COLORADO OPEN LANDS

IMPACT REPORT






2024

782
TOTAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS HELD

707,564
TOTAL ACRES PROTECTED

50
COLORADO COUNTIES IMPACTED BY OUR WORK

3,300
MILES OF WATERWAYS PROTECTED

MORE THAN 40 YEARS OF IMPACT

WHAT WE DO

Colorado Open Lands protects Colorado's land and water for people and wildlife. We work with landowners, donors, and community partners to find creative solutions that benefit current and future generations of Coloradans.

WHY WE DO IT

Protecting Colorado's most treasured landscapes and waterways is in the interest of all Coloradans. Colorado's outstanding quality of life comes from its open lands. By protecting land and water, we ensure a viable future for our wildlife, iconic views, healthy waterways, local food, Western culture, rural economies, and recreation opportunities, in perpetuity.

700,000 ACRES

One acre is easy to picture. It could be the size of the lot your house sits on or the size of the field where we watch the Denver Broncos play. But 700,000 acres? That's a little more difficult to imagine without help.

Start with the 250,000-acre Rocky Mountain National Park. Add in our other three national parks - Great Sand Dunes, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and Mesa Verde. Then throw in your favorite Colorado state park. In fact, add in all of the 54 state parks in Colorado. That still doesn't add up to 700,000 acres. It's that much land. So please forgive our urge to celebrate!

This milestone didn't just happen on its own. It took the community of our generous financial supporters, the hundreds of private landowners who chose COL to protect their working and open lands, and a team of talented professionals who work and innovate every day to make this happen.

While 700,000 acres is a wonderful accomplishment, and while it's important to pause and reflect, the urgency of this work going forward has never been greater. Development pressure and a demand for conservation are increasing in Colorado. Pressure on wildlife, threats to our iconic scenic views, and the loss of farm and ranch land are growing. That's why COL is committed to doubling down in the coming years to protect the last great open spaces in Colorado. We hope you will continue with us in this effort.

This past year has given us much to celebrate, but with so much uncertainty in the world around us, it has also given us a new purpose to redouble our efforts on this important conservation work. We appreciate all you do to help make this work possible and hope we can continue to count on your support.

Read on to learn more about this year's accomplishments and ways we're adapting for future challenges.

LAZY 3 RANCH, GUNNISON COUNTY

MICHIGAN CREEK FISHING PRESERVE, PARK COUNTY

ARROYOS DEL SOL, WELD COUNTY

JACK RABBIT AND FIRST CREEKS, MOFFAT COUNTY

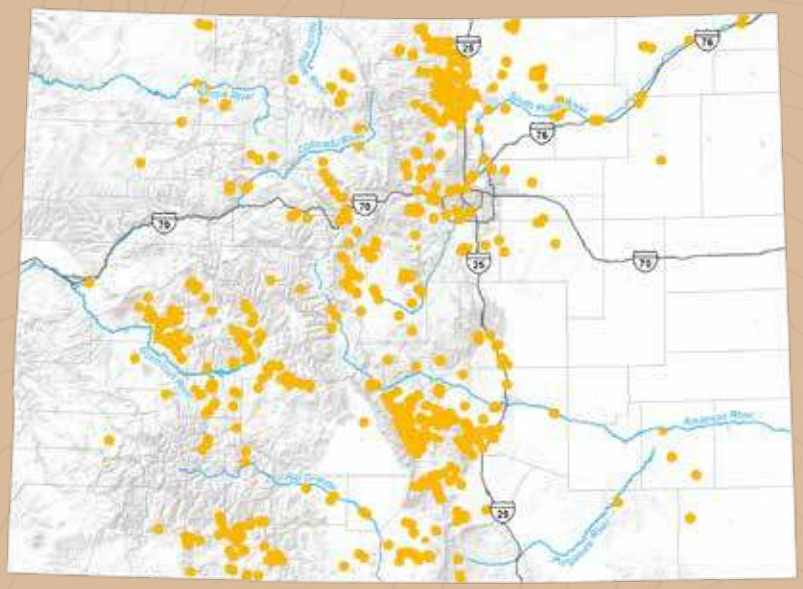
COCHETOPA DOME RANCH, SAGUACHE COUNTY

A RECORD-BREAKING YEAR FOR CONSERVATION

In 2024, Colorado Open Lands' work extended into 13 of Colorado's 64 counties and reached every corner of the state. The smallest project, just five acres, added additional area to the crown jewel of the Town of Westcliffe: the Bluff Park. Conserving this park protects expansive views to the towering Sangre de Cristo mountains beyond. The Bluff is where families and communities gather and recharge their bodies and souls.

