

Features

A DECADE OF DYNAMITE DIVIDENDS

Gentry Hale



Celebrating the 10-year anniversary of RMEF's most impactful gift.



My father would happily rot in a tree stand for 10 hours a day," says Eric Torstenson, son of the late Bob Torstenson. "He would sit in freezing temperatures in a sleeping bag in a deer stand and never pull a bow string. He was just happy to be outside. It's as simple as that."

Bob Torstenson has become an RMEF legend, and not just because of his unwavering love and dedication to the hunt. Bob's legacy has catapulted RMEF's mission work over the past decade, and 2023 marks an amazing milestone.

Growing up in Illinois, Bob spent countless days outdoors fiinging flies with his father, becoming an avid fly fisherman. He also developed a love of bowhunting for deer early in life. But it was a conversation in the early '90s that led Bob to catch the elk bug.

By then, the tool business he'd inherited from his grandfather in Franklin Park, Illinois, was an enormous success. Long drawn to the vastness of the American West, Bob purchased a 93,000-acre New Mexico ranch—the Double H—in 1999. Situated in an area famous for huge bull elk, mule deer and pronghorns, this ranch checked multiple boxes for him as both a place to hunt and to feed his appetite for conservation.

But tragically, only three years after that purchase, Bob was diagnosed with stomach cancer at age 50. After doctors told Bob he had six months to live, Eric remembers his father's words: "What the hell do I do with this ranch?"



Bob had earlier donated a voluntary conservation agreement to RMEF to forever protect the superb habitat on his ranch. In his final month, he came back to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation with his vision about how that land could create an everlasting legacy for three of his deepest passions: wildlife, conservation education and hunting.

Bob passed away in May 2002. In his declaration of trust for the Double H ranch, Bob wrote: "It is my strong belief that our young people and future generations should have opportunities to hunt and fish in wild places, and that wise conservation and management of such places will promote the continuation of a tradition of lawful hunting and fishing, which has meant so much to me." It transferred ownership of the ranch to RMEF, one of the largest gifts ever donated to a conservation-based nonprofit or land trust—both in size and value.

RMEF proceeded to host a variety of conservation education programs on the Double H, funded by guided big game hunts, livestock grazing, commercial haying operations and money set aside by Bob to help run the ranch.

Then in 2013, RMEF proposed to the Torstenson family a plan to sell the Double H with the intent of creating a large endowment for conservation. The family consented and the Double H sold to two conservation-minded private owners for nearly \$29 million. It passed to the new owners with the reassurance and guarantee that the ranch's habitat will be forever protected by a voluntary

conservation agreement held by RMEF. This sale established the Torstenson Family Endowment (TFE).

Since then, the appreciation and interest earnings from the TFE have raised more than \$17 million for RMEF's four core mission programs: land conservation and access, habitat stewardship, hunting heritage and wildlife management.

"In the long run, RMEF can now do things that no other U.S. conservation organization could ever dream of," says Eric.

The annual conservation proceeds from the endowment have grown from nearly \$950,000 when it was first launched in 2013 to \$2.1 million in 2022.

Here are some prime examples of the conservation work the TFE has helped make possible.



John Day Headwaters

The first year of TFE funding in 2013 helped pay to protect and make publicly accessible two incredible properties. The first was the John Day River Headwaters south of Prairie City, Oregon. Tucked high in the Strawberry Mountains, this land was a checkerboard of public and private ownership scattered

across first-class habitat for elk, deer, bears, mountain goats, pronghorn and a bouquet of other wildlife.



RMEF helped broker the purchase of this 13,000-acre timberland checkerboard, converting it into a single block of public ground managed by the Malheur National Forest, enhancing access to more than 50,000 acres and securing new access to tens of thousands of acres of previously land-locked public lands.

