SAN ISABEL LAND PROTECTION TRUST

LAND AND LEGACY

A HISTORY OF SAN ISABEL LAND PROTECTION TRUST

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Thank you to the many community members that dedicated their time and energy to this effort:

Vic & Jacke Barnes
Bill Donley
Karen Foley
Marty Frick
Peggy Kavookjian
Mary Ellen Lesage
Pari Morse
Charles Proctor
Shannon Proctor
Brian Riley
Randy & Claricy Rusk
Janet Smith
Dick & Audrey Stermer
Larry Vickerman
Dianne Whalen
Randy & Sarah Woods

In Memory of Our Friends Who Have Passed On:
Vic Barnes
Carol and John Barnett
Margaret and Fred Karsten
Bill Jack
Mike O'Hanlon
Alice Proctor
Paul Snyder

Cover photo by Bill Gillette
Photo on this spread by Dan Ballard

4 **Photo by John Fielder**

Alice and Charles Proctor were en route to visit Alice's sister at her new property in Colorado's Wet Mountain Valley.

It was a beautiful spring in the 1960s, with sweeping green meadows and snow receding on the mountains on a perfect, sunny day. Speckles of gold and purple began to rise from the ground. Irrigation season had just begun, and the local ranches were filled with dots of wildflowers. This slice of Custer County was cradled between the Wet Mountains to the east and the Sangre de Cristo mountains to the west. This place felt like a still, charming sanctuary of nature.

Charles turned to his wife and said, "Can you imagine people really live here?"

In the 1970s, Alice and Charles would try to move to the valley themselves. But their college professors' salaries were meager, and the process was difficult. Eventually, they managed to put together a down payment for a 200-acre property along with two additional families. It had an old house and perhaps an even older barn, and they kept both. It was key to them that they preserved the beauty of the area when they purchased it.

As the years passed, the Proctors began to see things change. New houses began popping up among the fields—fancy buildings in the wrong places. Land was being bought and developed, and the nature and views that drew the pair to the Wet Mountain Valley in the first place felt fragile.

"We thought that was the future for Custer County," said Charles. "And that was wrong."

That was the beginning. Alice, Charles, and other concerned members of the community began a grassroots effort to preserve what they found so special about this valley. They banded together to create the San Isabel Foundation, later renamed San Isabel Land Protection Trust. By working with local landowners, using conservation easements, and partnering with regional organizations, San Isabel worked to protect the land and resources that make Custer County and surrounding areas unique. What started as a small, unknown, volunteer-run land trust became a renowned center of land conservation, run by both full-time staff and volunteers. By 2020, San Isabel Land Protection Trust had protected over 40,000 acres, 174 water rights, and 61 miles of stream frontage through 134 conservation easements.[1,2]

As times changed, San Isabel decided to merge with a larger land trust, Colorado Open Lands in December 2021. This merger marked an evolution of an incredible effort by dedicated people who loved the land, and the community and together have made lasting and ongoing contributions to the preservation of this very special part of Colorado.

1 Hal Water, "Preserving This Place Called Home," *San Isabel Land Protection Trust Newsletter*, Spring 2015.
2 San Isabel Land Protection Trust, "SILPT Easement Report 2020" (organization internal document, Westcliffe, 2021).

Part I: To remain remote, rural, and wild (1994 – 2000)

CHANGES COMING TO CUSTER COUNTY

The 1990s were a time of rapid change for Custer County. Development and growing populations were happening at a pace that strained county government and noticeably changed the landscape. Ranches and other agricultural lands were disappearing here as they were across the nation.

Between 1990-93, Custer County was Colorado's fourth-fastest-growing county, with a growth rate of 7.25%.[3] The population would more than double in the short time between 1990 and 2000. Ranchland was being divvied up into 35-acre and five-acre ranchettes, and ranching as a lifestyle was also in decline.[4] The Wet Mountain Tribune wrote in 1996, "Many ranching families are forced to leave the land because there's not enough return for too much work."[5]

The loss of ranches and increasing development were impacting not only the ranching families and the agricultural economy, but the rich natural ecology of the region. The Pueblo Chieftain described in 1995 that the Sangre de Cristo Mountains had the highest biological diversity of the Rocky Mountains.[6] Preserving land in Custer County meant preserving habitats, and by extension, the wildlife that depended on them.

