

Collaboration in Ovando Goes Electric

Eye on the Environment

By Brice Crozier
Northwest
Connections



Community
Conservation
Education

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It's a warm, blue-skied Indian summer day on the Murphy Ranch outside of Ovando, and though the day appears like any other, change is in the air. Northwest Connections Landscape and Livelihood students are preparing the ranch for a new high-power electric fence.



University of Montana Junior Jonathan Lewis of Seattle removing some old fence line.

The new electric fences are intended to keep predators and other animals such as elk and deer out of specific areas on a rancher's property, especially the calving grounds and the winter-feeding areas.

Ted Murphy is a fourth-generation resident of the Blackfoot Valley, and he owns and ranches on approximately 1,500 acres. Murphy runs several hundred head of cattle on his ranch; the ranch is also under a conservation easement.

Murphy said he's hoping to keep grizzlies and other predators out of the pasture and in doing so, protect both the wild animals and his livestock. Grizzlies frequently use the area, and wildlife encounters have occurred in the past. Also, Murphy has had trouble with elk and deer eating the cattle's hay during the winter months. "It was a costly venture," Murphy said.

Seth Wilson serves as the Coordinator for the Wildlife Committee of the Blackfoot Challenge. He said the fencing projects have been in the works for three years, and they are just one component of the larger collaborative conservation efforts going on in the Blackfoot.

Specifically for the Murphy Ranch, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Blackfoot Challenge are covering the total cost for purchasing and installing the fence. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks also provided a great deal of technical expertise for the project.

"The predator fences are sight specific and are intended to meet the needs of both the ranchers and the wildlife who live in the valley," Wilson said. Wilson also stressed the importance of remembering how much collaboration was necessary in getting the many conservation projects up and running in the Blackfoot.

Many other landowners and ranches in the Blackfoot Valley have already received similar fences and other forms of assistance aimed at eliminating negative encounters between wildlife, stock and ranchers. The fences have already reduced such problems, and they serve as one of many useful tools.

Typically, the landowner must prepare the area for fencing, while local contractors provide the workforce for the fence installation. This collaborative agreement provides the necessary cost incentive for the landowner, while allowing the conservation groups and agencies the ability to protect key species on private land.

Enter Northwest Connections. The nonprofit organization, headquartered in Condon, runs field programs through the University of Montana for college students from across the nation. The Landscape and Livelihood semester program includes a four-

day trip to the Blackfoot Valley, highlighting examples of successful partnerships between local landowners, conservation groups and government agencies.

In return for a campsite on the ranch, the staff and students from NWC set aside one day each fall to volunteer on the Murphy Ranch, working specifically on collaborative conservation projects. This year's project was removing an old fence where the new electric fence will be installed.

The work included pulling fencing clips from the wooden posts, rolling rusty barbed wire and sorting through the old posts for any suitable for use on other parts of the ranch. The day provided an opportunity for many students to learn a little about the daily workings on an actual ranch.

"This was a great way for the other students and me to get some hands-on experience working on an actual cattle ranch," said Seattle native and University of Montana junior, Jonathan Lewis. "I never realized how much work actually goes into running and operating a ranch," he continued.

In addition to providing a learning opportunity for the students, the volunteers were able to complete a job in one day that would have required approximately one week for Murphy alone. It also facilitated the entire process for all involved parties.

Nancy Ganswindt, a sophomore at the University of Vermont in Burlington, said, "It's great we were able to help out a family who works hard every day and help prevent unfortunate animal encounters."

The day ended with a job well done and a dinner trip to Trixi's Antler Saloon and Family Diner. The familiar tiredness after a full day's work left all of the volunteers with a deep sense of accomplishment as well as a few aches and pains that begged for a good night's rest.