

Think subdivision; now think the opposite

By Don Benjamin, Staff Writer

Delta County Independent, Apr 4, 2018

It's a familiar story. A traditional ranch changes hands. Machinery and livestock are auctioned off. Structures are bulldozed. The acreage is carved into lots for modern houses and what was once open country is swamped by an ocean of subdivision rooftops.

Now—think the opposite and you have an idea of what the folks at the Boulder-based Conscience Bay Company have in mind for the historic acreages that lie in the rolling hills east of Eckert.

The Figure 4 Ranch and Hart's Basin Ranch are two iconic Western Slope outfits that will not be given over to traditional commercial development. They will continue to function as a profit-making commercial cattle operation, but with a twist. Going forward under the single banner of Hart's Basin Ranch, the enterprise will continue to focus on producing and marketing healthy livestock, but the ranch will complement its agricultural goals by pursuing strong commitments to do public good and to manage water and protect natural resources and wildlife habitat.

Mike Higuera, director of resources, explains that Conscience Bay is a "B-Corporation that pursues an obligation to produce a profit for company shareholders while also taking into consideration community benefits. B-Corp certification means that Conscience Bay meets the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability, and aspires to use the power of markets to solve social and environmental problems."

The B-Corp concept has been around since 2009 when like-minded for-profit companies formed a voluntary community to become—as their website puts it—"not only the best in the world but the best for the world." The founding companies signed a "declaration of interdependence" and invited others to join them. Companies seeking B-Corp certification must complete an assessment process that evaluates their commitment to treat employees fairly and give back to their local communities in the form of good deeds and charitable contributions. Details of the certification procedure and more information about the concept can be found at the B-Corp website: <https://www.bcorporation.net>.

In practical terms, Conscience Bay Company and Hart's Basin Ranch has committed to:

- Continue to operate the combined 3,200-acre ranch as a cattle and hay operation with no plans to commercially develop the area, and
- Make a profit while also doing good things for the community by being good stewards of the land and resources and by contributing to such local causes as 4-H, the Nature Connection, Delta County Economic Development and the Black Canyon Audubon Society.

The team that manages the Eckert property includes state and local actors. Higuera and Conscience Bay president Eli Feldman reside in Boulder although Feldman splits his time between the Front Range and Ridgway. Mark and Polly Hill commute from Mack (west of Fruita) to manage the Hart's Basin spread and other Conscience Bay holdings on the Western Slope. Jimmy McNamara of Montrose is the assistant manager and two locals, Alonso Mendoza and Alex Ibarra, who have provided day-to-day operations in the past, will continue to live and work on the ranch with their families.

Feldman emphasizes that Conscience Bay is a small family-based company that began with the Perry Ranch in Steamboat Springs. While other ranches were down-sizing and surrendering to subdivisions, Feldman's friends and family made a conscious effort to acquire more land and "put the ranch back together." They have essentially done the same thing by combining the two Eckert ranches. Eventually that grassroots effort to support sustainable ranching led Feldman to form his Boulder enterprise with a focus on commercial real estate along the Front Range and ranching on the Western Slope. Given Feldman's commitment to protecting the natural environment and his desire to support the communities in which he works, becoming a certified B-corporation was a natural fit.



Eli Feldman (left) and Mike Higuera of the Boulder-based Conscience Bay Company were on hand last month for the Eckert Crane Days celebration. Feldman is the company's president and Higuera serves as director of resources. Conscience Bay has purchased two iconic Delta County ranches and combined them into a single entity under the banner of Hart's Basin Ranch. The two men and other ranch staff hosted a get-acquainted barbeque during Crane

Days to introduce area residents to their company's commitment to maintain the cattle operation while also doing public good, managing water, and protecting natural resources and wildlife habitat. Photo by Don Benjamin