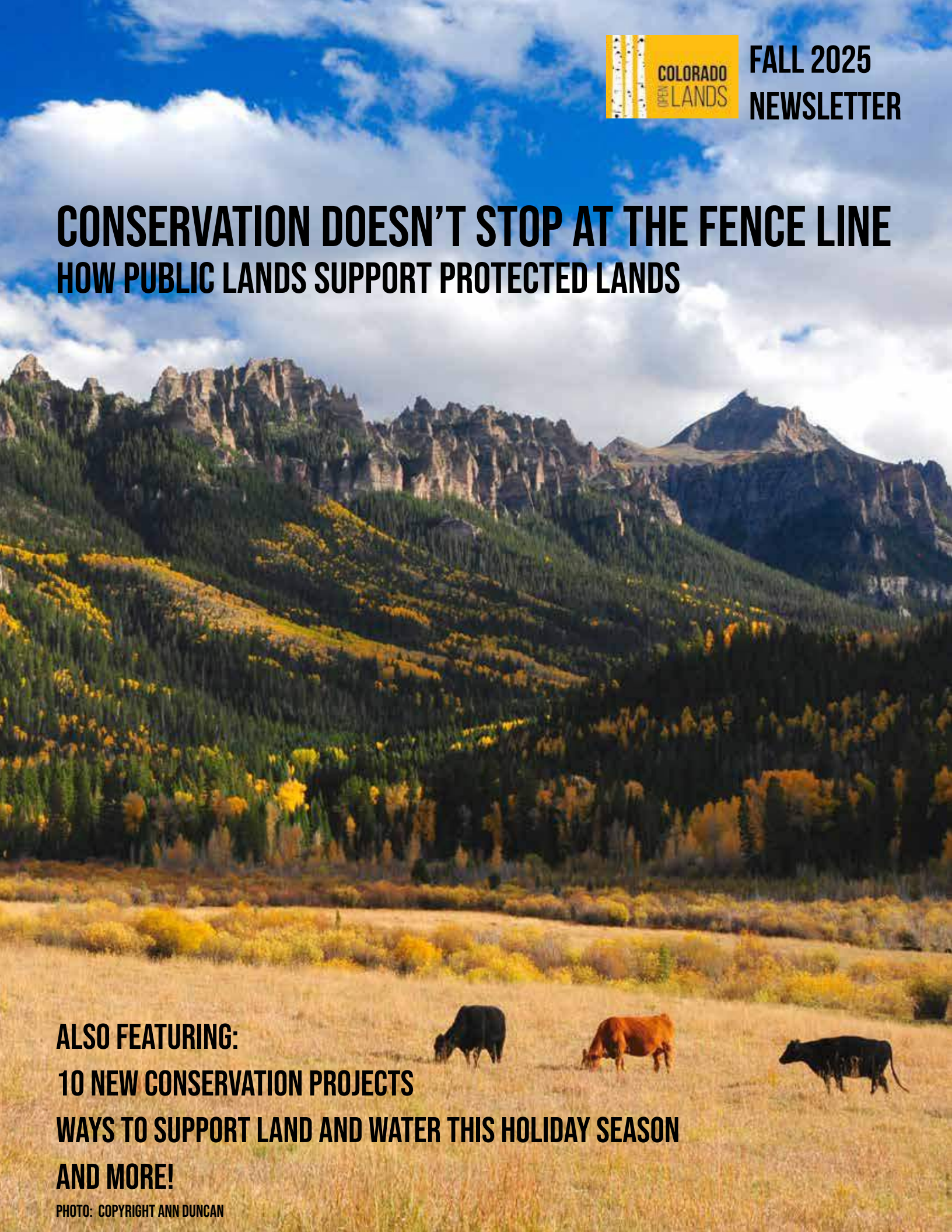
COLORADO OPEN LANDS

FALL 2025
NEWSLETTER

CONSERVATION DOESN'T STOP AT THE FENCE LINE

HOW PUBLIC LANDS SUPPORT PROTECTED LANDS



ALSO FEATURING:

10 NEW CONSERVATION PROJECTS

WAYS TO SUPPORT LAND AND WATER THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