One of COL's largest projects of the year, Warner Ranch, is comprised of 1,809 acres in Weld County. It is a Centennial Ranch (owned and operated by the same family for over 100 years) that represents a piece of Colorado's agricultural history, with a landowner that has demonstrated a longstanding conservation ethic. Protecting Warner Ranch also protects a senior water right, critically important to the future of farming and ranching in northeast Colorado.

If we described in detail each of the projects that our staff completed in 2024, this document would have to be much longer! Instead, let us share some highlights by region on the following page.



Yellow circles on map represent Colorado Open Lands projects to date

27
PROJECTS

21,598
ACRES

$8.3M
IN PUBLIC FUNDS RAISED

JAMES AND LINDSEY PAINE RANCH, COSTILLA COUNTY

SALAZAR RANCHES CONEJOS, CONEJOS COUNTY

TEXAS CREEK RANCH, CUSTER COUNTY

MCDERMAND SILVER SPRINGS RANCH, GUNNISON COUNTY

GREENLEAF RANCH, CUSTER COUNTY

ACCOMPLISHMENTS BY REGION

GUNNISON BASIN: We continued our fruitful partnership with local entity Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy on three outstanding ranching properties. Two are highly visible from state highways, protecting the viewshed for local travelers. The third features large open range for cattle grazing. And all three include outstanding surface water rights!

SAN LUIS VALLEY: It was an outstanding year for conservation in this area that features some of the most senior water rights in the entire state. In addition to conserving three cattle ranches, we collaborated on a project for a privately held parcel to be purchased by the local municipality and ultimately used to protect and expand public access in an area of the state where parks and trails are rare.

NORTHEAST COLORADO: We protected three important agricultural properties along with one large public open space. The ranches are a mix of irrigated and dryland, cattle grazing and crops. They represent the continued legacy of agriculture along the Lower South Platte River corridor. The public access project brought together many partners and an enormous public engagement process, resulting in nearly 1,000 acres acquired and protected for the Town of Greeley residents and visitors to recreate.

NORTHWEST COLORADO: We advanced many projects in this area and finalized one. This ranch of open sagebrush and riparian wetlands abuts many conserved and public lands, adding to the benefits for migrating wildlife. The world's second largest elk herd is known to travel therein.

CENTRAL COLORADO: This year, partnerships brought great successes. We helped Central Colorado Conservancy expand an existing project that features public access and Arkansas River frontage. In Park County, we collaborated with partners including Western Rivers Conservancy and Colorado Parks and Wildlife to bring a new public fishing preserve to Colorado.

WET MOUNTAIN VALLEY: Now three years into our merger with the local land trust, conservation in the Wet Mountain Valley is picking up powerful steam. We not only expanded the Bluff Park as described in the previous page, we also protected several ranches that make up the valley floor, some of which have been owned and operated by the same family for generations. We also protected a property at the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains where a local family cares for and releases injured and rehabilitated wildlife.

COLORADO HEADWATERS: In December, our newly merged partner Colorado Headwaters Land Trust conserved a project with high visibility and connectivity to the Town of Granby. The public access and habitat protection it provides is unmatched. This property is now under permanent stewardship by Colorado Open Lands.

SOUTHEAST COLORADO: We continued our partnership with Southern Plains Land Trust on a historic property that will be used for public education and wildlife habitat.

CLEAR CREEK: We collaborated with Mountain Area Land Trust on a parcel they own which is highly visible from Interstate 70. Millions of people will continue to enjoy the uninterrupted views each year!

PHOTO BY SUSAN HERPEL

PROTECTING THE HEADWATERS REGION OF THE COLORADO RIVER

On December 31, 2024, Colorado Headwaters Land Trust (CHLT), based in Grand County, and Colorado Open Lands formally merged to join forces to re-energize land and water protection in Grand County and the headwaters of the Colorado River.

For several decades our two organizations have worked together through various partnerships to protect the important open lands and waters of this region. Now CHLT and COL have created a single entity to advance meaningful conservation and restoration in the Upper Colorado River Watershed in Grand County and beyond.