Photographer John Fielder said in 1995, "For the sake of future lovers, and may they be our children and theirs, I pray that this valley will not be despoiled. For the sake of all lovers of sublime places and prodigious views, may the Wet Mountain Valley forever remain remote, rural, and wild."[7]

People looked to California as a poor example of land use, worried that natural and open space would be lost to development. In the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph in 1996, Lee Dusa, then-President of Colorado Open Lands, said, "We saw what happened to California. The destiny for Colorado is the same, unless we do something about it."[8]

That same article mentioned locals feeling a lack of interest in land use planning from the government. After all, local governments were busy dealing with the rapid change, handling the influx of people moving in, and just not having the time to consider "smart growth" or land conservation.

Custer County is a small community—less than 3,000 people between 1995 and 1998—including many multi-generational ranchers who live closely with the land. It is made of close-knit communities and supportive neighbors. Many in the community recognized the treasure they had. Under the leadership of Ben Kettle, in the 1980s Custer County's government adopted a land use zone to protect the irrigated valley floor of the Wet Mountain Valley, establishing a minimum lot size of 80 acres, unprecedented in Colorado. This kept the critical valley floor open but may have increased subdivision in the upland portions of the county.

Despite the farsighted zoning, as with much of the West, while growing populations often bring economic benefits, the loss of agriculture as a community focus impacts that portion of the economy. It also stresses the social fabric and characteristics of a community.

If someone were to act, it had to be local. With the county government taking a hands-off approach, it was down to the members of the community to try to preserve what made their home special. Most critically, landowners, including prominent ranch families and long-time residents, were at the table, interested in finding solutions, and supportive of the effort. There was determination and incentive. Now, all they needed was the right tool.

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3 Leavett Biles, "Colorado Growth Rate 1990-93," *Denver Post*, March 16, 1995.
4 Jerd Smith, "Valley Gets $320,000 Conservation Grant," *Rocky Mountain News*, December 11, 2001.
5 "Assorted Groups to Co-host Introductory Valley Project Meet," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, November 7, 1996.
6 Mary Jean Porter, "Custer County Development Up to Residents," *The Pueblo Chieftain*, November 5, 1995.
7 John Fielder, "John Fielder Talks About the Wet Mountain Valley," *San Isabel Foundation Newsletter*, Winter 1996.
8 Thomas Torgove, "Land/Private Groups Rescue Open Space," *Gazette Telegraph*, March 19, 1996.

Timeline of major events

1990

Fall 1994
Discussions begin about having a local land trust in Custer County.

1995

May 1, 1995
San Isabel Foundation was established.

Spring 1996
San Isabel granted tax exemption status.

January 1997
Lookout Valley Ranch became San Isabel's first conservation easement.

September 27, 1997
First Art for the Sangres event.

2000

1998
Hired first staff, first conservation easement in Huerfano County on Singing River Ranch.

2001
First conservation easement in Fremont County.

2002
Wet Mountain Ranchland Preservation Project launched.

2002
$2.55 million grant for easement purchases from Great Outdoors Colorado.

2003
First Pueblo County conservation easement.

2005

2004
San Isabel Foundation renames itself San Isabel Land Protection Trust, hires first full-time executive director, Brian Riley.

2007
Additional $2 million grant for easement purchases from Great Outdoors Colorado.

August 2009
The San Isabel Land Protection Trust earns accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

2010

2012
First nonprofit conservation easement, the San Isabel Scout Ranch.

2013
First Hardscrabble Mountain Trail Run.

2014
San Isabel receives ownership of Bluff Park.

2015

2016
San Isabel begins restoration work following the Hayden Pass and Junkins Fires.

2020

December 31, 2021
San Isabel Land Protection Trust merges with Colorado Open Lands.