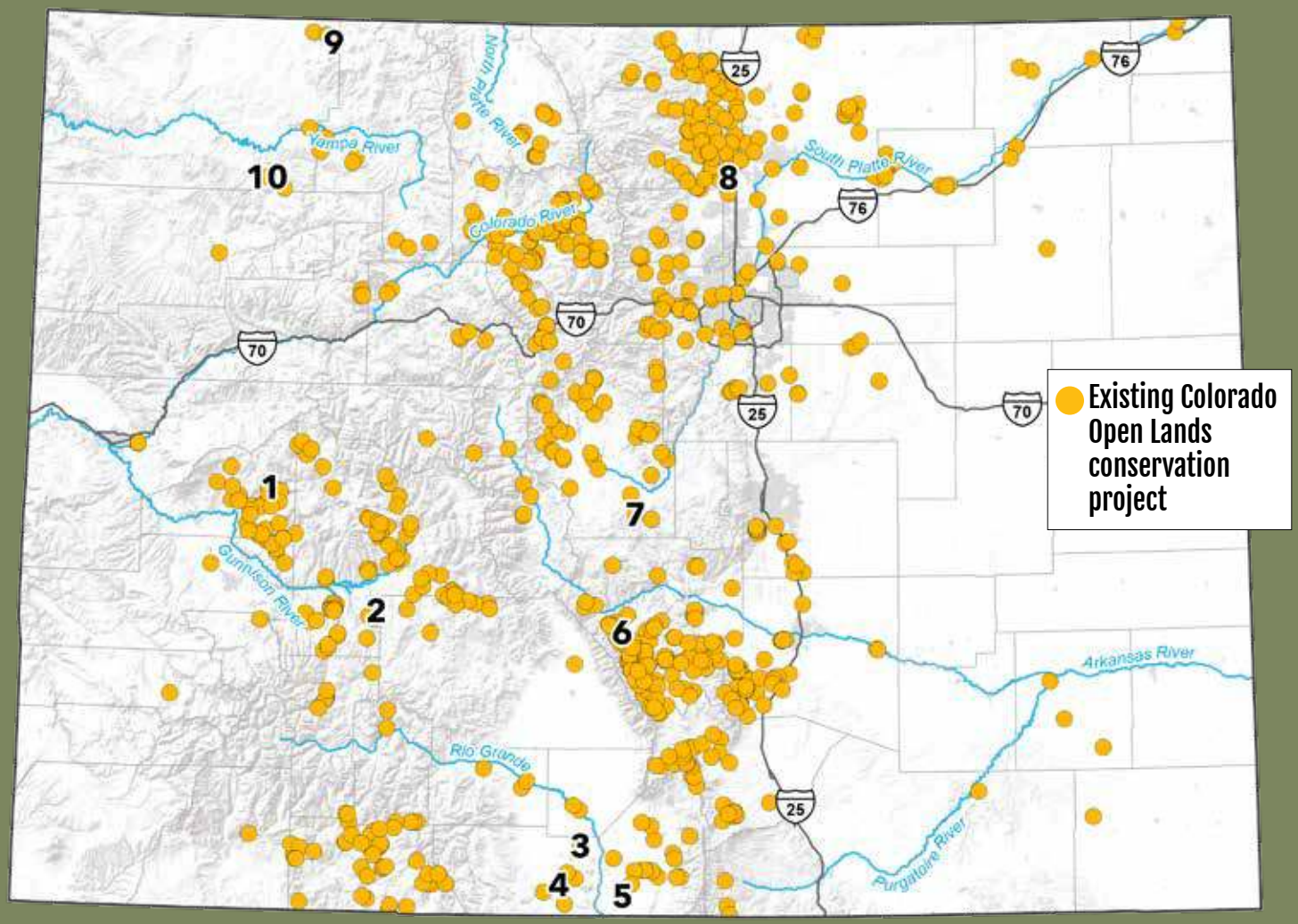
AND MORE!

PHOTO: COPYRIGHT ANN DUNCAN

Ten new conservation projects!