Grand County is a unique and special place. It contains the headwaters of the Colorado River, a river system that is depended upon by millions of residents and important wildlife across the West. It is home to some of Colorado's most iconic landscapes, world class fishing, unforgettable wildlife encounters, and epic winter recreation, and it serves as the western gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. From the traditional western ranching communities of Kremmling, Granby, and Hot Sulfur Springs to the recreation and tourism towns of Fraser, Winter Park, and Grand Lake, Grand County is a portrait of the diversity of all that Colorado has to offer. Only 90 minutes from the Denver metro area, this region is still a refuge from the bustling urbanization of the Front Range.

But Grand County is also a place under threat.

Over the next 25 years, Grand County's population is expected to grow quickly, driven by remote workers and second homeowners who are attracted to the outdoors and are seeking a higher quality of life. Simultaneously, the Colorado River and its tributaries, such as the Blue and Fraser Rivers, face unprecedented pressures as a result of overallocation, population growth, and a changing climate.

While there has been great success in our past conservation work, both organizations see the need and opportunity to do more. Together, we can bring additional resources to Grand County and the Colorado River headwaters region, accelerate our conservation efforts, and catalyze new work. We believe by combining the deep community connections and trust held by CHLT and the diverse expertise of a statewide organization like COL, we can accelerate the pace of land protection in this dynamic and fast-growing community.

TEACHER WORKSHOP AT SACRAMENTO CREEK RANCH | FAIRPLAY, CO

CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP SERIES OUTING | KENOSHA PASS, CO

CONNECTING NEW COMMUNITIES TO LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION

In addition to stewarding the open lands and water that Colorado Open Lands has protected over our four decades of work, COL also works to steward and grow Colorado's strong land conservation ethic. We do this through a suite of outreach and education programs that engage a wide diversity of communities, including young professionals, teachers, youth, and other folks from around the state that are interested in learning more about land and water conservation.

For the past several years, our flagship education program has been our Conservation Leadership Series. This program engages a cohort of young professionals in a year-long series of briefings, field visits, and landowner engagement to learn more about the how and why of our conservation and restoration work. This year marks more than 100 current and past participants. Many graduates of the program stay engaged with COL and conservation throughout their careers and their lives.

COL also hosts Teacher Workshops that engage K-12 educators in rigorous week-long training programs, giving them lesson ideas and tools to teach about land and water conservation in their own classrooms. We also publish two annual editions of Conserved Colorado, a guide to goods and services produced on conserved lands to help connect consumers with conservation. Finally, we host a series of free educational field trips and webinars, open to the public, to help deepen Coloradans' understanding of the importance of land and water conservation.

For more information on any of these programs, including how to register for a free event, please visit coloradoopenlands.org/outreach-and-education

2024 RESTORATION PROJECT OUTSIDE OF HOT SULFUR SPRINGS

HEALTHY LANDS AND WATER: EXPANDING OUR LAND AND RESTORATION WORK

In 2024, we significantly expanded our land and water restoration work with the launch of a comprehensive program at COL called "Healthy Lands and Water." Our objective is to take a close look at many of the lands that we have worked to protect over the years and begin to help restore the health of those lands and waters.

From an idea born just a few years ago, COL's Healthy Lands and Water program is becoming an even greater facet of our work statewide, and has even garnered national attention and support. Now we are shaping the restoration of lands and waterways across the state. From figuring out how to convert irrigated farmland to less water-intensive use to supporting landowners in more healthy land management, Colorado Open Lands sees tremendous opportunity in restoration work for public benefit for the people and wildlife of Colorado.

RESTORING COLORADO'S STREAMS AND RIVERS

By focusing on the restoration of streams and rivers, our program exemplifies the power of community-driven initiatives in ensuring a sustainable future for our precious water resources. Together, we can reconnect, revitalize, and safeguard the lifelines that sustain our state's unparalleled beauty.

While some of these restoration projects are local in nature, many of them provide statewide benefits well beyond the region where they are located. For instance, a stream restoration project in the upper reaches of the South Platte River in Park County helps filter and clean the water that eventually makes its way to Chatfield Reservoir and into the kitchen taps of Denver.

Creating more robust riparian habitat helps slow water on land, easing potential flooding from faster snow melt that comes with a changing climate. It also expands islands of wetlands that can help slow forest fires and provide refuge for wildlife. And of course, improving habitat helps improve the health of species from trout to moose and elk, helping to protect one of Colorado's most beloved treasures – our robust wildlife population.

