

Conserving the Land and Preserving the Farming Way of Life

*A Conversation with Tom Siderius
Siderius Farm, Kalispell, MT*

The Siderius name is well-known in the Flathead Watershed. The family has been involved in farming and contributing to the community for longer than some folks can remember. But today, Tom Siderius looks worried across the table from me in a local café. He is worried that the Flathead—and the nation—are going to

Source: T. Siderius, Inc., 2010



Tom Siderius

run short of land to produce our food. Tom would like to see a greater emphasis on land conservation and conservation easements. He and his wife recently put their 315-acre Siderius Farm in an easement. "Land owners don't realize what you can get out of your land in an easement. I can do everything I want on it while preserving the land."

He describes how they worked with the Montana Land Reliance, Trust for Public Land, Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), and Bonneville Power to finalize the deal. Most of the land is along the Flathead River. I ask him why he didn't work with our local Flathead Land Trust, and he explains that it would have been a conflict of interest since his brother Ken was then president of the

Source: The Trust for Public Land,
Northern Rockies office

Trust. Ken Siderius, a retired educator and Kalispell "Great Chief," has played a part in some of the most significant conservation projects the Flathead Watershed has ever seen. Land conservation seems to run in the family.

Tom still has hay and cattle, and a little bit of grain. He butchers a cow a year and sells "natural" hamburger meat. He explains how natural producers cannot use growth hormones, antibiotics, or any animal byproducts for feed. He used to have many cattle, pigs, grew all kinds of grain, and managed more acres than what he owns now. But Tom says he's "gonna farm until I quit." He remembers when Flathead Valley farmers sold everything they produced at the local auction. Additionally, the pork producers in the valley shipped 400 pigs (two semi loads) a week out of here, some that were shipped as far as California. Back then, many people had small 10-20 cow dairies. Two creameries processed all the milk, and local dairies bought the milk. Tom is happy that his neighbor—County Commissioner Joe Brenneman—still has a dairy, and he's pleased to see the Hedstrom's running their new Kalispell Creamery.

He's also worried because so many people don't read labels. They pick out fruits and vegetables at the market, but they have no idea who grew it, where it was grown, how it was handled, or what chemicals were used

on it. He'd like to see more people take a greater interest in knowing and influencing their food sources. He suggests that everyone visit the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan. "You wouldn't believe all the products that are made right here in the Flathead Watershed," he talks excitedly about the center. The purpose of the center is to assist in the development of food and value added agricultural business; collaborate with the statewide effort to increase Montana's capacity to produce food, farm-derived renewable energy and other value added agricultural products and enhance local food system development within our local communities. Tom laments that we buy way too much produce from outside of the watershed, the state, and often the country.

We talk about farm life and how many sons and daughters of farmers choose not to live the life of the farmer. "It is a way of life, but hard, and not always a good living," Tom said with a knowing smile. Of Tom's four kids, only one chose to farm. He says he wasn't surprised though, because he worked them too hard. He recalls himself from years past, "I told my kids there are two ways to do stuff, your way and my way, and my way is how we are going to do it." Tom continues to farm, volunteer his time on boards and committees, and play his part in the conservation of farm land.



Siderius Conservation Easement