It's been another productive season of conservation at Colorado Open Lands. We anticipate our pace of conservation to increase even further throughout the fall and winter! Make sure you're signed up to receive COL's email updates to get the latest news as it happens at coloradoopenlands.org/subscribe.

See the map below for a guide to the newest conservation projects, and on what pages you can learn more.



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COLORADO OPEN LANDS IS PROUD TO HAVE PERMANENTLY JOINED FORCES WITH THE ORGANIZATIONS BELOW TO ADVANCE THE PACE AND QUALITY OF CONSERVATION IN COLORADO.

Colorado Conservation Trust · Legacy Land Trust · Continental Divide Land Trust · Clear Creek Land Conservancy · SLA Southwest Land Alliance · San Isabel Land Protection Trust · Colorado Headwaters Land Trust

COLORADO OPEN LANDS

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear Friend of Colorado Open Lands,

When the latest proposals came out of Washington, D.C., that consider selling some federally owned public lands, my first reaction was that we at Colorado Open Lands need not get involved, since our focus is more on protecting privately owned lands. However, it didn't take long for our phone to start ringing with calls from Colorado ranchers and farmers who expressed deep concern about this issue. Many of them directly depend on federally owned public lands in order to keep their agricultural operations sustainable.

This prompted us to do a little research to understand the impact of this issue. We quickly learned that a wide-scale sell-off of federal public lands could have a tremendously negative impact on Colorado agriculture and, in turn, our work to protect many of our working open lands in the state. Of course, Colorado's public also benefits tremendously when private working lands are protected, since they also protect the scenic vistas we treasure, open space where our wildlife roam, and the healthy waterways that sustain life all over the state.

In Colorado alone, there are more than 7.8 million acres of land administered by the Federal Bureau of Land Management with grazing leases that help sustain nearly 2,400 Colorado farms and ranches. At the state level, the Colorado State Land Board owns 2.8 million acres, of which more than 90% are made available for agricultural leases. This revenue goes directly into funding our public schools in Colorado. Many of these agricultural operations could simply not survive without this leasing access.

For us, it is a lesson that the policies of public land management and the practices of private land conservation are deeply intertwined. As we share in our cover story: "Conservation doesn't stop at the fence line." Responsible agriculture and good public land policy go hand in hand with our work to protect private lands in Colorado.

We hope you enjoy this cover article, and also read on to learn about conservation successes spanning the state in 2025. This year is shaping up to be another record year for land and water conservation at Colorado Open Lands, due largely to your support for our work. Thank you for being a part of this incredible legacy – this amazing gift of land protected in perpetuity – that you are giving to future generations.

Sincerely,

Tony Caligiuri

Tony Caligiuri
President

Cover photo by Ann Duncan was taken near Owl Creek Pass.

CONSERVATION DOESN'T STOP AT THE FENCE LINE:

How public lands support protected lands

In the vast and rugged American West,

the line between public and private lands is so much more than a boundary on a map. Public grazing lands contribute to the lifeline of an entire agricultural economy. The partnerships between private agricultural lands and federal public lands, particularly in states like Colorado, ensure the sustainability of ranching operations, the preservation of open spaces, and the stewardship of natural resources.

As political discussions reignite around the sell-off or transfer of federal lands to private buyers, private land conservation organizations like Colorado Open Lands (COL) find themselves squarely in the middle of this debate. Protecting public lands is not just an "environmental" cause; it's necessary to keep private ranches economically viable, keeping entire landscapes intact.

The Symbiotic Relationship Between Private and Public Lands

Ranchers across the West often operate on a patchwork of their own lands, interwoven with public lands managed by federal agencies like the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service. While private parcels form the home base where infrastructure like housing, barns, and critical water rights exist, the surrounding federal lands are often vital to seasonal grazing.

Sandy and Burt Guerrieri own the conserved Mill Creek Ranch and utilize federal lands to support their cattle operation. Sandy shared, "Being a rancher in Gunnison, federal grazing permits are a critical asset to high mountain ranching. In late spring, the cattle are moved from the ranch onto federal grazing permits, managed by the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management, allowing the rancher to raise grass hay on their privately owned irrigated meadow lands. This hay then feeds the cattle in the long, cold winter months."

