 4, 2021. The Stewarts remain landowners of the Woody Ranch and operate as a working ranch. The family still can sell the land, manage it, and pass the land down to a family member if they wish. RTK now holds 22 conservation easements with 16 families and has conserved nearly 17,000 acres.

In addition to thanking NRCS and RTK, Stewart said, "I'd like to thank Brigham and the crew for the clean-up. I would also like to thank Tucker, my youngest son, for getting us started down this road. He put in countless hours of advisement, reviewing paperwork, title work, etc. I truly believe it was a project that was meant to happen!"



Gregg & Debbie Stewart Conservation Easement in Lincoln County

## Kansas Leopold Award Seeks Nominees

News Release Provided by Sand County Foundation

Know a Kansas farmer, rancher or forestland owner who goes above and beyond in the care and management of natural resources? Nominate them for the 2022 Kansas Leopold Conservation Award®.

In Kansas, the \$10,000 award is presented by Sand County Foundation, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD), Ranchland Trust of Kansas (RTK) and national sponsor, American Farmland Trust.

Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes those who inspire others with their dedication to land, water and wildlife habitat management on private, working land.

Nominations may be submitted on behalf of a landowner, or landowners may nominate themselves. Applications are reviewed by an independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders.

The application deadline date is June 1, 2022. Applications should be emailed to [award@sandcountyfoundation.org](mailto:award@sandcountyfoundation.org).

"RTK is a proud supporter of the Leopold Conservation Award in Kansas. It is an honor to help recognize those conservationists who go above and beyond in the stewardship of our natural resources," said Chelsea Good, Chair of the RTK Board.

The 2022 award will be presented in November at the KACD Annual Convention.



"The Leopold Conservation Award Program provides a valuable opportunity to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of Kansas agricultural landowners who are committed to strong conservation practices and effective stewardship," said Dan Meyerhoff, Executive Director of KACD.

The 2021 recipient of the award was Dwane Roth of Holcomb. The first Kansas Leopold Conservation Award was presented in 2015 to the Sproul Ranch of Sedan.

"Conserving our state's rich and diverse natural resources is ingrained deeply in the culture of our multi-generational farms and ranches," said Kansas Agriculture Secretary Mike Beam. "The Leopold Conservation Award serves an important role of reminding the general public of how private land managers conserve and enhance these resources for future generations."

The Leopold Conservation Award in Kansas is made possible thanks to the generous support of American Farmland Trust, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Ranchland Trust of Kansas, Sand County Foundation, Farm Credit Associations of Kansas, ITC Great Plains, Evergy, Kansas Department of Agriculture's Division of Conservation, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, Kansas Forest Service, McDonald's, The Nature Conservancy in Kansas, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and a Kansas Leopold Conservation Award recipient.

Visit [www.leopoldconservationaward.org](http://www.leopoldconservationaward.org) for more information about the award.

## A message from the Executive Director



You may have heard before, "Plan to work and work the plan." RTK is working to protect our grasslands. Three years ago, RTK kicked off a new strategic plan. This included an action plan with measurable outcomes and accountability for everyone from staff to the board of directors. The plan is working.

Fundraising is up 96% from 2018. The number of donations is up 87%. Donor retention reached an all-time high of 79% in 2021. A recent study placed the national average at 46%. RTK will continue to navigate the financial challenges and shortfalls still present. The plan is working.

In the past 12 months RTK partnered with the true conservationists, Kansas landowners, to help facilitate their vision of protecting 2,746 acres of limited, native grassland. Another 5,060 acres are pending. The plan is working.

Public education and outreach have increased by 194%. RTK communications through website, digital and print

media made 367,000 impressions in 2021. This is an increase from 125,000 in 2018. The plan is working.

You, the friends of RTK, have made this work possible. Unlike many of our neighboring states, Kansas does not have a designated conservation fund for easements, which is unfortunate. These funds could pay for the capacity to access a plethora of grants waiting to be delivered in our state. Your financial support is what makes our work possible. Whether you recognize it or not, you are a part of the plan and an invaluable team member. This plan cannot exist without you. Thanks to you, the plan is working.

Yet, even with this recent success, it is still not enough. Ranchland has major hurdles, from capacity to finances, to overcome. Thank you for your continued trust and support of RTK as we do the mission that is important to you, protecting Kansas grassland.

Thank you. Together, the plan is working.

*Lynn Gentine*  
RTK Executive Director