Blake Henning, RMEF chief conservation officer, says the TFE vastly accelerated the rate at which RMEF could help conserve key habitats. “One of the first big projects we did was the headwaters of the John Day River followed by the Red Hill acquisition,” says Henning. “The endowment gave us the ability to write checks that we never could before.”

Red Hill Acquisition

RMEF’s second big land project in 2013 was a much smaller-scale purchase in acreage than John Day, but it too opened a significant new area to public access. The 40-acre Red Hill acquisition cracked open a backdoor at a crucial access point into the Big Snowy Mountains near Lewistown, Montana, creating a new corridor into 18,000 acres of public land that had previously been nearly impossible to access.

With these two big successes capping off the first year of TFE conservation funding, it was immediately obvious what a transformative effect it was going to have on RMEF’s ability to achieve its mission. Since then, the TFE has permanently protected more than 135,000 acres of prime elk country and opened or improved another 214,000 acres.



Another TFE priority is boosting RMEF's investments in research and wildlife management to increase the wealth of knowledge and the capacity for managers to steward healthy elk populations across the country. Here are a few prime examples:

Eastern Elk Restorations

Ever since TFE proceeds began flowing in 2013, it's helped underpin initiatives in eastern states to establish or expand new elk herds in that region. In 2014, the TFE allowed the RMEF to grant \$80,000 to Virginia to boost its two-year-old elk herd, which RMEF helped usher into existence.

From 2014-2019, Wisconsin received more than \$180,000 of TFE proceeds for elk transplantation and herd-bolstering initiatives. And in 2021, Kentucky received \$80,000 to expand elk distribution and increase the state's opportunities for hunting.



"The philosophy of RMEF leadership has been to spread the funding out across the country to hit our strategic priorities and also to allow the endowment resources to benefit elk wherever they are," says Henning.



CWD Research



The study and management of chronic wasting disease (CWD) is one of the most important battle lines for wildlife disease in the U.S. Through the TFE, RMEF has granted \$285,000 to the CWD Alliance over the past five years, which is the central purveyor of scientifically accurate information and news about the disease. RMEF is a founding member of the alliance alongside the Boone and Crockett Club and the Mule Deer Foundation. TFE funds are also supporting CWD research to help wildlife managers and biologists develop science-based management practices to mitigate the spread of the disease, and to boost legislation that aids research and management.

During the time RMEF owned the Double H ranch, it partnered with the Boy Scouts of America to use the property for an adventure base, held fishing clinics for kids, hosted youth-led riparian work



projects and used the property as a hub for other conservation education opportunities.

“As my dad would say, at the end of the day it doesn’t matter if they [kids] are out hunting, but I just hope they’re outside,” says Eric.

Bob was deeply committed to showing children the wonders of the outdoors, and asked RMEF to leverage his gift to help the foundation do more to foster the next generation of hunter-conservationists. RMEF has kept that torch burning bright ever since. Here are some prime examples:

Wild Sustenance

A college course taught by University of Montana professors Josh Millspaugh and Libby Metcalf, the Wild Sustenance Program teaches hunting ethics, the role of hunting in society, wildlife management, conservation, firearm safety, game tracking, field dressing and cooking, among other important subjects.

In addition to a weekly lecture and discussion, the class brings students on a 3-day field trip where they get to field dress a deer, process the meat and learn to cook wild game. This year was also the first time the students were able to go hunting. They were given exclusive hunting access to a parcel of land conserved by RMEF for the first two weeks of Montana’s rifle season.

“I think students get a lot out of it, whether they decide they want to hunt or not. It’s important to understand what hunting is and what it isn’t,” says Millspaugh. “We really want to create an informed citizenry. In addition to removing barriers and making hunting accessible, we normalize hunting as an important feature in modern society.”

Millspaugh says that TFE funding has been critical since they launched the program in 2019. Grants have gone toward firearms, field dressing supplies and other equipment and infrastructure they would not have otherwise had.

It’s also allowed them to hire staff to pull together course content and lecture materials into modules to share with other institutions looking to replicate the course. Several other universities have expressed interest in the curriculum.