Federal grazing leases allow ranchers to use public lands at affordable rates. This system has been in place for over a century and remains essential in the high-altitude, arid climates of the West, where a single ranch may require thousands of acres to support even a modest herd due to sparse vegetation and tough terrain.

Without access to these public lands, many ranches simply could not sustain their operations. The loss of grazing access would force ranchers to either reduce herd size significantly or seek expensive alternatives, likely pushing many out of business. In turn, this economic pressure could result in the subdivision and sale of private lands, leading to the fragmentation of open space, loss of wildlife corridors, and increased development pressure on ecologically sensitive landscapes.

Sandy detailed additional public benefits. "Public land grazing also reduces wildland fire risk, by keeping the grasses and forest floor healthy."

Why Federal Lands Matter to Private Land Conservation

Organizations like Colorado Open Lands work with landowners including ranchers to preserve lands through conservation easements: voluntary, permanent agreements that limit development while allowing continued agricultural use. The perpetual stability of many easements in Colorado relies on the long-term viability of ranching.

If public lands were sold off, as some policy proposals have suggested, ranchers would lose access to grazing leases that their operations have depended on for generations. The economic sustainability of their ranches would be jeopardized, undermining the value of conservation easements and forcing landowners into difficult decisions that could include selling conserved land or seeking amendments that weaken conservation protections. In this way, protecting federal public lands is an indirect but essential method of protecting private conservation investments.

The Economic and Ecological Stakes

Ranchers are some of our most responsible stewards of land. Their livelihoods depend on land health. Ranching is not a lifestyle that someone chooses to become wealthy; working the high-altitude landscape is a labor of love. That love extends to the careful and capable management of land and water resources.

And thus, ranching is not just an economic engine for rural communities; it is also a land management practice that can benefit the environment when done sustainably. Ranchers on federal lands are required to follow grazing plans and stewardship guidelines that often improve rangeland health and reduce fire risk. When these lands remain under federal ownership and management, they are more likely to be conserved for multiple uses, including agriculture, recreation, wildlife, and watershed protection.

The sell-off or state transfer of federal lands could result in more fencing, habitat fragmentation, reduced public access, and a prioritization of short-term economic gains like mining or real estate over long-term stewardship. Furthermore, state agencies often lack the budget and capacity to manage these lands at the same scale and scope as federal agencies, increasing the likelihood of privatization or neglect.

Conservation and Policy Can Find Alignment

As land conservation organizations offer their expertise in rural policy discussions, there is a growing recognition that conservation does not stop at the fence line. Defending the integrity of federal public lands is essential to achieving landscape-scale conservation outcomes, supporting rural economies, and sustaining agricultural legacies.

Colorado Open Lands, with its deep relationships in ranching communities and conservation networks, has a unique and important role to play in opposing federal land sell-offs. By articulating the economic consequences to private landowners and the broader threats to Colorado's open spaces and natural heritage, COL can help build a coalition of support that bridges the occasional divide between ranchers, conservationists, and recreationists.

In the American West, public lands are personal, woven into the lives, livelihoods, and legacies of those who call this region home. Their protection is dictated by policy, but is also a means to preserve our culture, our economy, and our ecology.

With every policy change proposed, the future of the West is being solidified. While transfer of lands to private buyers can happen at any time, the reverse almost never happens. Once these public lands are gone, they're likely gone forever. As threats to federal land ownership continue to surface, conservation organizations like Colorado Open Lands support private land protection, but also public lands that make working ranches possible. By doing so, access to these lands help ensure that open spaces remain open, that rural economies stay viable, and that the landscapes of the West endure for future generations.

The Many Ways Your

Provides native seed for two acres of dryland revegetation to support the **successful transition of previously irrigated land**. This will help ensure that wildlife and agriculture can continue to thrive with the reduction in groundwater pumping in areas like the San Luis Valley.

Helps **inspire a passion** for conservation in our youngest Coloradans by covering costs for teachers participating in our Teacher Workshops.

Funds one young professional to go through our year-long Conservation Leadership Series to learn about land and water conservation, inspiring **the next generation to continue** a strong conservation ethic in Colorado and beyond.

