

## **Contact**

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## **SAN LUIS VALLEY CONSERVATION PROJECTS RECEIVE NATIONAL FUNDING AWARD**

**February 7, 2018 (Lakewood, Colo.)** Colorado Open Lands announced today that its Acequia Initiative has been awarded \$1,722,000 in funding from the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and an additional \$638,000 from Great Outdoors Colorado. The money will advance the permanent conservation of privately owned farm and ranchland along the Rio Culebra River in Costilla County.

The NRCS Award came through the agency's Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and was the only project in the state of Colorado that received funding in the 2017 award cycle. Senator Michael Bennet commented, "We are grateful that this award will help secure water rights and conserve wildlife habitat in the Rio Culebra watershed. Colorado's agricultural and economic wellbeing depends on our water infrastructure. This region contains acequias dating back to the 1850s, many that were dug by hand by some of Colorado's first farmers and ranchers. It is important that we protect this infrastructure and preserve these working agricultural lands for future generations."

"The USDA NRCS has partnered with Colorado Open Lands for many years and the recent award through the RCPP for its Acequia program only expands our partnership opportunities," said Clint Evans, State Conservationist with NRCS. "The USDA NRCS helps protect agricultural lands by partnering on conservation easements to conserve prime agricultural lands while limiting their non-ag related uses. The Regional Conservation Partnership Program has provided an additional avenue to conserve prime ag lands in Colorado and we're looking forward to working with and helping COL reach its natural resource goals."

The project received attention from statewide funders as well. Great Outdoors Colorado contributed \$638,000 through its Protect Initiative. Other funding for the project was contributed from the Gates Family Foundation, LOR Foundation, and the Trinchera Blanca Foundation.

The Acequia Initiative aims to strategically protect private land irrigated by acequias – shared irrigation canals and ditches – along the Culebra watershed. The acequias often represent the oldest water rights in Colorado, and their protection is critical to preserving our heritage and way of life in the San Luis Valley. Communal water use is critical in the area – without these historic water-sharing agreements, the region's agricultural way of life would not be possible. Many acequia properties have been in the same families since the mid-1800s, and the acequias form the agricultural, social, and ecological foundation of the communities.

Colorado Open Lands President Tony Caligiuri added, "Acequia properties are the backbone of

these communities. Their preservation will ensure that way of life in the Valley can continue as it has for generations.”

The land included in this conservation initiative also feature several miles of Culebra Creek, providing important habitat to several sensitive species including the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Great Blue Heron, Bald Eagle, and Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout. The properties lie at a narrow point in the Culebra floodplain, funneling wildlife onto the lands.

Unfortunately, the acequia water rights in the Culebra watershed face an extreme risk of transfer off the properties. The San Luis Valley is subject to very strict groundwater rules, so water users across the valley planning new development are looking for surface water rights. The market and infrastructure are in place to move these water rights, and the opportunity to provide a positive alternative to the landowners through conservation is critical. If acequia water rights are purchased for use elsewhere, the integrity of the irrigation systems across the area would be compromised. The agricultural economy would crumble, and the community along with it.

This Initiative is a grassroots conservation effort built from the community’s interest and determination to preserve their historical agricultural heritage and is a direct result of the relationships developed since COL began working in Costilla County over seven years ago, and the investments that key partners have provided. The success of this project combined with the long-term investment in this landscape will provide security and sustainability to the acequia community, so that they continue to support agricultural production and ecological services, to the benefit of all Coloradoans.

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### **About Colorado Open Lands**

Colorado Open Lands is a private, nonprofit land trust that works to enhance Colorado’s quality of life by protecting its most treasured asset: open lands. Since 1981, COL has helped landowners conserve more than 500,000 acres around the state and fostered partnerships responsible for critical innovations in conservation funding, conservation easement defense and more. In 2015, COL adopted an ambitious strategic plan to help interested landowners protect a total of 800,000 acres across Colorado by 2025.