WHY LAND TRUSTS?

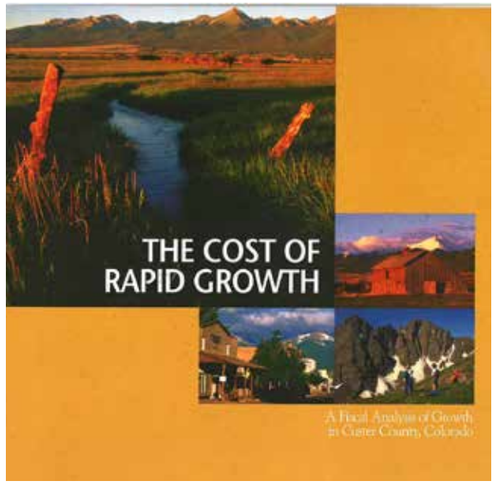
The growing and shifting population made the 1990s a major growth period in America's land trust movement. By 1995, there were 1,100 land trusts in the country, a robust nationwide movement for land protection.[9]

The land trust movement did not emerge without controversy. Starting in the 1960s, "environmental" groups often assumed preservationist ideologies and did not recognize the importance of people who own, use, and manage land. This approach often failed to recognize that people have been, and always will be, on the land, living and working, and that any land use solutions must be beneficial to people – economically and socially, as well as environmentally. The success of land trusts comes from meeting in the middle, recognizing the importance of working farms and ranches as havens of biodiversity, and adopting a collaborative and respectful approach to land use. The primary tool that emerged for land trusts was conservation easements, which are voluntary legal easements that keep land private and productive, and keep landowners in control. Because easements are entirely voluntary, private property rights are maintained and elevated, and regulatory edicts and government overreach are avoided. It's private landowners making decisions about their own property. Land trusts, therefore, were seen as a politically safe route to conservation.[10] Even at San Isabel, the historic conflicts between environmentalism and agriculture remained, but the fact that these groups came together over common goals is the foundation of any success a land trust can hope for.

Protecting private land also has notable economic benefits, both for landowners and for local government. Most obviously, agriculture has been a top economic sector in the region since statehood, and agriculture provides jobs, products for exportation, and tax revenue. When these are lost, that productive value of the land itself declines or is lost completely, other than for residential development. While it's true that land developed for residential use produces new tax money, it's also true that these lands generally cost more to the county to maintain than their taxes provided in return. Ultimately, dispersed exurban sprawl, with required road and utility maintenance, is a net economic loss for counties like Custer.

A Cost of Community Services Study for Custer County was conducted in 2000, sponsored by the San Isabel Foundation, Custer Heritage Committee, American Farmland Trust, and the Sonoran Institute.

The Sonoran Institute, a Tucson, Arizona based nonprofit that works to "connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them", provided a staff person, Ben Alexander, to lead this project and publish the findings. Titled "The Cost of Rapid Growth," the report revealed that for every $1 the county receives in taxes from agricultural land and open space, it costs only $0.54 to provide services. In contrast, for every $1 of taxes from rural residential development, it costs $1.16 to provide services.[11]



Cover of Sonoran Institute report

The report reads, "Residential development that consumes agricultural land and open space is slowly depleting county coffers."

Therefore, maintaining agricultural land and open space became a key element in protecting the county's tax base and economic viability. Private land that is protected by conservation easements keeps the county's costs down and agricultural production up, despite the commonly heard objections of developers that conservation reduces potential tax revenue and can drive up land values.