Give a gift with an impact that will last in perpetuity

GIFTS BY MAIL
Mail a check to Colorado Open Lands at 1546 Cole Boulevard, Suite #200, Lakewood, CO 80401.

CREDIT CARD
Recurring or one-time gifts can be processed online at ColoradoOpenLands.org/donate or by calling us at 303-988-2373.

DONOR ADVISED FUNDS
Don't forget your family's Donor Advised funds! Check with your fund's custodian to make a gift. Our Federal Identification Number is 84-0866211.

IRA CONTRIBUTIONS
– You can turn your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) into a meaningful gift for Colorado Open Lands, while realizing significant tax savings! Consult your financial adviser or account manager for more information.

GIFTS OF STOCK
Gifts of appreciated stock and mutual funds can be a wonderful way to support Colorado Open Lands, while realizing savings on long-term capital gains taxes! Transfers of publicly traded securities can be made to Colorado Open Lands through Charles Schwab & Co, Inc. Account # 1372-3301 and DTC #0164.

ESTATE PLANNING
By including Colorado Open Lands in your estate and retirement planning, you are making a legacy gift that supports our promise of perpetual land conservation. You may also consider listing COL as a beneficiary on your life insurance policy.

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES
Your organization can sponsor events or experiences with Colorado Open Lands!

SAVE THE DATE: Our For Love of the Land gala is returning on May 14, 2026, at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science!

Learn more about ways to give at ColoradoOpenLands.org/Ways-To-Give
or contact Elizabeth Silverman at 303.988.2373 ext. 216
or ESilverman@ColoradoOpenLands.org with questions or for routing and account information.

Giving Can Impact Colorado

Supports the **protection and conservation** of 65 acres of wildlife habitat into perpetuity.

Advances a new conservation project to permanently protect **critical elk, mule deer, or sage grouse habitat** in Northwest Colorado.

Funds on-the-ground costs for six acres of river restoration to **support healthy waterways and riparian corridors** through our Healthy Lands and Water initiative.

Many Trails, One Summit: Join a Giving Society and Help Us Protect Colorado Forever

PERENNIAL PARTNERS
Monthly donors, at any level.

EVERGREEN SOCIETY
Donate $1,000 or more annually.

CONSERVATORS SOCIETY
Donate $5,000 or more annually.

CENTENNIAL SOCIETY
Include Colorado Open Lands in your will or estate plan for a future gift.

Each giving society offers distinct opportunities for you to deepen your commitment to protecting Colorado's landscapes and legacy. Scan the QR code to learn more or contact Elizabeth Silverman at ESilverman@ColoradoOpenLands.org.

San Luis Valley

Agricultural Property in Conejos County

The ranch consists of five parcels across 549 acres. It features prime soils, and the conservation easement protects significant irrigation water rights, including surface water and groundwater. The land is used for cattle grazing, hay production, and assorted crops throughout the year, including oats and beardless barley. The landowners are a multigenerational ranching family that plans a long future of agricultural production in the San Luis Valley.

The ranch includes the active and historic floodplains of the Conejos River, offering a wealth of plant and wildlife habitat. Wet meadows, cottonwood and willow trees, and upland shrubs support a wide variety of species of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and birds. Of particular note is important riparian habitat for endangered and threatened bird species, including the southwestern willow flycatcher and the yellow-billed cuckoo. Additionally, habitat is provided for bald and golden eagles, ferruginous hawk, northern leopard frog, elk, mule deer, and Rio Grande chub. Project partners include Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, Gates Family Foundation, and Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements.

Faucette Land and Cattle Headquarters Ranch

This 3,137-acre ranch spans four separate parcels in Conejos and Alamosa Counties. It includes 1.25 miles of La Jara Creek, the associated wetlands and riparian areas, and irrigated cropland and pastures, along with native shrub and grass lands. The ranch is used for irrigated crop production and seasonal grazing. It includes significant soils and both surface and groundwater irrigation water rights.

