



THE DIRT | 2026

AN ANNUAL RESOURCE FOR OWNERS OF CONSERVED LANDS

FOREST HEALTH IN PRACTICE:

LANDOWNER PERSPECTIVES FROM ACROSS COLORADO

A forested hillslope on Dick and Sally's property in Clear Creek County, post-treatment.

Landowners with COL conservation easements have made great strides in maintaining and improving forest health on their properties. We interviewed three such landowners across Colorado to capture their firsthand experiences with the forest health practices they implemented, the tangible results they observed on the ground, and the key insights they gained through the process. Responses have been condensed for clarity and length.

Please describe your property.

Marna and Ron, Grand County: My parents bought the property in 1988. After my dad passed away in 1999, my mom wanted to carry out his love for the land and conservation, and the property was conserved in 2003. Marna and I hope to carry on my mom's legacy by continuing conservation efforts on the property. At 1,000 acres, the property consists mainly of lodgepole pine forest intermixed with stands of aspen, spruce, and fir. There are several meadows, and the Fraser River flows through the property.

Dick and Sally, Clear Creek County: We originally owned 25 acres around our home. After about a decade, we purchased an additional 90 acres from a friend and neighbor who felt inspired to sell it to us because of our passion for conservation and commitment to keeping the land as a single unit. Our property includes a forested hillside, meadow, and a beautiful section of Upper Bear Creek.

Jack and Kathi, Custer County: In the summer of 2014, we acquired 189 acres in a conservation easement in the Wet Mountains, an area that we had dreamed about for 25 years. The property is bordered by the Colorado Highway 165 along with BLM, national forest, and private land. Elevation on the property ranges from 8,400 feet at the highway to nearly 10,000 feet. The forest consists of aspen, Douglas fir, white fir, lodgepole and ponderosa pine, as well as lush meadows with columbine and many other wildflowers.

What got you thinking about improving your forest's health?

M&R: The Rocky Mountain pine beetle was able to take over the forest because of drought and warmer temperature trends. Before the pine beetle, the forest seemed healthy. In about 2007, we barely had any dead trees and the whole forest was green. Within the next year or so, 60-70% of the trees had turned grey, dying from the pine beetle infestation.

D&S: We wanted to create a fire break for the crest of the hillside on the southern portion of the property, which was very overgrown. Before the forest was overgrown, it was a mixture of aspen and ponderosa pine. The trees were scattered, so that the ponderosa could easily accept fire without losing the entire forest stand. The goal was to take the choked forest and replace it with a healthier, more balanced forest like the one that used to be here hundreds of years ago.

J&K: In the Fall of 2016, the Junkins Fire burned through the property. There was nothing left but charred remnants where the house was; even metal deck railings melted from the heat. Black trees and scorched earth were everywhere. We were devastated. After the shock subsided, we looked inside ourselves and decided we'd come so far, worked so hard for this life, planned so much. We still have much to be thankful for here. We have such an attachment to this land, so let's get to work and figure this out!

What forest health practices have you carried out, and which partners did you work with?

M&R: In the early 2010s, we worked with our homeowner's association to utilize a neighborhood grant for removal of standing beetle kill and infested trees. This initial project was focused primarily on areas around

the house and driveway, protecting structures in the neighborhood, but also promoting regrowth. The next phase of forest management began after the East Troublesome Fire in 2020. The fire did not burn our property, but certainly spurred interest in mitigation. Grand Fire and the Grand County Wildfire Council reached out to us, interested in creating a fire mitigation plan, and connected us with the Colorado State Forest Service. The process of building plans, securing grants, and collaborating with neighboring properties took about 5 years before work could begin. One area that was identified as high priority for fire mitigation was patch cut during the fall of 2024, and, in the fall of 2025, slash piles were made and burned throughout the property.

D&S: We worked with Jefferson Conservation District (JCD) to create a fire break and a more fire-resilient forest; they're incredibly knowledgeable about forestry. We were able to get 90% of the project grant funded, which made it economically feasible. From initial conversations with JCD to the finished project took between 9 months to a year. Getting the grant was the time-determining event. We removed an abundance of trees, so that afterwards, the forest that remained was primarily composed of ponderosa pine and aspen trees. Some of the trees that were removed were sold and some were used to make mulch.



Jack and Kathi's property in Custer County, 8 years after the Junkins Fire.

