

## Colorado Open Lands, Colorado Conservation Trust merge into one group

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The most influential conservation groups in Colorado are joining forces in an effort to safeguard the promise of endless protection for conservation easements.

Colorado Open Lands and the Colorado Conservation Trust planned to announce Thursday they are joining forces to create a conservation supergroup under the Colorado Open Lands banner. The move is meant to guarantee that the hundreds of thousands of acres that the groups have locked into conservation easements will endure as wild, natural open spaces.

"We have taken a look at what we think we need to ensure conservation into the future. Perpetuity is a big part of what we do and why we do it," said Dan Pike, president of the 32-year-old Colorado Open Lands, which works to unite landowners with federal, state and local conservation groups to protect open land. "We feel this merger creates a more durable organization for the future."

Mergers typically involve a weaker party. Not so with this marriage. Colorado Open Lands and the Colorado Conservation Trust have different skill sets that when linked can forge a lasting, unified front that will bolster conservation in the state, said Charlie Russell, chairman of the Colorado Open Lands board.

"Colorado Open Lands is skilled and competent in the operation of land preservation, and Colorado Conservation Trust is very experienced and competent in raising money and creating substantial outreach. These are very complementary strengths," Russell said.

The merger was sparked over years of conversation and work toward the same goal. As pressures on open land increase — for water, energy and development — leaders in both organizations more closely scrutinized their promise to protect lands forever.

"I kept saying to Dan, Colorado Open Lands must survive. It must exist for a very long time," said Brian Ross, president of the 13-year-old Colorado Conservation Trust, which [reported \\$1.23 million in revenues in 2012](#). "If our organization can help fulfill that promise of perpetuity, let's do it."

The [2013 Colorado College "State of the Rockies" poll](#) found that 68 percent of Colorado residents identify themselves as conservationists, with 98 percent agreeing that public lands are an essential part of the state's economy, not just providing recreation but luring high-quality employers and workers.

A concerted conservation effort will tap that land-loving sentiment, said leaders of both conservation outfits. The new Colorado Open Lands will employ 12 people, including the staff of four from the trust. The group hopes to expand its staff as it broadens its reach across Colorado.

"Both groups approached this from the perspective of 'What is the best thing we can do to further the cause of land conservation in Colorado?' " said Russell, who expects the merger will result in better education and outreach to the public.

The unique merger could have ripple effects across the conservation industry, where sometimes missions are muddled as various conservation groups vie for limited funds.

"We believe this could very easily be a template on a national level," said Pete Leavell, chairman of the Colorado Conservation Trust.

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## **What they do**

**Colorado Open Lands:** Has worked in 40 counties, spending \$51 million in public funds to protect 399,000 acres valued at \$263 million. Holds 283 conservation easements. Has permanently protected more than 28,000 acres in the six-county Front Range, working with 43 landowners.

**Colorado Conservation Trust:** Invested \$17 million in state land trusts and public open-space programs since 2000. Provided loans and other funding to help conserve 14,000 acres of agricultural and natural lands around the state. Has partnered with state and national conservation efforts to protect 500,000 acres in 25 priority areas through the Colorado Conservation Partnership.