



THE DIRT | 2025

AN ANNUAL RESOURCE FOR OWNERS OF CONSERVED LANDS



THE DIRT ON DIRT: A LANDOWNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON SOIL HEALTH

When we think about our natural environments, we tend to focus on what's happening above ground. Yet below the surface, it is the soil that plays a vital role in supporting them. Soils are the foundation essential for producing food, fiber, fuels, and medicines; storing water and cycling nutrients; and establishing resilience to extremes, such as drought and natural disasters.

So what is soil health and how do we know if our soils are healthy? Simply put, soil health is the ability of the soil to sustain life and deliver benefits that we rely on. We can assess it by looking at physical indicators of health, much like a wellness check with a doctor. For Colorado cattle ranchers, these indicators may include livestock forage quantity and quality, signs of erosion, or the soil's ability to hold water.

Here we share the story of a landowner of property conserved with Colorado Open Lands, Steve Oswald, who recognized that soil health may be playing an important role in his ranching operations. When Oswald and his family moved back to Colorado in 1991, it was clear to him that the land they leased was stressed. His first plan was to reduce the number of livestock on the property, but he noticed that this change had a limited effect, with plant growth hitting a plateau regardless of the number of livestock on the property. "I wanted to figure out why that was. I thought, there's more organisms underground, maybe that has something to do with it."

Oswald had worked on ranches before in British Columbia. He learned conventional agriculture practices that focused on traditional schedules of hay production and cow-calf operations. However, when he tried applying similar management to his cattle ranch in southern Colorado, he struggled to attain that same success. "By 1994, we were going broke. I knew we had to do something different." When Oswald heard about The Ranching for Profit

School, a program based in Wheatland, Wyoming, he decided to give it a try. Here they taught agricultural management techniques aimed at making ranching more profitable through improving soil health.

As a result of what he learned at the school, Oswald's new perspective changed his operations. "I decided haying was not feasible for us, so I sold every piece of equipment I had in 1995. We used to calve in March and April, but I switched to calving in June and July, which decreased the need to feed hay. Most years I do not need to feed any hay." Across more than 11,900 acres, Oswald has installed around 50 permanent pastures, with another 50 temporary pastures made using movable electric fencing. He rotates cattle through each pasture once or twice a year for a couple of days at a time. This creates high-intensity grazing for very short durations, mimicking natural processes and historical grazing by wildlife. High-intensity, low-frequency grazing helps to encourage plant root growth, sustains biodiversity by decreasing pressure on only those plants desirable to livestock, minimizes disturbance to soil structure, and keeps enough plant biomass to cover the soil throughout the year – all key principles of promoting soil health.

However, Oswald acknowledges that making these changes may not be easy or always necessary. Many conventional operations are still successful. Currently, only 3% of farms and ranches across the United States focus management techniques on improving soil health.

***"There has to be a reason to switch.
For me, it was the economic piece."***

Oswald attests that his operation is much more successful now and that profitability is tied directly to the changes he has made to his operations. Without the need to sell hay or feed it to his cattle, he has eliminated all costs related to hay production. Diversifying his cattle operation to include stockers with cow-calves and adding the frequent rotations has also provided necessary flexibility and resilience when challenges such as severe drought occur. Because he has a direct-to-consumer business, his prices do not fluctuate with the cattle cycle. "I don't charge more for my beef, even though I probably could. People want that connection to their food." Almost all of Oswald's business comes through word of mouth and he has loyal customers, some who

have expressed that their support is due to the way he ranches.

Changing his management style has also come with unexpected benefits, including more free time and more enjoyment from his work.

***"It's not more work to ranch this way,
just different work."***

But there have also been unexpected drawbacks too, the biggest for Oswald being a lack of social support. Despite the support from other members of the school program, he found that his practices are largely absent within his community. This is a common sentiment echoed by ranchers and farmers nationwide exploring similar techniques. Family dynamics around management decisions can be particularly challenging. However, as awareness about the importance of soil health increases, support for promoting soil health is gaining momentum. "It gives me hope."

For others curious to learn more about soil health, Oswald recommends one resource in particular. "UnderstandingAg.com is a good place to start." At COL, some of our stewardship staff have been undergoing soil health training through the American Farmland Trust, an organization that has worked closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop guides, economic tools, and case studies around land management practices to promote soil health. If you're interested, ask our stewardship staff to get you connected!



