

Features

CINNAMON CREEK: SAVED FROM THE AUCTION BLOCK

Gentry Hale



“To have all these partners come together to make this happen is so rare. Everything had to line up perfectly.”

In mid-October 2021, 55-year-old Mike Laughter and his 27-year-old daughter Sarah hiked through Cinnamon Creek property northeast of Ogden, Utah. With rifles slung over their shoulders, they were looking for elk. They had hunted this 8,107-acre parcel too many times to count. But Sarah walked slower this evening, taking in every second.

The pair climbed through vast stands of aspens and crested high ridges without finding any elk that day. As the sun started to set, Sarah knew it was time to head home.

But she didn't want to leave.

Though she'd spent her whole life exploring this place in every season, she was unsure if she would ever be back. She followed about 10 yards behind her father, and he could hear her sniffing back tears.

Sarah was understandably emotional. Her dad had recently told her that the publicly accessible Cinnamon Creek property where she and her older sister Meghan grew up hunting, hiking, fishing, four-wheeling and horseback riding was up for auction and might well be sold to private developers.

Mike knew he needed to do everything in his power to save this country he'd enjoyed for the past 38 years. Since high school, he'd spent hundreds of weekends here, raised his family enjoying its many rewards. Yet with Powder Mountain Ski Resort just four miles to the southwest of this land, he now faced the very real potential it would be not only be sold off and posted with "No Trespassing" signs, but transformed into golf courses and condominiums.

He was staring down the barrel of a three-month deadline until the auction. To keep it protected and open to the public would require a consortium of interests raising millions of dollars. And because it would be a blind auction, no parties knew how much the others had bid. Any efforts to purchase it would need to be kept secret.

Basically, it would require the near impossible.



A Quasi-Public Paradise

It's not hard to see why elk love the Cinnamon Creek drainage. It's rich in aspens, sagebrush, native grasses and fields of wildflowers untarnished by noxious weeds, helping it support mule deer,

moose, greater sage grouse and scores of other species. It also hosts genetically pure Bonneville cutthroat trout in Cinnamon Creek, which runs clear and cold through a 1,000-foot-deep canyon on the parcel just above Porcupine Reservoir, along with the East Fork of the Little Bear River to the north and Red Rock Creek to the south.

Congress had designated the property as state trust land back in 1896, the year Utah gained statehood. State trust lands are scattered across the American West, and in Utah they generate income for 12 different institutions, including state colleges, hospitals, reservoirs, juvenile justice services and public schools.

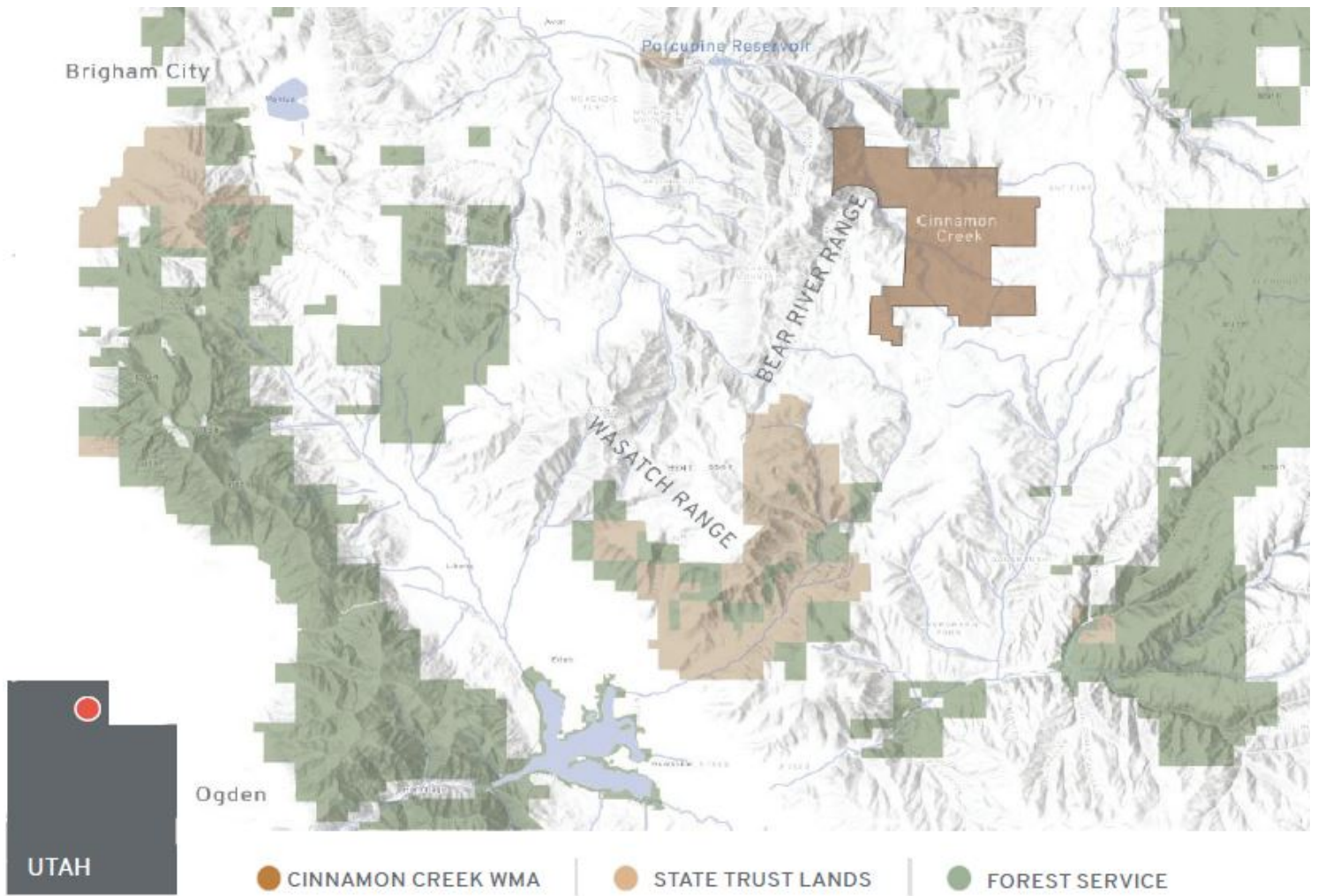
In 1994, the Utah legislature created the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) to manage these 3.4 million acres—about six percent of the state. The Utah Constitution states that SITLA is entrusted to manage these lands in a way that yields the maximum amount of profit possible for current and future beneficiaries.