The ranch features abundant forage, shelter, breeding ground, and migration areas for large mammals including elk, mule deer, pronghorn, black bear, and mountain lions, as well as small mammals, raptors, migratory birds, waterfowl, reptiles, and amphibians. Many Colorado Species of Concern utilize the ranch, including bald eagle, greater sandhill crane, ferruginous hawk, and northern leopard frog. Additionally, suitable habitat is provided for southwestern willow flycatcher (federally designated as endangered) and burrowing owl (designed as threatened in Colorado).

The landowning family has local roots in the San Luis Valley dating back to the 1800s. They have a strong conservation ethic, having completed another easement with COL in 2013. Project partners include Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easements. This program protects the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion of productive working lands to non-agricultural uses.

Salazar Ranches Costilla

Salazar Ranches Costilla consists of 767 acres in Costilla County west of San Luis. The Salazar family completed another easement with COL in 2024 and are strong proponents of easements as tools to protect water rights in particular. Three generations of the family are currently involved in farming and ranching and intend to do so into the future.

The property consists of center pivot-irrigated crop fields currently in peas, oats, and grass production. Other crops throughout the year include alfalfa, sorghum, and seed potatoes. Surface water rights from one ditch system support irrigation. The property provides important habitat for mule deer, elk, pronghorn, mountain lion, black bear, and many raptors and other birds of prey. It also provides habitat for Golden eagle, brown-capped rosy finch, burrowing owl, greater sandhill crane, and fringed myotis, which are all designated by Colorado Parks and Wildlife as Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the 2015 Colorado State Wildlife Action Plan. Tier 1 species represent the species which are of highest conservation priority in the state.

The property has beautiful views of the southern Sangre de Cristo mountains to the east, San Antonio Mountain in New Mexico to the south, and the Piñon Hills Bureau of Land Management area to the west. Numerous other conservation easements are within the vicinity of the property.

Central Colorado

Hillside Mountain Ranch

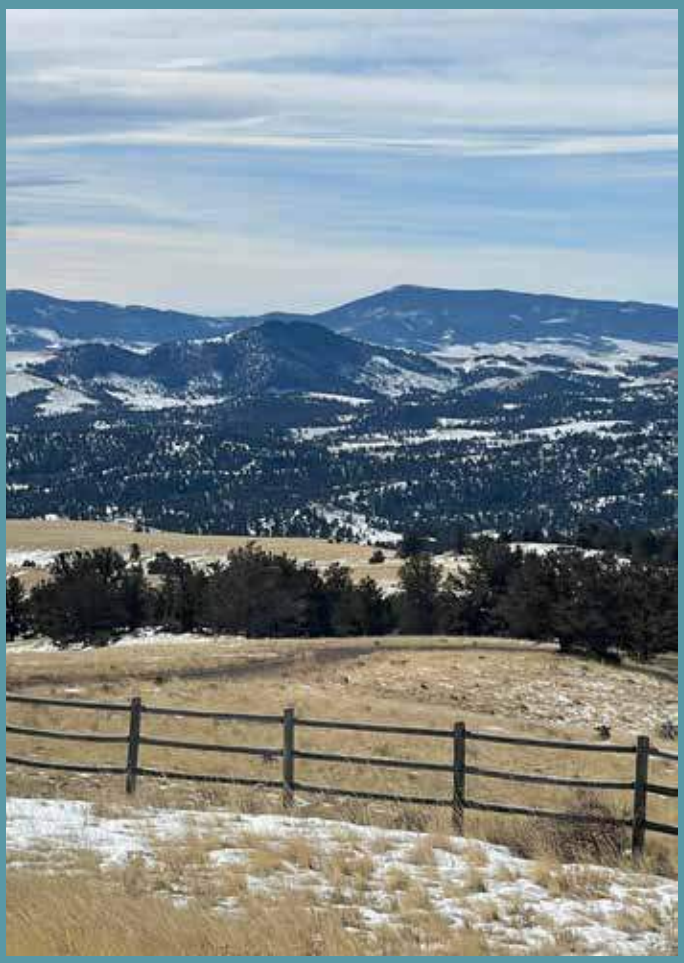
Hillside Mountain Ranch is located in the Wet Mountain Valley north of Westcliffe and is highly visible from CO Highway 69. The 314-acre property consists of mountain grasslands, upland scrub habitat, herbaceous wetlands, and hay fields irrigated by senior water rights. The property is valuable to wildlife, hosting elk year-round, as well as pronghorn, bear, badger, raptors, mule deer, fish, amphibians, and diverse songbirds.