TFE grants have even allowed them to enlist media arts faculty and students that specialize in virtual and augmented reality to create new ways to teach about hunting using the latest technologies— including how to navigate public and private lands, practice hunting skills and field dress a deer or elk virtually.

“It is a really exciting component that allows students to practice what they are learning in a safe environment. Without the help of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation resources, we could have never pursued such opportunities,” says Millspaugh.

He believes that college students are an ideal demographic to help fuel hunter growth; an untapped group that can play a vital role in keeping hunting heritage alive.

“A lot of people don’t realize the huge market that exists. It’s estimated that 40 percent of young people attend some type of college, and the literature tells us that at this point in their lives they’re exploring new ideas, they’re interested in testing out new things to do. Hunting is an activity of great interest, and this course makes hunting accessible to college students,” says Millspaugh.

Scholarships

As a member of the TFE’s advisory committee, Eric Torstenson says one of his favorite beneficiaries of TFE funding is the RMEF Wildlife Leadership Award scholarship program. “These go to great young people that are going into our world and hopefully will make society a better place. They are very meaningful to me,” says Eric.

These scholarships support college students pursuing careers in wildlife management, and over the decades have given a boost to people that have gone on to be leaders in conservation across the nation. To date the TFE has distributed nearly \$350,000 to 94 recipients to support wildlife and biology students’ education.

Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow

One program that has received funding since the creation of the TFE is Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow (CLfT). This organization aims to educate current and future natural resource professionals and university students who aren’t hunters themselves on the diverse values and important impacts that hunting has on wildlife conservation.

Over the past decade the TFE has provided more than \$1.25 million in funding for CLfT, helping teach over 2,000 individuals from state and federal agencies and universities across the U.S. about the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and the integral role of hunters and anglers in that system. The funding helped CLfT expand from its birthplace in Illinois into the Western U.S., developing workshops in Montana, Idaho, Colorado and now Utah.

According to CLfT’s Director David Windsor, the professionals that attend their workshops go on to share the information they learn with their agencies and help to increase understanding and appreciation of the role hunting plays in conservation nationwide.