WELCOME NEW LANDOWNERS!

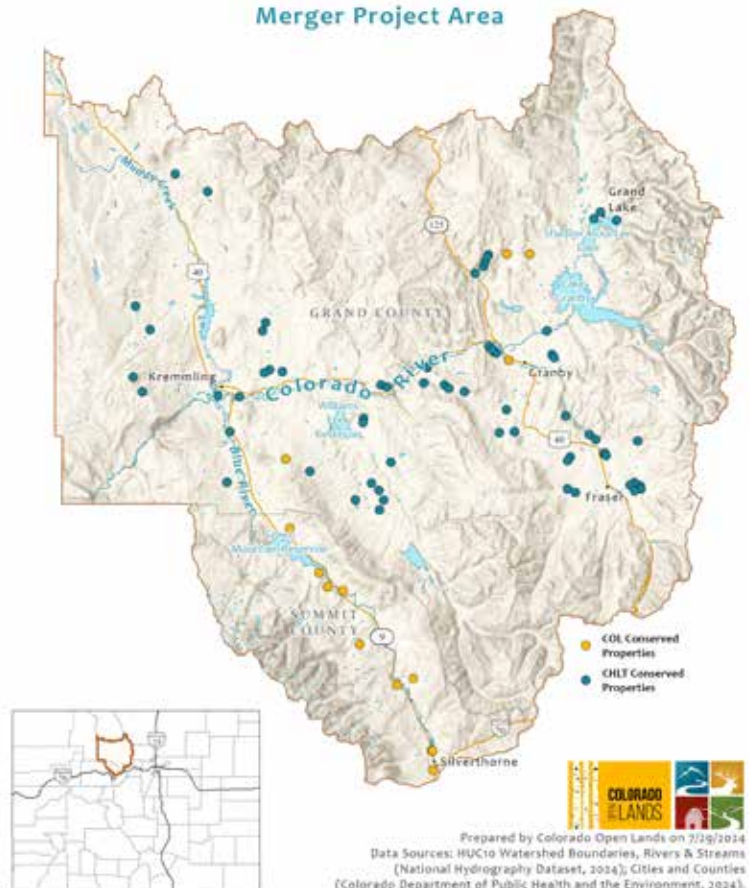
2024 was a landmark year for Colorado Open Lands (COL)! We completed 25 new conservation easements protecting critical open space, ranchland, and wildlife habitat across the state. In addition, 14 conserved properties transferred to new ownership. In December, we also finalized our merger with Colorado Headwaters Land Trust (CHLT), which brought an additional 67 conservation easements under COL's stewardship. To all the new landowners joining our community, a warm welcome! We're excited to partner with you in preserving Colorado's natural beauty.

Colorado Headwaters Land Trust:

We are thrilled to extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to all landowners who have joined us through the recent merger of COL and CHLT! This union marks a significant milestone in our shared commitment to protecting Colorado's breathtaking landscapes.

For years, both COL and CHLT have worked to safeguard the open spaces, ranchlands, and wildlife habitats that define our state. This merger strengthens our collective impact, bringing together our expertise, resources, and passion for conservation.

Colorado Open Lands & Colorado Headwaters Land Trust Merger Project Area



Since 1995, CHLT has protected over 10,000 acres of critical wildlife habitat, working agricultural lands, and open space. A final accomplishment was the completion of a conservation easement in December 2024 on the Granby Trails property, which protects 740 acres along the Colorado River. To continue the legacy of CHLT, COL has formed a local advisory committee made up of CHLT Board members who will provide direction and knowledge as we advance conservation in the headwaters of the Upper Colorado River.

To our new landowners from CHLT, we understand that your connection to your land is deeply personal. We recognize and honor the dedication you've shown in stewarding these vital landscapes. We are excited to continue the work you've started and to partner with you in maintaining the conservation values of your properties.

Whether you're new to COL or have been a part of our community for years, we want you to know that you are a vital part of our mission. We are committed to providing you with the support, resources, and expertise you need to ensure the long-term success of your conservation easements.

Welcome to the COL family! We are so glad you are here.



THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE SURVEY!