J&K: After the 2016 Junkins Fire, we worked with local contractors to remove the building debris that winter and cut burnt trees in spring of 2017. The cut trees were laid perpendicular to steep slopes to minimize erosion. In June 2018, we worked with the Mile High Youth Corp for two weeks to cut burnt trees and create log erosion barriers for slope stabilization. The Youth Corp also spread grass seed and planted over 100 new tree saplings that were purchased from the Colorado State Forest Service Nursery. Following floods that occurred in 2018, we connected with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop a forest management plan and install 28 log and boulder structures from the upper wash to the lower meadows to control the flow of water and debris. The forest management plan entailed removing burned, dead, and diseased trees to mitigate future fire risks.

What visible changes have you noticed in your forest since implementing forest health practices?

M&R: Our first thought after the first phase of tree removal done by the homeowner's association was "look at the view!" Tree removal opened a whole new viewshed. We noticed nice regrowth in those areas just a couple of summers later, and now, over 10 years later, the new trees are very healthy. Having just completed the second phase of forest management, we are very interested to see what the area looks like in a few years. We frequently see moose, bears, deer, and many small mammals on our property. We absolutely believe our property has become more resilient after both management phases!

D&S: We have many more bird species now. Before treatment, the predator birds couldn't fly into the forest because of the tree density. Now, you can see birds perching on the top of the ponderosa across the property. Owls came back. We now have three species of owls, as opposed to one. It gives me goosebumps! The whole biology of the land has gone through a radical transformation.

J&K: Today, we have the start of a thriving aspen forest with many wildflowers and vegetation in the burned areas. There is once more an abundance of wildlife. The grass grows belly-high to an elk!



A bear on Marna and Ron's property in Grand County.

Are there any key lessons you learned that you would like to share?

M&R: Make sure you have a clear game plan and are very specific with consultants about what exactly you want to achieve before work starts. Additionally, ensure you have a very clear description of where work will be done – this can be difficult with large acre projects, especially when working with several different consultants. We learned it is important to be there to check in on the work when it is being completed, just so you have a clear understanding of what is happening during all stages and aren't surprised by the aesthetic outcomes.

D&S: You don't need to do it all at once. Once you get into the groove to know exactly what the processes are, it goes quicker, and it goes more efficiently. Also, it's possible to get financial help. And that will take away a lot of stress. Finally, be willing to live with and work with disturbed land for a year or two. Or even more than two years. Because you can look towards the future and understand what will happen once you allow the land to recuperate.

J&K: There is no routine in any given week when it comes to owning a mountain property. Noxious weeds need to constantly be mitigated, pests in smaller trees need to be treated, the existing dams need to be cleaned out for sludge over time, and the fallen trees need to be cut for firewood. There is no end to the work, but we **love** it. We wouldn't have it any other way with being so close to nature.



BUILDING DROUGHT RESILIENCE ON CONSERVED AGRICULTURAL LANDS

As Colorado emerges from one of the driest winters in the state's history, it is no surprise that drought is on the top of everyone's mind, especially for those whose livelihoods depend on the land. In this article, we highlight how a landowner adapted to drought by evolving their agricultural practices to enhance long-term resilience, focusing on the specific shifts they've made and the results of those improvements.

Christy Wyckoff owns the conserved Redwing Ranch in Huerfano County and has seen significant changes to the property as result of the prolonged drought. When Christy first purchased the ranch in 2006, there were six ponds that would remain full year-round. Now, three of the ponds are dry and the others only hold water seasonally. Additionally, this past fall, several wells went dry while others demonstrated fluctuating water levels. "We keep thinking, what's the next thing that's coming? It can be overwhelming, but it is a reality we are all facing," she remarked.

Along with prolonged drought and changes in precipitation patterns comes challenges for management: some of which Christy and her team anticipated, and others which were unexpected. They expected the noxious weeds that thrive in low water conditions that have overtaken some of the pastures. "This past year we saw cheatgrass in places we haven't seen it before."

Less expected was the delay between precipitation events (or lack thereof) and on-the-ground impacts. "When a pond doesn't fill or a creek goes dry, that's not as surprising in a dry year and can be a bit easier to plan around. But underground, you cannot see what is happening, so it makes it hard to plan for the effects of how ground water deposited higher up is moving through different geologic layers. One basin might have a nine-month delay between precipitation

and its flow at a spring downhill. There is a disconnect between the sky and the ground and that can have real impacts on wetlands and stock water systems."

