

Some famous faces, names also get ag-land tax breaks in Colo.

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The Denver Post

POSTED: 03/07/2011 01:00:00 AM MST

UPDATED: 03/07/2011 06:28:32 AM MST

Second of two parts



Bootjack Ranch (Photo by Philip Mueller and provided by Bill Fandel Sotheby's International Realty)

Actors, captains of industry, an Ivy League astrologer, sports figures, politicians, energy giants, schoolteachers from Pasadena, Calif. All these are also considered farmers or ranchers for tax purposes in Colorado. They have secured low property taxes through agricultural designations on land they own even though they personally have little or nothing to do with producing food — the reason state legislators originally created a low property-tax rate for the agriculture sector.

In some cases, the properties where they have second, third or fourth homes were traditional working ranches before they were sold to the wealthy and became what, in real-estate lingo, are termed "gentleman ranches" or "recreational ranches."



StarHouse (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

Some of these are leased to real ranchers to operate or are run by hired ranch managers. More often, the owners of the smaller, high-dollar vacant properties allow sheep or cattle to graze their land for short periods, share equestrian facilities with other owners or cut hay on their subdivision lots to slash annual taxes from thousands of dollars to two-figure amounts.

The following are a sampling of the hundreds of notable or surprising agricultural landowners The Denver Post found while combing through assessors' rolls in Colorado:

Sheep graze on land.

Actor Tom Cruise owns five parcels of land on a scenic mesa northwest of Telluride that has become an enclave of high-end vacation homes. Sheep graze around the mansions for brief periods each year, according to the assessor's office. Cruise pays just more than \$400 in taxes for 248 acres for which he paid nearly \$18 million between 1994 and 2002. He pays \$11,380 in residential property taxes for the land where his \$9.7 million home is located.

Partially irrigated.

Sen. Gail Schwartz, D-Snowmass Village, and her husband, Alan, own 15.4 acres of partially irrigated meadowland in the Happy Day

Ranch Subdivision near Basalt. They bought the land for \$690,000 in 2004. Schwartz pays \$54.52 in annual taxes for the land.

Bootjack Ranch.

Kelcy Warren, an energy-industry billionaire, racked up the second-most expensive real-estate transaction in the country last year when he bought the 3,500-acre Bootjack Ranch near Pagosa Springs for \$46.5 million.

Warren is the co-founder of Energy Transfer Partners, one of the largest gas-pipeline companies in the world. He paid nearly \$70,000 in property tax for the ranch that straddles two counties, but most of that is for the many buildings on the property, not for the land.

Enchanted Mesa Ranch.

Charlie Ergen, a professional blackjack player turned media mogul, owns nearly 600 agricultural acres near Ridgway. The chairman and founder of EchoStar Communications Corp. pays \$3,185 in taxes on the Enchanted Mesa Ranch. Most of that covers the ranch residences and outbuildings on the spread.

Spiritual, cultural space.

David Tresemer, an astrologer and Harvard-educated psychologist, owns 191 acres and four structures that are listed as farm buildings or residences in the foothills west of Boulder where he operates the StarHouse. It is advertised as a spiritual and cultural space for celebrations of the seasons, the lunar cycles and rituals from ancient and indigenous cultures.

He pays \$11.48 in taxes for 38 of the vacant acres and \$3,699 for the remainder of the land with the buildings.



Adjoining Home Run Ranch (Heather Rousseau, Special to The Denver Post)

Hay on West Meadows.

Dick Ebersol and Susan Saint James own a 35-acre lot in the upscale West Meadows subdivision near Telluride. They purchased the land for \$1.8 million in 1996 and pay \$123 in property taxes on it annually because there is hay on it. They also own an \$11 million home in the Mountain Village.

Log home, land to develop.

Walker Stapleton, Colorado's newly elected state treasurer, owns 6.4 acres and a log home in Gunnison County that has a market value of nearly half a million dollars. The tax on that land and home, which records show is also owned by his wife and another couple, is \$1,618. Stapleton and another family member also have nearly 180 acres near Castle Rock with taxes of \$116. Stapleton is planning to develop that land.

6,500 acres at Gateway.

John Hendricks, chairman and founder of Discovery Communications, owns more than 6,500 acres of agricultural land in Mesa County in his name and under subsidiary companies. The land is in and around Gateway, where Hendricks owns a luxury home, a car museum and a hotel-and-restaurant complex. Hendricks has plans for more housing and commercial development as part of the Gateway Canyons Resort project. His taxes are as low as \$7.27 for some 40-acre parcels.

Star Mesa's empty land.

Craig Slater is executive vice president of the Anschutz Corp. He owns 41 acres of grazing and irrigated empty land on Star Mesa near Aspen that he purchased for \$4 million in 2005. He paid \$55.44 in property taxes for the land last year.

On the Grand Mesa.

Universal Faithists of Kosmon, which believes in a new-age bible purportedly channeled by a clairvoyant dentist in the late 1800s, purchased 40 acres of agricultural ground in Mesa County last summer. The land on the Grand Mesa includes a ranch house, so the tax is \$1,503. The Faithists teach that human beings are going to evolve into the Kosmon Era, a time of worldwide peace and joy.

Along the highway.

Klaus Obermeyer, Aspen ski pioneer and ski-gear inventor, owns 3.2 agriculturally designated acres along a road that parallels Colorado 82 near Basalt. Obermeyer came to Aspen in 1947 and started a ski-clothing company. He is credited with inventing the first down ski parka, mirrored sunglasses and turtlenecks at his Sport Obermeyer company. His annual property tax on his Basalt land is \$27.80.

Adjoining Home Run Ranch.

Actors Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn own adjoining agricultural properties between Aspen and Snowmass that they call Home Run Ranch. Hawn owns 34.65 acres. Her annual taxes that take into account her 2,700-square-foot home are \$2,873. Russell has 37.6 acres. His total annual taxes are \$16,787 — most of that for the two residences, including a 6,500- square-foot, eight-

bedroom home. They fought to have their land reclassified as agricultural nine years ago and received the big tax break along with a check for \$37,780 from Pitkin County for overpayment of taxes for two years.

Classified as grazing.

Teacher Inc. Money Purchase Pension Plan, an investment vehicle for teachers in Pasadena, Calif., owns 4.7 acres of grazing land on Specie Mesa near Telluride. The land was purchased for \$800,000 in 1995. It is classified as grazing land, so the taxes are \$100 a year.

"Farm" owners

Tom Cruise *Actor* Property: Five parcels of land on a mesa northwest of Telluride, about 248 acres in a region of high-end vacation homes Property tax: \$400

Gail Schwartz *State senator* Property: 15.4 acres of partially irrigated meadowland near Basalt Property tax: \$54.52

Charlie Ergen *Media mogul* Property: The Enchanted Mesa Ranch, nearly 600 acres near Ridgway Property tax: \$3,185

Walker Stapleton *Treasurer* Property: 6.4 acres and a cabin in Gunnison County; 180 acres near Castle Rock Property tax: \$1,618; \$116

Klaus Obermeyer *Ski pioneer* Property: 3.2 acres along a road that parallels Colorado 82 near Basalt Property tax: \$27.80

Goldie Hawn *Actor* Property: 34.56 acres and a 2,700- square-foot home that adjoins Kurt Russell's property with two residences Property tax: \$2,873

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EXTRAS

The findings: View the Post analyzed agricultural land data in nine Front Range counties.

Got a tip? The Post has been investigating the use and abuse of the agricultural tax designation. If you know of a story to pursue, contact us at 303-893-TIPS (8477) or toll-free at 866-748-TIPS, or e-mail us at TIPS@denverpost.com.