This decree can mean leasing the ground for grazing, mining, timber or energy development—or, in some cases, outright sale to a private party. Since 1994, SITLA has generated nearly \$2 billion in revenue from these lands, and clearly states on its website that these lands are *not* held in the public trust.

SITLA's 8,100-acres on Cinnamon Creek were utilized for sheep grazing and leased to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) for public access to the delight of hunters and anglers. In recent years, SITLA generated \$20,000 from the property annually.

In 2021, though, private developers who own surrounding land approached SITLA and asked to buy it, compelling the agency to field the offer.

This same investment group had paid much less to acquire property surrounding Cinnamon Creek, but with real estate values spiraling upward, they offered to pay nearly \$20 million to connect their existing purchases.



Even though Utah DWR was paying for public access to the land, they were given no advance notice that the auction was taking place.



The Race is On

Laughter learned the land was up for auction in early August 2021 from a friend who owned property nearby. He'd received a notification flyer on his door from SITLA, and sent a picture of the pamphlet to Laughter, which announced that bidding would take place on Nov. 16. That left just three months to try to save the wildlife haven.



Laughter had noticed survey teams and helicopters checking out the property that summer, and now it all made sense. He started making calls.



A director of field operations for the Mule Deer Foundation for 17 years, Laughter had been involved with wildlife conservation and public access projects before, and he had connections with similar organizations like RMEF. But this was a beast larger than anything he'd seen. Raising the minimum bid of \$19.5 million would require some very deep pockets.



Even though Utah DWR was paying for public access to the land, they were given no advance notice that the auction was taking place. Mike Canning, DWR deputy director, said he first heard about the sale from Laughter. Canning understood the magnitude of the wildlife and recreation values on this parcel, so he too began working in earnest to corral enough funds by the deadline.



Laughter then turned his focus to the critter conservation groups. Ron Camp, RMEF regional director for Utah, remembers the day his phone rang. After hearing Mike's pitch, he was both inspired by the incredible opportunity to conserve Cinnamon Creek and daunted by the asking price.



“Let’s be honest, to acquire an 8,100-acre property in today’s world is doggone hard to do, especially in such a gorgeous location less than 90 minutes from Salt Lake,” said Camp. “To the right developer, you could be talking about a \$100 million project if it became a golfing resort peppered with trophy homes.”

Camp quickly huddled with Aaron Swift, RMEF lands program manager for the Intermountain West, and others to see what funds were available to help.

Utah DWR partners with conservation organizations such as RMEF to auction special hunting permits at big game banquets and other events. These tags raise large sums of money that are earmarked to be spent on conservation projects within the state. In 2021, RMEF was able to commit \$760,000 to Utah toward Cinnamon Creek.

Mule Deer Foundation and Sportsman For Fish and Wildlife also sell conservation tags at their Utah events, and directed those proceeds to Cinnamon Creek. Recognizing the importance of this project, The Nature Conservancy also kicked in money.

Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah DWR was able to obtain \$6 million in federal Pittman-Robertson funds for the purchase— reinvesting hunter dollars from excise taxes on hunting and shooting equipment.

Yet even after all those partners ponyed up close to \$10 million, they were only halfway to the goal.

“I would lay in bed awake every night thinking about who else I needed to call,” said Laughter.