Torstenson Youth Conservation Education Center



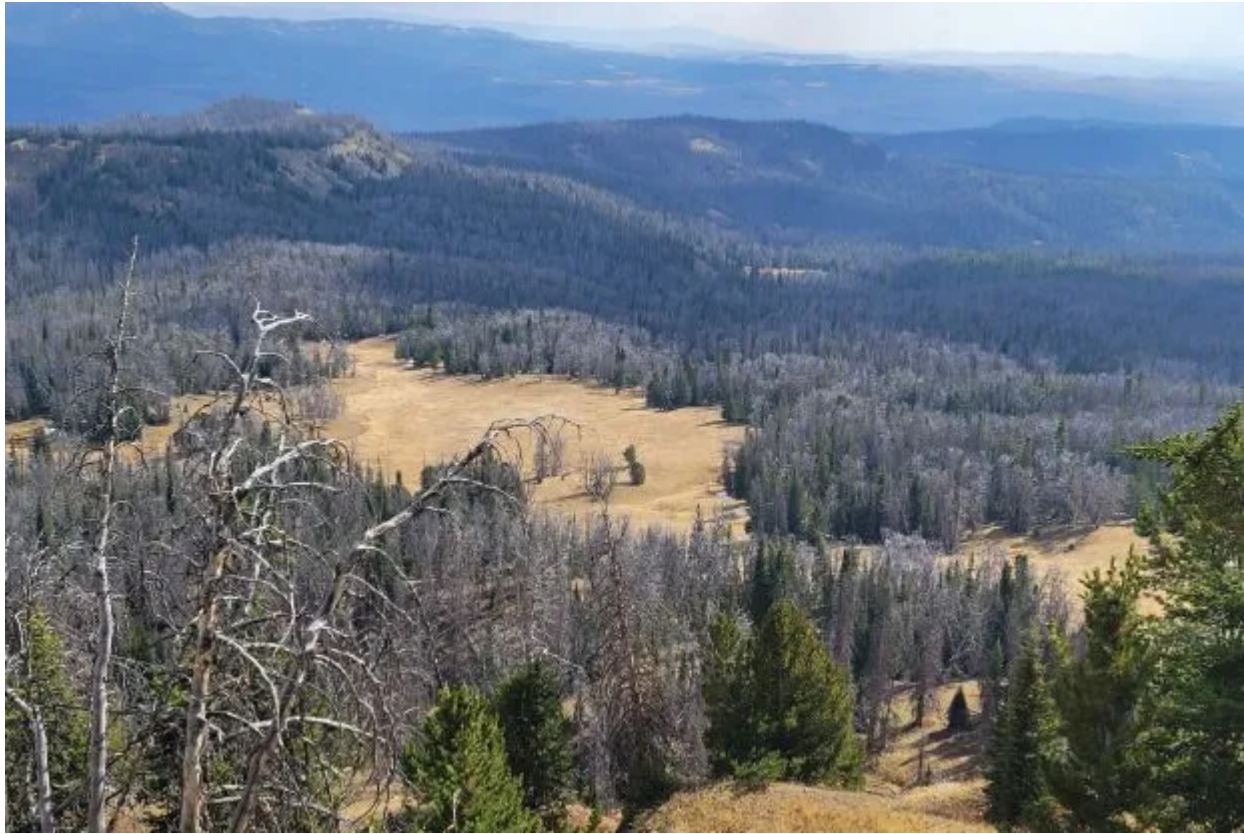
“It was my dad’s first Double H Ranch, if you will,” says Eric, referring to a 750-acre property in northern Illinois that Bob donated to the Illinois Conservation Foundation (ICF). The ICF has received nearly \$600,000 from the TFE since 2013, which it used to host mentored youth hunts, maintain its infrastructure and to support a raft of other educational, conservation-focused programs designed for youth.



First Hunt Foundation



“We wouldn’t be who we are without the Torstenson family, honestly,” says Rick Brazell, president of the First Hunt Foundation (FHF), an organization committed to preserving hunting heritage through mentorship. A longtime employee of the U.S. Forest Service, Brazell started FHF as a passion project following his retirement. The organization has no paid employees, so it is 100 percent volunteer run, including Brazell.



The first grant provided start-up funds that allowed FHF to get up and running. It has since expanded to become one of the largest boots - on-the- ground hunter-mentoring organizations in the nation, operating in 43 states. FHF has programs aimed at mentoring youth, adults, women, veterans, first responders and people from underserved communities. TFE funding helps provide equipment, travel expenses, ammunition, other support materials, trip coordination and even liability insurance for hunters and their mentors. Since its beginning in 2015, FHF has received just over \$320,000 from the TFE and introduced nearly 10,000 people to hunting.



Wildfire Restoration

Another of Eric Torstenson's favorite projects is the TFE's recent investments in wildfire restoration efforts. "This money allows RMEF to think outside the box so it can try new things and set trends for other organizations."

In the past two years RMEF has contributed nearly \$1 million of TFE funding to restore tens of thousands of acres of landscapes damaged by recent wildfires across the West. Burn areas in Arizona, Montana, Idaho, Colorado, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington and Utah have all received aid .

This has included treatments such as seeding, planting shrubs, repairing wildlife water sources and forest restoration treatments that speed the recovery of charred landscapes to meet the needs of elk, other big game and a host of other species.

Shoshone Landscape Project

Beginning in 2015, RMEF began funding this multi-year effort to restore aspens and other important forest habitat types in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Habitat managers treated 260,000 acres with prescribed burns, invasive weed control, tree thinning and fence removal, providing more than 12,000 elk and hundreds of other species with better habitat.