Despite the seemingly grim outlook of long-term drought predictions, Christy and her team are optimistic that they can navigate the dry conditions. They make both short-term, reactive decisions based on the reality on the ground, as well as develop and use long-term adaptive management plans. Some of these strategies include using portable infrastructure for water and fencing to graze pastures according to their goals for each pasture, using and adjusting grazing plans in real time, and considering new technologies, such as virtual fencing for increased efficiency and adaptability.

"We look at our management from both an ecological and a business perspective. As I like to say, we manage from the ground up, and it all starts with leaving forage behind to feed soil health which then feeds our cattle." Christy and her team increase resilience by managing for mosaics created by different vegetation types and different grazing intensities. By having the cattle graze less than 50% of the forage, the soils remain covered, which insulates them from the sun and buffers them from wind, decreasing evaporative loss and increasing organic material in the soils. "Our goal is that every drop of water that falls on the ranch soaks into the ground and doesn't sheet off or drain away. We want that water to take its time moving through the system so the plants can use it to grow and feed our cattle and the soil microbes."

To become more resilient, Christy emphasizes that planning is essential, even if those plans change. To develop their seasonal grazing plans, the Redwing team uses the United States Department of Agriculture's Web Soil Survey to estimate forage productiv-

A pond on Redwing Ranch in 2022 (left) and 2024 (right).



ity in each pasture and then verify it in the field. By calculating the available stock days per acre based on the forage in each pasture, Redwing Ranch can manage the livestock and seasonal growth in ways that keep the cattle on a high nutritional plane as well as drive higher biodiversity and increased soil health. “Inevitably your grazing plans will change year-to-year and even throughout the year, so knowing your forage productivity in a variety of growing conditions is critical to operational resilience.”

When asked what advice she would give to landowners wanting to increase resilience to drought, Christy said, “There is a mindset that changing your operations to adaptive grazing takes a lot more work. Yes, there is a learning curve that may be more work at first, but it allows you to manage your grass better which can have a significant benefit to your bottom line and your ranch’s resilience. Ranchers want to grow more grass to grow more beef, year in and year out, and this is the recipe to do that.” Through livestock management that

prioritizes ground cover and diversity across the ranch, Christy believes that many drought-related challenges can be navigated. She remains optimistic about the path ahead and the benefits of continued adaptation on the ranch, declaring, “The potential of adaptive management for improving the ground and the business is very exciting!”

Christy and her team will be teaching a grazing management workshop for women in the land management and ranching space at Redwing Ranch, August 21st to 23rd, where participants will learn how to make a grazing plan, calculate forage estimations, and use electric fence for improved utilization. The workshop demonstrates how accessible adaptive management and resilience can be for anyone in any landscape. If you are interested in joining a workshop, visit their website www.redwingranch.us/events. Local rates and scholarships are available!

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Colorado Open Lands now has a podcast!



We discuss the people, partnerships, and landscapes that make conservation possible in Colorado.

Find Landlines on all major podcast platforms or search Youtube for Colorado Open Lands!

WE ASKED, YOU ANSWERED!

Last spring, Colorado Open Lands distributed a questionnaire to all landowners and property managers that own or manage property with a conservation easement held by COL. We received 165 responses representing a wide range of perspectives, geographies, and land stewardship goals. We gained valuable insights into the land management challenges you face, the resources that are most helpful to you, and how COL can best support you in stewarding your land. Thank you for your time and effort in filling out these surveys!

3 Pressing Land Management Challenges - and Resources to Navigate Them



WILDFIRE

The Colorado State Forest Service offers information and funding opportunities through the Forest Restoration & Wildfire Risk Mitigation Grant Program. Visit csfs.colostate.edu/homeowners-landowners



INVASIVE PLANTS

Your local Natural Resource Conservation Service and Colorado State University Extension offices offer technical assistance programs, cost-sharing for biological or chemical controls, and prevention resources.

