

Home on the Range - Permanently

By: Joanna Pope, Nebraska NRCS Public Affairs Officer

Cowboys are known for being good story tellers. When you visit with Roy and Steve Breuklander, father and son ranchers in Cherry County, you are treated to several stories. Roy will share a story about how his grandparents homesteaded in Cherry County back in the 1880's or about how he got his ranching operation started down along the Niobrara River. Steve will share stories about expanding the family's ranching operation, or how his family started one of the first canoe outfitters in the Niobrara Valley.

The common thread in each of the stories they share is their love of the land, and the life they've carved out for themselves and their families along the Niobrara River.

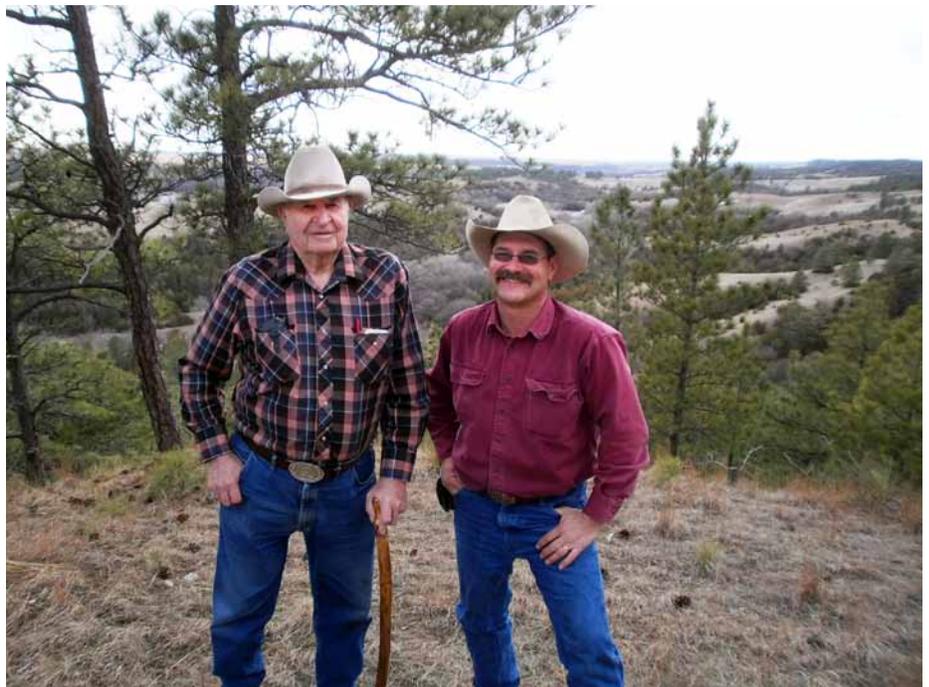
It isn't difficult to understand why the Breuklander family loves their land. Their ranch, which they've named "Sunny Brook Ranch" hugs the Niobrara River for over a mile, and then rises above the river valley into pine covered bluffs full of wildlife and beautiful views.

Anyone who has taken a float trip down the Niobrara River should appreciate Breuklander's ranch and the pristine views their property offers. As development pressure along the Niobrara River continues to rise, so does the price of land. This has driven some local ranchers out of business, or has created a big incentive to sell their ranchland for development.

The Breuklander family was acutely aware of how the Niobrara River Valley was changing. Roy was looking to retire, and Steve wanted

to purchase his dad's property. This would provide Roy retirement income and help Steve expand his own ranching operation. But with the steep increase of land prices, Steve simply couldn't afford to buy his dad's ranch. The family had been offered above market value for bits and pieces of their ranch, but they didn't want to see it broken up and developed, so they declined all offers.

The Breuklanders found a solution by working with their local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The NRCS, through the 2008 Farm Bill, offers the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. This program works with partner organization to help protect farm and ranchland threatened by development. The program provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agriculture uses. NRCS partners – the Nebraska Environmental Trust



Through the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, Roy (left) and Steve (right) Breuklander will be able to protect their Sunny Brook Ranch from development in the popular recreational area along the Niobrara River in Cherry County.

and the Nebraska Land Trust - provided up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the conservation easement, and NRCS provided the other 50 percent.

The easement allows owners to continue agricultural operations in perpetuity and the ranch remains the private property of the landowner. The primary purpose of a conservation easement is to protect land from certain development or uses while permitting existing uses. The land also remains on tax rolls.

This program was originally intended to assist with urban sprawl around densely populated urban areas, but in Nebraska, the program has been valuable in protecting historically significant, culturally unique and wild and scenic places from development.

The program worked well for the Breuklanders. It allowed the Breuklanders to keep their ranch intact. It provided money for Roy to retire, and the easement's no-development condition lowered the value of the land, making it more affordable for Steve to buy.

To explain why the Breuklanders enrolled 1,124 acres into the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, Steve shares another story.

On an elk hunting trip in Wyoming, Steve and his hunting guide came out into clearing. He was surrounded by one of the most majestic mountain views he had ever seen. Steve remarked to his guide that he'd love to put his cabin right here. His guide replied, "You and about 40,000 other people." It was then Steve realized the benefit of wilderness preservation.

Steve said, "We can love a place to death. That experience showed me that if something special isn't protected, we can destroy the things we love the most."

The easement is good news for those who enjoy the wild and scenic views from the Niobrara River. The Breuklander ranch is highly visible from the well-

traveled River Road, which crosses it for nearly 2.5 miles. The easement also includes 1.3 miles of river frontage just upstream from Rocky Ford, one of the most popular access points on the river.

The thing Steve Breuklander loves the most is ranching, and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program allows Steve to continue doing what he loves. The easement does not restrict the Breuklanders from continuing to operate their ranch.

Callie Kreutner, soil conservationist with NRCS in Valentine, Neb., said that the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program fits well with some in the ranching community.

"This program is all about letting ranchers ranch. It's about keeping land in sustainable production. The main restriction is that the property cannot be developed, but the land may still continue to be ranches as it always had," Kreutner said.

What Steve Breuklander liked most about the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program was the flexibility.

"Our easement agreement contains several options for recreation like hiking, hunting, trail rides, as well as rangeland management options like brush management, prescribed fire and more. It lets me have options for the future while allowing me to continue ranching as I had before," Steve said.

Steve plans to continue ranching and operating their canoe outfitting business, which offers the only alcohol-free campground on the river. Steve will also continue his deer and turkey hunting operation.

"The conservation easement has allowed my family to continue operating our land as we choose. We have been blessed with having a beautiful piece of God's land to take care of for just a little while. I want to do all I can to protect it in the best way I know how," Steve said. ♦

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