Keeping it on the Down Low

With Utah DWR and so many sportsmen groups pulling together for this land, local legislators started to pay attention. Casey Snider and Mike Schultz, Utah State Representatives, were willing to entertain the idea of helping fund the purchase, but they wanted to see the land themselves.

So, a month and a half before the auction, legislative liaisons, regional biologists and multiple DWR representatives planned a tour of the property. Laughter was invited along, but not wanting to step on anyone's toes, he planned to hang back quietly in the group. Yet knowing Laughter's deep connection to the place, the party asked him to guide them through the country.

He took the assembly from one end of the property to the other, identifying forage, telling stories of past hunting seasons and explaining the importance of this habitat. Everyone left impressed, and shortly thereafter the Utah legislature jumped on board, gathering \$10,000,000 to put toward the purchase.

"I refer to that as my 10-million-dollar tour!" Laughter jokes.

Yet everyone involved knew if they were to have any chance at making a successful bid, they had to keep it quiet. Since it was a blind auction, everyone had one chance to make a single bid without knowing who else was bidding—or for how much.

If the developers got wind, they would likely jack up their bid. "I wanted it to be shock and awe," said Laughter. "They have deep enough pockets, I'm sure they could have adjusted their bid and beat us."

From mid-October on, nobody spoke of the plan. Laughter couldn't cross his fingers hard enough.

"After three months getting the ball rolling, it was one week too long because that last week was miserable. We'd scrambled and scrambled to roll over every rock to come up with every dime we

could, and the last week seemed like 10 years," said Laughter.

With so many organizations bidding together, securing the funds and double-checking each source was not easy. Yet DWR's Mike Canning did that and more, gathering support within both his agency and the state legislature.

Around noon on Nov. 16, 2021, DWR Director J. Shirley officially placed a \$20,000,013 electronic bid. By 12:15 p.m., Canning received word that DWR had won the auction.

Canning sent Laughter an emoji of a party hat.

"What does that mean?" Laughter replied. It was colorful and looked happy, so he assumed it was something good. "Please confirm," he texted again.

"We got it!" Canning replied. Laughter felt like a ton of bricks fell from his shoulders. "It was one of the proudest moments of my life," Laughter said. "Well, it was definitely in the top five, aside from marrying my beautiful wife and having my two daughters."

RMEF's Ron Camp and Aaron Swift were also ecstatic to hear the news.

"I hesitate to call it a miracle, but it was simply awesome to see all the groups come together and see Utah DWR step up, the legislature step up, some of those state representatives step up for conservation and wildlife. That's a huge deal," said Swift.

Camp agreed.

"Any time we can get permanent land protection is the best thing ever, because many generations are going to be able to enjoy it."

Camp volunteered for RMEF for over 20 years and has worked on staff as a regional director for four. He has never seen a parcel of land this large purchased for public access in Utah. It was also the largest land sale in SITLA history.

"To have all these partners come together to make this happen is so rare," Camp said. "Everything had to line up perfectly. And how hard everyone worked to keep it on the down-low also shows how committed the partners were to seeing it through."

Laughter said the investment group never did see it coming.

"From my understanding, this was a very, very close deal, and the investors were distraught that the Division of Wildlife ended up with this ground."

Michelle McConkie, an assistant director at SITLA, stated in an article posted on the agency's website that this was a big win for their beneficiaries and that the money will be split 50/50 for public schools and reservoirs.



Looking Forward

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources officially took ownership of its newest wildlife management area—the Cinnamon Creek WMA—in June 2022. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held August 5 to mark the occasion.

The fact that it's surrounded by private land makes the purchase all the more important. Cinnamon Creek is a critical migration corridor between winter and summer ranges. It's also home to multiple species of special concern. The genetically pure strain of Bonneville cutthroat trout that live in the property's namesake stream were thought to be extinct 30 years ago, but isolated populations were discovered across Utah, and the state has since been actively working to increase their numbers.

Sharp-tailed grouse and greater sage grouse live on Cinnamon Creek WMA as well, both of which have been increasing in numbers over the past few years following habitat enhancement efforts.

From now on, wildlife will be the main management objective for this land, officially Utah's 193rd Wildlife Management Area. Previously, it had been grazed heavily by sheep, which cleared large swaths of vegetation and exposed rocky earth. DWR is pausing all grazing for the time being to help revive lost vegetation and will resume if it is deemed beneficial for wildlife.

But DWR also manages its WMAs for the public to hunt and fish.

Now, when Laughter and his daughters visit to chase elk and other game, they'll do so knowing those opportunities are there to stay.

"The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was a wonderful partner through this. It wouldn't have been possible without the Elk Foundation, or without any of the contributing groups," said Laughter, "The sportsmen stood together and unified with the state to keep this land public and viable for wildlife. Now so many families like ours can enjoy it for years to come."



Gentry Hale is a recent Bugle intern and grew up in the Salt Lake City area.