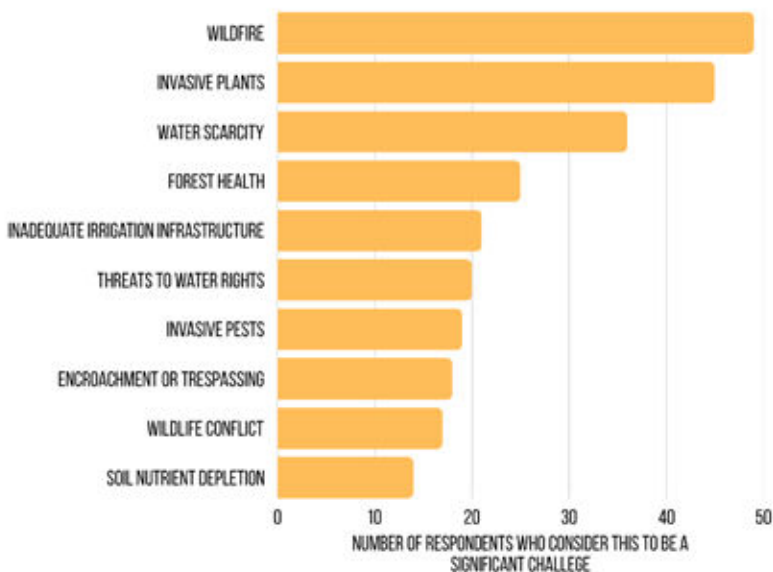


WATER SCARCITY

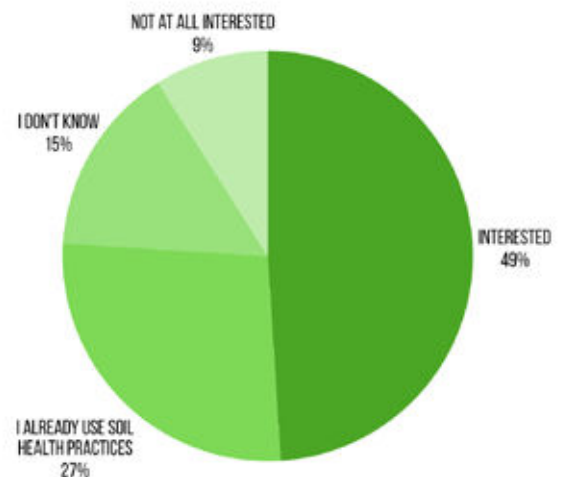
The Colorado Water Conservation Board offers a variety of grant opportunities that support water conservation, agricultural efficiency, and watershed health. Visit cwcb.colorado.gov/funding

We hope that a few of the resources listed in this newsletter can serve as a starting point towards addressing pertinent land management challenges. For more information on these resources, or for additional resource inquiries, contact the COL Stewardship team.

10 Most Significant Land Management Challenges



Landowners Interested in Soil Health Practices



If you are interested in soil health, please reach out to our Stewardship team to be connected to further resources.

WHEN TO CONTACT COLORADO OPEN LANDS

Relationships with landowners are at the heart of our Stewardship program here at Colorado Open Lands. We view this partnership as a long-term commitment to the health and legacy of your property. Open communication is key to this partnership, and we are available to answer questions about your conservation easement and provide resources to support your land stewardship goals.

Some activities such as building new structures or transferring ownership may require you to contact us before moving forward. If you're ever unsure, it is always best to reach out first. Below, we've highlighted a few common scenarios in which you should contact COL before taking any further action.

Property Transfer/Subdivision

My conservation easement property is made up of multiple county tax parcels, and I'm considering transferring one parcel to a family member, neighbor, or other party while keeping the other parcels in my name. Should I contact COL?

Yes, please contact us! COL should be notified before any sale or transfer so we can provide you, your realtor, or the interested buyer with important information about the conservation easement.

Additionally, transferring ownership of a portion of your property is considered a "subdivision" or "division" of the property. Most conservation easements do not allow subdivision/division, though a small number may include narrow exceptions. Please contact COL before making any plans so we can help you understand how your conservation easement applies.

Utility or Pipeline Request

I received a request from a utility company or other third party to install a pipeline, powerline, or other utility across my property. Should I contact COL?

Yes, please contact us! Giving a third party any access, use, or ownership rights to your property must be reviewed by COL in order to ensure that the project is consistent with your conservation easement. Please connect with us right away, especially before entering into any agreement.

Please reach out to Chelsea Collins, Director of Stewardship, with any stewardship-related inquiries at (303) 988-2373 ext. 214 or ccollins@coloradoopenlands.org.

American Farmland Trust Grant Opportunity

COL is excited to share a funding opportunity from the American Farmland Trust to help families navigate the transition of land ownership to the next generation. The Farm and Ranch Transition Support Grant Program is open to landowners that own land protected by a conservation easement or who are working towards a conservation easement. Awards of up to \$10,000 per project can be used for either professional services or infrastructure and equipment that would aid in succession planning or the transfer of a conserved property.