In 2020, the landowners, Steve and Nancy Oswald of Oswald Cattle Company, purchased Hillside Mountain Ranch with the proceeds from a conservation easement on their nearby homeplace. The Oswalds originally met over 40 years ago while working on the this exact ranch, so this purchase was a dream come true! They now operate it as part of their well-respected cattle operation in the Wet Mountain Valley, which includes providing and participating in soil health and grazing workshops. Natural Resources Conservation Service was a project partner on the conservation of Hillside Mountain Ranch.

La Dolce Vita Ranch

La Dolce Vita Ranch is a 446-acre property on the north slope of Thirtynine Mile Mountain near Guffey and approximately 1/4 mile from Pike National Forest. The property is a mix of rolling montane grasslands, punctuated with mixed conifers, stands of aspen, rocky outcroppings, and springs, wetlands, and ponds. The area is important for wildlife, with elk, pronghorn, deer, many birds, bears, and mountain lions using the property throughout the year.

In 2023, La Dolce Vita Ranch was purchased by Anna Clare Monlezun and Giovanni Taormina to serve as home to three generations of their family and to operate a diversified cow-calf working ranch with grass-finishing of cattle, sheep, and free-range chickens. The property is headquarters to the family's livestock grazing consultancy and their non-profit Rangeland Living Laboratory, both dedicated to applying rangeland and ecosystem science to help bridge the gap between science and management. Anna Clare and Giovanni open their property to collaborate with local schools, Colorado State University, the former Colorado Department of Agriculture's Soil Health Program, the NRCS's Conservation Stewardship Program, and other partnerships for student research, educational workshops, and work experience. The Park County Land & Water Trust Fund was a project partner.



Northwest Colorado

Rock Ridge Ranch

The 2,564-acre Rock Ridge Ranch property is located in Moffat County between Meeker and Craig. The property consists of sagebrush shrublands, montane meadows, rock outcroppings, and gambel oak shrubland. Exceptional wildlife habitat is provided for bald eagle, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, greater sage-grouse, and greater sandhill crane (all Colorado Species of concern), burrowing owl (designated Threatened by the state), black bear, elk, moose, mountain lion, mule deer, and pronghorn. Two active and thriving Columbian sharp-tailed grouse leks (where birds conduct their courtship displays) are located on the property. Colorado Parks and Wildlife transplants some of the grouse found on this property to other leks to help bolster additional populations. Rock Ridge Ranch is visible from State Highway 13. Additionally, the property connects with 6,600 acres of public lands.

Rock Ridge Ranch has been owned and operated by the same family for almost 100 years. The original patriarch began purchasing portions of the property in the 1920s and lost the land during the Great Depression. He then worked on a neighboring family's ranch until he saved up enough money to repurchase his ranch. The family originally raised sheep, then shifted to wheat, and now graze cattle and grow hay. Project partners include Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

McKee Ranch

Located in northeastern Moffat County, this conservation easement includes two tracts of land: the 482-acre Four Mile Creek Ranch and the 1,143-acre Slater Creek Ranch. Four Mile Creek Ranch consists of sagebrush shrublands and two miles along Four Mile Creek. Slater Creek Ranch also features sagebrush shrublands along with irrigated pasture, aspen and conifer forests, and two miles of Slater Creek. The two properties are part of a larger landscape containing numerous conservation easements held by COL.

Within 10 miles of the property, 17 easements conserve 33,000 acres. Bald eagle, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, ferruginous hawk, greater sage-grouse (all Species of Concern) and burrowing owl (State Threatened) are found on McKee Ranch. Big game habitat is also provided for black bear, elk, moose, mountain lion, mule deer, and pronghorn. The properties are part of an important winter concentration area for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn.

Gunnison Basin

East Roatcap Ranch – expanding a protected property!