By protecting land, its resources and ecological value are also preserved. Working with local landowners gives land trusts a chance to work with flexibility and offer choices in negotiations at no cost to local people or local government.[12]

Folks in Custer County were already growing wary of people coming in from other counties or states to buy up the land. And distrust lingers towards perceptions of governmental institutions taking power away from individuals. If there was anything to be done to protect the land in Custer County, it had to be local. People believed that if a big conservation organization got involved, the San Isabel region would never be more than a sideshow.[13]

9 "San Isabel Foundation Reps Attend National Rally," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, October 26, 1995.
10 Torgove, "Land/Private Groups."
11 The Rapid Cost of Growth brochure. Publication date unknown.
12 *Land Trust Movement is Growing* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Foundation, 1996), p3.
13 Susan Tichy, "A Little History of the San Isabel Foundation," *San Isabel Foundation Newsletter*, Spring 1998.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Census: Custer is 10th fastest growing area in U.S.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that based on percentage growth, Custer County was the tenth fastest growing county in the nation during the five-year period ending July 1, 1995.

The new report shows Custer County's population has increased more than 40 percent, from 1,926 in the 1990 census to an estimated 2,702 last July.

Besides being the tenth fastest growing county nationwide, Custer County ranks fourth in percentage growth statewide, behind Douglas, Elbert and Park counties.

In sheer numbers, Custer remains one of the least populated of all of Colorado's 63 counties, coming in at 55th. Colorado's smallest county by population is San Juan, with a population of just 546 (down from 745 in 1990). Others counties with populations smaller than Custer's are Mineral (634), Hinsdale (648), Jackson (1,537), Dolores (2,588), Kiowa (1,627), Cheyenne (2,312), and Sedgwick (2,606).

Denver County remains Colorado's most populated county, with a '95 head count of 494,462, up 5.7 percent from the 1990 census of 467,630.

The state's fastest growing area, Douglas County, now virtually a suburb of Denver, grew almost 65 percent the past five years, from about 60,000 to just under 100,000. According to the Census Bureau, it is the fastest growing county in all the 50 states.

The other boom counties in Colorado -- Elbert and Park -- grew 51 percent and 47.6 percent respectively. Elbert County, with a population of 14,565, is the nation's second fastest growing county, and Park County, with a head count of 10,589, is the fourth fastest growing county nationwide.

Colorado's population as a whole increased some 13 percent from 1990 to '95, from 3.29 million to 3.75 million.

Despite the overall growth, six counties in the state lost population these past five years. Colorado's smallest county, San Juan, lost more than 26 percent of its population. Other losers, all noting a drop of between 2.6 and 4.2 percent, were Washington, Sedgwick, Cheyenne, Kiowa and Jackson counties. San Juan County in the San Juan Mountains likely lost population due to a decrease in mining activity. All the others are on Colorado's eastern plains.

In our region of south-central Colorado, all counties noted substantial growth in the past five years, but none comparable to Custer's rate of 40 percent.

Thanks to the new state and federal prisons in the area, Fremont County's population jumped 23 percent, from approximately 32,000 in 1990 to 40,000 in '95.

Chaffee County noted a 13.6 percent increase, from about 12,600 to 14,400. Saguache County's population grew more than 19 percent, from about 4,600 to 5,500. And Pueblo County's population was up 5.5 percent, from 123,051 to 129,759.

--Jim Little

Pari Morse, a founding member of San Isabel, remembers discussing the idea with Peggy McIntosh, a Custer County zoning officer. "She said we need more voluntary options, not regulatory options, for landowners. And she said, 'I really think this conservation easement thing is going to be the ticket.'"

SAN ISABEL'S EARLY MEETINGS

There wasn't an exact date when the idea came up or gained steam, just an undeniable energy and the pull of something happening. That was how the San Isabel Foundation started.

"Anyone who's been involved in grassroots efforts knows when you get with a group of people who are like minded and you feel that everyone wants to pull their weight up hill on an issue, and how strong that can be. And that feeling was paramount with the initial stages of San Isabel," said Randy Woods, one of the founding members of San Isabel who served as first Board President from 1996 to 2000.