Applications are open through June 2027 or until all available funding has been awarded. **As a qualified Land Transfer Navigator Organization, COL can assist in the application process.** For more information, please reach out to Seth Armentrout at (719)-289-7332; sarmentrout@coloradoopenlands.org.

AFT has assembled a Farm Transfer Toolkit. Visit farmlandinfo.org/farm-transfer-toolkit/ for this free resource.

GET TO KNOW YOUR STEWARDSHIP TEAM

Stewardship staff travel the state all year! We shared our favorite Colorado roads and byways below.



CHERYL CUFRE



CHELSEA COLLINS



JENN MURDOCK



DIRK RASMUSSEN



HANNAH MCCLURE



KAREN FOLEY



KENNY PRIOR



HANNAH REID



RYAN HOLT



ELLIE ROSHAK

CHERYL CUFRE SR. DIR. STEWARDSHIP & STRATEGIC INITIATIVES – LAKEWOOD
Highway 12, known as the Highway of Legends, is a National Scenic Byway that runs from Walsenburg to Trinidad in southern Colorado. Between the breathtaking Spanish Peaks, the unique volcanic rock formations and the charm of La Veta, this hidden gem is always a detour I'm willing to take.

CHELSEA COLLINS DIRECTOR OF STEWARDSHIP – LAKEWOOD
Highway 133 between Carbondale and Paonia holds a special place in my heart because I first drove it during my first summer with COL. Climbing toward McClure pass, you wind through an incredible mix of landscapes in a single drive, red rock along the Crystal River, open ranch lands, and dense aspen groves as you look out toward the West Elk Mountain Wilderness.

JENN MURDOCK GIS MANAGER – LAKEWOOD
Driving Highway 141 through Unaweep Canyon, known as the “canyon with two mouths,” reveals a rare river system that flows in opposite directions from a central divide. The route travels through geologic time, from Dakota and Triassic sandstone all the way back to Precambrian basement rock, on which excellent climbing abounds!

DIRK RASMUSSEN SENIOR RESTORATION PROGRAM MANAGER – SALIDA
The Tennessee Pass area along Highway 24 between Leadville and Minturn is my favorite stretch of road. With mature beaver complexes, striking geology, and endless jumping-off points, it invites exploration at every turn.

HANNAH MCCLURE STEWARDSHIP MONITORING PROGRAM MANAGER – LAKEWOOD
My favorite Colorado highway is Highway 82, especially the stretch between Aspen and Independence Pass in the summer. The wildflowers and alpine scenery are incredible, and the fact that the road is only open seasonally makes it feel even more special.

KAREN FOLEY LAND AND WATER STEWARD – WESTCLIFFE
Colorado Highway 165, part of the Frontier Pathways Scenic and Historic Byway, is my favorite, especially in the fall due to the many aspen stands that sport yellow, orange, and red leaves. It also provides access to many excellent campgrounds and trailheads for recreating in the Wet Mountains, and a stop at Bishop's Castle too!

KENNY PRIOR LAND AND WATER STEWARD – LAKEWOOD
Traversing a winding rim almost 2000 feet above the Gunnison River, Highway 92 between the Blue Mesa Dam and Crawford is one of my favorite scenic drives in the whole state. There's an abundance of pullouts that reveal extraordinary views of the canyon below and San Juan mountains in the distance.

HANNAH REID LAND AND WATER STEWARD - GRANBY
My favorite highway is Highway 125 between Granby and the summit of Willow Creek Pass. I have spent countless hours exploring the public lands accessed along this road, and watching the vegetation regenerate a little stronger each summer succeeding the East Troublesome Fire is so inspiring.

RYAN HOLT RESTORATION LANDSCAPE COORDINATOR - GRANBY
My favorite stretch of highway in Colorado is Highway 50 between Poncha Springs and Montrose. I used to drive this stretch a lot during my first seasonal job and have fond memories of watching the moon rise over Blue Mesa Reservoir.

ELLIE ROSHAK MORGRIDGE FAMILY FOUNDATION LAND STEWARDSHIP FELLOW - LAKEWOOD
Highway 7 along the St. Vrain Canyon west of Lyons is a nostalgic route for me, reminding me of all my hiking trips in the southern side of RMNP, and camping trips with friends as a teenager. These days, I love rock climbing and fishing along this road, and the views aren't half bad either!