East Roatcap Ranch is located in Paonia in Delta County and contributes to the incredibly scenic surroundings. Previous owners had conserved 80 acres of the ranch in 2007 with a vision for conservation of the complete property. The current owners have achieved that goal by adding 297 acres to the existing conservation easement, thereby protecting the entirety of the ranch. The landowners have been engaging in active land stewardship practices, including creating settling ponds and restoring nutrients to the soil that encourage native grasses and discourage invasive plants.

The North Fork Valley, where the ranch lies, was inhabited by the Núu-agha-tūvū-pū (Ute) people until 1880. In 2023, the landowners volunteered to provide access to members of the Ute Tribe, allowing members use of their ancestral lands for the traditional harvest of native plants. The landowners have also offered the land for the tribal members to hunt but have seen more desire from the members to utilize the lands for foraging and harvesting.

Because one of the landowners is of indigenous descent himself, specifically from the K'úutìimẃé (Cochiti Pueblo People), he has a strong desire to provide access for the indigenous community who sees this land as home.

The Ute community has expressed gratitude for having an undisturbed experience on the property and for the ability to experience the land as it was 100 years ago, untouched. Keep it Colorado was a project partner.

Flying W Ranch – Vulcan Property

This 285-acre property southwest of Gunnison is adjacent to a 4,000-acre conserved ranch with the same landowner. The property is used for seasonal cattle grazing and consists of montane sagebrush shrubland; riparian areas along Camp Creek, Little Camp Creek, and Little Willow Creek; and grasslands of environmental significance. These habitats support a variety of wildlife, including Gunnison sage-grouse, American peregrine falcon, bald eagle, ferruginous hawk, and northern leopard frog, all Colorado Species of Concern. Project partners include Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Northern Colorado

Waggener Farm – additional water rights protected!

In a typical project announcement, COL shares good news about protected acres of land. Here, we're excited to share that a family has chosen to protect the water on their land after the land itself had already been conserved.

Waggener Farm is an irrigated family farm located in Weld County just outside the Town of Berthoud. Positioned at the gateway into Berthoud, the Waggener Farm conservation easement helps to protect the agricultural character of Berthoud's greenbelt while also preserving the iconic views of Longs Peak and Rocky Mountain National Park on the drive into town. The farm has keystone water rights on three major ditch systems that ensure that the prime soils on the farm continue to be irrigated. The water rights also help to fortify the overall integrity of the ditch systems in the local community. A longstanding farm lease is in place with the Olander family, founders of Root Shoot Malting, who closed on a conservation easement on their own farm in 2022.

Previous phases of work with this family conserved the farm's 466 acres with valuable native water rights. This fourth and final phase adds 53 units of Colorado Big Thompson (CBT) water rights. While historically they were developed for supplemental irrigation water, the CBT decree allows for the rights to be used for multiple purposes, including municipal and industrial uses, making them highly coveted by growing municipalities and water providers. The family approved flexible water sharing language in the conservation easement, which would allow for the landowner to lease some of the water to other users in the community in certain years. By building in this flexibility, landowners retain some diversification of income opportunities while also freeing up water for other uses that support the landscape and local community. Having access to leasable water relieves pressure for municipalities to "buy and dry" farms. This project benefits not only ag producers in South Platte Basin, but also municipal water users and managers, wildlife that depend on reliable water sources, and proponents of conservation across Colorado!

Want to learn more about water use and agriculture in northern Colorado?

The September episode of our podcast, Landlines, features Todd Olander of Olander Farms, and Carmen Farmer, Senior Conservation Project Manager for Northern Colorado.

Scan the QR code or visit coloradoopenlands.org/podcast to listen now!

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Be part of the Colorado Gives Day momentum and help us protect the places you love in Colorado!

Colorado Gives Day is December 9, but early giving is already underway! When you give today, you're helping protect Colorado's land and water for people and wildlife in perpetuity.

Every dollar raised stays right here in Colorado, ensuring your impact lasts forever. From the mountains to the plains and everywhere in between, together we can keep Colorado's natural beauty thriving for generations to come.

We are thrilled to share that a generous family foundation and long-time supporter of COL is offering a matching challenge for Colorado Gives Day! All donations will be matched up to $50,000, doubling the power of your gift to protect the places you love in Colorado.

Gunnison River photo by John Fielder.