At the beginning of this spring, we sent out letters to conservation easement landowners and property managers across the state of Colorado. We asked you to participate in a survey identifying natural resource management challenges on your property. We wanted to take the time to thank all of you for your participation. Your feedback means a lot to us, and we appreciate the comments that we have already received. If you have not yet completed your survey, there is still time to do so. If you did not receive the survey in the mail, feel free to use the QR code to the right to participate. To update your contact information for future correspondence, please reach out to Chelsea Collins at ccollins@coloradoopenlands.org or 303-988-2373 ext. 214. If you have already submitted your response, please disregard the QR code.



WHEN DO I CALL COLORADO OPEN LANDS?



Colorado Open Lands prioritizes strong landowner partnerships. We are here to support you by answering questions and providing guidance on your conservation easement.

Your conservation easement may require you to reach out to us prior to engaging in certain activities. In these cases, please contact us and we will promptly respond to your request.

While each conservation easement is unique, the following are examples of activities where you will likely need to get in touch with us first:

- Constructing buildings, including residences, garages, barns, etc.
- Building or expanding roads or trails.
- Changing the administration of your water rights, including leasing your water rights or changing the point of diversion.
- Building or improving utility structures such as electrical, gas, or renewable energy projects, such as wind or solar.
- Granting an easement to a third party, including right of way, utility, or access easements.
- Improving wildlife habitat, such as restoring streams or conducting forest health treatments.
- Leasing your minerals (including oil and gas) or contact from prospective third parties that want to exercise mineral rights.
- Transferring your property, whether it's to a new landowner, family member, LLC, or a trust.

What if I am selling my property?

Are you thinking of selling your conserved property in the near future, or do you currently have someone interested in buying? Whether you are planning to transfer ownership of your property to a family member, selling the property as a whole to a third party, or planning to divide ownership, there may be conditions that are unique to your conservation easement. Please reach out to a member of our team and we can support you in taking those next steps.

What does it mean if my conservation easement prohibits “Subdivision” or “Division”?

When a conservation easement prohibits “subdivision” or “division”, the property must be held under a single ownership, whether by an individual, joint tenants, tenants in common, an LLC, or a trust. This restriction ensures the land remains undivided and protects the conservation values. Some conservation easements do allow for an ownership division, but only under specific conditions. Always consult your easement documents and our team before making any ownership changes.



ONCE AGAIN, COLORADO OPEN LANDS HAS BEEN AWARDED ACCREDITATION BY THE LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION. OUR RENEWED ACCREDITATION NOW EXTENDS THROUGH 2031!

POLLINATOR POWER: DISCOVER HOW THESE TINY INSECTS SUPPORT OUR ECOSYSTEM

What are pollinators?

Pollinators are animals or insects that help plants reproduce by transferring pollen from one flower to another. This transfer of pollen allows plants to create fruits and seeds. The most well-known pollinators are honeybees and butterflies, but there are many unsung heroes like solitary bees, wasps, moths, beetles, and flies.

Why are pollinators important?

Pollinators directly contribute to food production. Without pollinators, we wouldn't be able to eat some of our favorite foods! In fact, about 75% of all plants require pollinators to reproduce and 1/3 of crops (fruits and vegetables) rely on pollinators. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, pollinators contribute over \$34 billion in economic value to the U.S. agricultural industry. Not only do these tiny creatures assist with human crop production, but they also help native plants reproduce and provide nutrition for other wildlife like birds and fish. Pollinators play a huge role in the ecosystem and are integral in the wellbeing of all wildlife.

UNSUNG HEROES OF COLORADO POLLINATORS



Golden Northern Bumble Bee
Bombus fervidus



Melissa Blue Butterfly
Plebejus melissa



Black Blister Beetle
Epicauta pensylvanica



Bee Fly
Anastoechus sp.

How can I support our pollinators?

1. **Plant native plants:** if you plant the right vegetation, the pollinators will follow. In addition to adding beautiful native plants to your garden, you will also save money and resources since Colorado native plants require less water than plants suited for a different environment.
2. **Give solitary, native bees a home:** not all bees sting or live in colonies. Colorado is home to over 1,000 species of bees and most of them nest alone. You can build or purchase a bee house and place it on your property to help provide shelter.
3. **Avoid pesticides (if possible):** controlling pesky weeds can be difficult, but if your property has a small number of weeds to control, try other methods such as hand-pulling or using biocontrols. Maintaining healthy soils and planting native species can encourage them to outcompete those weeds!
4. **Mow less frequently and leave your leaves:** many pollinators and insects use taller grass as shelter. Once mowed, their shelter is lost. So instead of mowing frequently in the summer, give your grasses some time to grow taller. Leaves also make great shelter and nesting habitat for insects, so leave the leaves to decay on your property.
5. **Leave land undeveloped:** undeveloped or lightly managed land is perfect for pollinators! Some solitary bees live in nests underground and require open space to thrive. If your property is being used for agricultural purposes, consider designating a small portion- a field corner, fence line, or a less productive patch- as habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