DRYLAND RESTORATION

The expanding populations of the West are placing increasing demands on water resources. Irrigated agricultural lands are an attractive source of water during shortages. Despite conservation efforts, the permanent loss of water from some farms and ranches is unavoidable. But it also has negative consequences for wildlife, ecosystems, people, and agriculture. Restoration of previously irrigated lands to natural, self-sustaining systems offers a wide range of benefits.

COL has been actively working to address these issues and has made substantial progress toward developing practical solutions. For example, we have begun our inaugural restoration project in the San Luis Valley that focuses on a phased reduction of irrigated farmland. The goal is to promote more sustainable water use from the aquifer and ensure the long-term viability of other agricultural operations in the region.

In addition to the goal of aquifer sustainability, COL and its partners are actively working to restore a grassland ecosystem on the property. This effort will not only provide vital habitat for wildlife but also improve soil health and enhance the land's resilience. A total of 850 acres have been revegetated, and ongoing management is focused on cultivating native grasses and shrubs.

AN INNOVATIVE LOOK AT COLLABORATIONS TO PROTECT WATER IN COLORADO

Colorado Open Lands continues to exercise creativity in finding new ways to apply existing conservation tools to protect land and water. We have pioneered a new approach we call "Buy-Protect-Sell" that makes permanent conservation more affordable for farmers and provides consistent water resources for our communities.

Farmers and ranchers facing economic hardship sometimes feel that their only option is to put their land and water rights up for sale, which often severs water from land and decimates open space. The landowners' neighbors in agriculture may feel helpless when seeing farm after farm convert to dry land or developed parcels.

A recent law created a new opportunity for certain types of water entities, including ditch and reservoir companies, water conservancies, and water conservation districts, to receive state tax credits for the donation of conservation easements on land owned by any of these entities. The law also increased the benefit for donation of a conservation easement. COL is helping these water entities examine collective purchasing to protect water rights in a way that may be difficult for any one individual.

To use a hypothetical illustration, a farmer is considering selling her property. She contacts the local ditch company and offers them a right of first refusal for purchase of her property. When the farmer receives an offer from a third party, she takes that offer to the ditch company, which decides to take out a loan from the Colorado Water Conservation Board to match the offer and purchase the property. The ditch company then places the property in a conservation easement that allows for water-sharing but ensures that the water rights can never be separated from the property. They use the sale of the tax credits to repay most of their loan and then sell the property to another agricultural producer for the value of the property after the easement to pay the loan balance. The property stays in ag, the farmer gets a fair offer for her assets, a new farmer can aquire land at a more accessible price, and the water stays permanently tied to the land.

It is through creative solutions like these that COL is helping farmers stay on land and ensure a viable water future for all Coloradans.

JOIN THE CENTENNIAL SOCIETY

MAKE COLORADO OPEN LANDS A PART OF YOUR LEGACY AND HELP PROTECT COLORADO FOREVER!

HONORING FAMILIES WHO ARE COMMITTED TO PROTECTING COLORADO'S LANDS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Following Colorado's tradition as the Centennial State, COL is proud to offer our Centennial Society, recognizing those who make lasting commitments to the land through legacy gifts in their wills or estate plans. As a member of this group, your thoughtful contribution will ensure that Colorado's precious landscapes will be protected for the next century—and beyond.

"WE DO NOT INHERIT THE LAND FROM OUR ANCESTORS; WE BORROW IT FROM OUR CHILDREN"

Through membership in the Centennial Society, you play a crucial role in ensuring the continued protection of Colorado's most cherished natural resources. Members of the Centennial Society are deeply committed to preserving the land, wildlife, and way of life that define Colorado.

Your legacy will help safeguard Colorado's land and water for future generations. To express our gratitude for your commitment, Centennial Society members receive special benefits, such as exclusive tour invitations, insider updates about our work, and an annual gift from Colorado Open Lands.

Estate gifts come in all shapes and sizes. Your legal and financial advisors can help you explore options that not only leave a lasting impact but also maximize potential financial and tax benefits.

For more information, please visit our website at coloradoopenlands.planmylegacy.org or reach out to Elizabeth Silverman, Director of Philanthropy, at esilverman@coloradoopenlands.org or 303.988.2373 ext. 216. Thank you for considering this impactful gift to Colorado Open Lands. Your legacy will ensure that the places we all treasure will continue to be protected—now and for generations to come.

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