

# Gathering Our Voice | Keeping the land together in the Okanogan

by By Nancy Warner | [April 4, 2014, 7 a.m.](#) | [Comment](#)



Photo provided

Cynthia and Brian Nelson's Okanogan Highlands ranch has been in Brian's family for 113 years.

Many of the stories we've gathered since 2006 about the Okanogan Valley and surrounding highlands illustrate the many ways farmers and ranchers have adapted to change over time. Several people, including Buzz Berney of Conconully, have talked about how early ranchers learned to produce hay to feed their livestock in the winter instead of depending upon open rangelands after the devastating cow-killing winter of 1889-1890.



Davis Canyon farmer Gene Fitzgerald explained how erosion coupled with drought spurred her father, George Davis, to work with the Civilian Conservation Corps to try contour ditching, a practice that was new in the 1930s. Once people saw how well this method worked at his site, they were inspired to take action at other locations.

More recently, Okanogan ranchers have described how they have worked with Will Keller, a rangelands conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, to change the timing and intensity of their grazing practices. They did this to restore the native bunchgrasses that provide sustainable forage for their livestock and habitat for wildlife.



Last fall, I talked with a group of Okanogan ranchers about how they are adapting to the pressures from rising land values by working with the Okanogan Land Trust to put their lands into a conservation easement program. By selling their rights to subdivide — rights that are then retired — these ranchers are insuring that their lands will be kept intact and in production for future generations. Excerpts from the full interview follow:

Brian and Cynthia Nelson's ranch on the Okanogan Highlands has been in Brian's family for 113 years. "Every day is a challenge," Brian said, noting that there is a lot of topography and different microclimates to deal with. "I couldn't ask for a better place to be — there's always one more hill to look over," he said.

His neighbor, Wynn Schell, agrees noting that "the whole hill was a great time growing up." He and wife Wendy operate the ranch that Wynn's father started 73 years ago. They appreciate the landscape — the mountains, lakes, creeks — and the quiet. "I never feel isolated here," Wendy said. "Sometimes it feels like we're almost untouched by the world's struggles," she offered. "And we don't feel recessions," Wynn joked, "because we're in one all the time."

The Ellis-Barnes Livestock Co., located in the Sinlahekin Valley, is home to Bob and Nancy Barnes. Bob feels a deep attachment to this land that has been in his family for 90 years.

"Everywhere you go, you see something they did," he said, referring to his dad and uncle, "and you want to build on it."

Nancy described how Bob is now working with their grandson, who is interested in ranching. "It's exciting to see that the next generation wants to continue this," she said, "because it's not an easy lifestyle; it's a lot of hard work and not a lot of money."

Bob explained that putting a conservation easement on his family's ranch "is an attractive way to bring other generations into agriculture and to extract some cash value while keeping the land together." It's a tool that provides options for their own children and others, all of the ranchers said.

"Hopefully generations of our family and other families will always have that unique spot and will be producing food," Cynthia Nelson said.

The decision to move forward with their respective easements, a relatively new land conservation tool, was a change each ranching family considered carefully. But, as Brian Nelson pointed out, "oldtimers who couldn't change and continued to do things the way grandpa did, didn't make it." Wynn Schell nodded, adding that "if you're going to succeed in the ranching business, you can't be afraid of change."

*To read the transcript of this and related interviews, visit [gatheringour voice.org](http://gatheringourvoice.org) or contact the IRIS office at [irisncw@gmail.com](mailto:irisncw@gmail.com) or 888-7374. To learn more about the Okanogan Land Trust, visit [okanoganlandtrust.org](http://okanoganlandtrust.org).*

*Gathering Our Voice is a program of the Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship (IRIS) that aims to inform and inspire our future by sharing success stories from individuals, families and organizations that can help the region grow. This column highlights some of what IRIS has learned as it works with the community to gather interviews and photos that help tell the story of this place.*

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