Resource for Insect and Plant ID:

Inaturalist: A community-based platform where you can upload photos of any type of wildlife for identification. Experts and community enthusiasts help identify your specimens. Use their app called **Seek** to help identify plants and animals.

I SPY...WILDLIFE!



Colorado Open Lands is always seeking ways to demonstrate the impact of conservation to our communities. We talk a lot about conserving wildlife habitat, but it's even better when we can prove it! Trail cameras can bring conservation easements to life for the people who will never set foot on that land.

Do you have a trail or motion-activated camera? Has it captured something with hooves, wings, fur, or scales? If you're interested in sending us your trail camera shots, we'd be delighted to share them with our social media audiences.

Photos can be emailed to info@coloradoopenlands.org any time throughout the year!



GET TO KNOW YOUR STEWARDSHIP TEAM

Wildlife flourishes across the state of Colorado thanks to your conservation efforts. We wanted to express our gratitude by sharing our favorite encounters with wildlife.



CHERYL CUFRE



CHELSEA COLLINS



JENN MURDOCK



DIRK RASMUSSEN



HANNAH BROWN



KAREN FOLEY



SETH ARMENTROUT



KENNY PRIOR



HANNAH REID

CHERYL CUFRE SENIOR DIRECTOR OF STEWARDSHIP & STRATEGIC INITIATIVES - LAKEWOOD

It was a picture-perfect late fall day, with quaking aspens and brilliant blue skies. Our family was enjoying a hike just outside of Granby. To our complete disbelief, a moose appeared unexpectedly, hidden within the thick aspen groves. Though we wished to linger, recognizing we were too close, we quietly and quickly retreated, leaving the moose to its day.

CHELSEA COLLINS DIRECTOR OF STEWARDSHIP - LAKEWOOD

Surrounded by snow-laden spruces, we stopped to catch our breath on the trail, when out from under a log, a small, black-tipped tail emerged. An ermine, its winter coat blending seamlessly with the snowy backdrop, paused to size us up just before disappearing back into the understory.

JENN MURDOCK GIS MANAGER - LAKEWOOD

Two bobcat kits play in the snow,
With pounces and tumbles, they roll.
But Mom keeps a stare,
With a watchful glare,
As dawn casts a soft golden glow.

DIRK RASMUSSEN RESTORATION PROGRAM MANAGER - SALIDA

Sun crust alpine spring
Wolverine stalking above
Tundra holds its breath

HANNAH BROWN STEWARDSHIP MONITORING PROGRAM MANAGER - LAKEWOOD

Since moving to Colorado, I have always been on the lookout for a pika. A few years ago, I was out for a fall hike near Brainard Lake and heard/saw one. It was truly magical.

KAREN FOLEY LAND AND WATER STEWARD - WESTCLIFFE

Emerging from the arroyo before me, a large herd of pronghorn sprinted out under the blazing sun onto the grasslands, the male snorting in alarm. I gazed, mesmerized, at their strength and agility.

SETH ARMENTROUT LAND AND WATER STEWARD - ALAMOSA

I had caught zero fish all day on the Rio Grande when an osprey cannonballed into the river not 40 feet in front of me, lugging a sparkling rainbow trout to a nest up the canyon. I left the river humbled by this creature whose survival depends on its catch.

KENNY PRIOR LAND AND WATER STEWARD - LAKEWOOD

As dusk was setting in the Lost Creek Wilderness, I spotted a badger sauntering up the trail ahead of me. It guided me up a few switchbacks, stopping to look back at me on every corner, before disappearing into the understory.

HANNAH REID LAND AND WATER STEWARD - GRANBY

One of my most memorable wildlife encounters this year was getting to see the annual Sandhill Crane migration through the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. There were tens of thousands of birds in the area, and the groups of thousands that took flight all at once was like nothing I've ever seen before.