An early gathering includes Paul Snyder, Margaret Karsten, Vic Barnes, Annie Layman, Peggy Kavookjian and Claudie Cole

Discussions began around 1994. Charles Proctor first learned of conservation easements from his sister-in-law, Peggy McIntosh. She had come across them in her work in zoning for the county. Peggy had recommended a local land trust to manage conservation easements for the Custer County area.[14]

Land trusts commonly use conservation easements because they are completely voluntary, so they keep landowners in control. Conservation easements place strict limits on what can be done to the land, eliminating the opportunity for subdivision or industry, with the goal of keeping the land in agricultural use. All the conditions and details are crafted carefully by the landowner together with the land trust. The easement protects the land permanently.

14 *25 Years of Protecting Land, Water and Wildlife.* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Land Protection Trust, 2020), 1.


Photo by Annie Layman

"And I didn't have a clue what a land conservation easement was," said Charles, reflecting on those days. Peggy also told him and Alice of a land conservation conference in Crested Butte. So Charles, Alice, and Peggy attended and learned the basics of conservation easements and thought that it might be possible to apply them to the Wet Mountain Valley and the rest of Custer County.

Compared to the old-time ranchers, some of whom had local roots stretching back generations, Alice and Charles were newcomers.

"The people we really wanted to deal with did not trust us at all," said Charles.

The work had to be put in to establish trust with landowners and the community before conservation easements would be accepted in Custer County.

"It was hard for ranchers," said Mary Ellen Lesage, a long-time board member of San Isabel. "Because the rest of the ranching community had no desire in telling you what you can do with your land."

So Alice and Charles started with the people in their social circle, including Bill Jack and Paul Snyder, who agreed that they ought to do something official.


Photo by Bill Gillette

Paul was instrumental in San Isabel's efforts since the early days. An attorney who had grown up in Castle Rock when it was a small town and later helped Boulder establish its land use code, he had always been drawn to the idea of conservation easements. His legal expertise helped San Isabel lay the foundation for its work and begin acquiring conservation easements in earnest.

"Paul became the city attorney for Westcliffe very quickly after we moved down there," said Marty Frick, Paul's widow. "What he fell in love with was the idea of the conservation easement. He started wanting to bring it to the ranchers who were having some trouble holding on their land."

VISION STATEMENT

The purpose of the San Isabel Foundation is to provide a local resource or partner for local land owners to facilitate the stewardship and preservation of agricultural lands, wildlands and wildlife habitat, open space, water, scenic beauty, and other natural and historic resources now and for future generations.

Adopted on 11 April 1995 by the San Isabel Foundation steering committee.

Incorporated into the grant proposal to Greater Outdoors Colorado, submitted on 8 May 1995. Grant proposal was approved for funding on 22 June 1995.

Charles looks back upon those early days with fond nostalgia. "We put together this idea that it would be better, even though it was inefficient, to have a local land preservation group. Because if somebody came from Denver to sell their idea here, the ranchers were not going to listen."

Alice and Charles's trip to the state conference proved crucial. It was there that they made connections with other people who were willing to help them get started in Custer County. Alice also joined the Custer County Cattlewomens Association to listen and learn, and create connections. It was there that she met Sara Shields, owner and operator of the Kettle Ranch and daughter of the far-sighted county commissioner Ben Kettle.

Trust in the Proctors improved as they spent more time being a part of the community. And during this time, they continued to develop connections that would help them build a local land trust.

Randy and Claricy Rusk, well-respected local ranchers, became strong advocates and early adopters of private land protection. Claricy recollected trying early on to get people on board. "We had our discussions and had our explaining to do, and we had our coffees and we put on a bazillion picnics and barbecues and invited anybody and everybody that would come." The ranching families brought credibility to the effort and ultimately were the source of its success.

On Tuesday March 28, 1995, a group officially met to try to establish a land trust in the Wet Mountain Valley. The idea was to protect the land between Salida and Walsenburg. This meeting was also where the name "San Isabel Foundation" was coined.[15]

The San Isabel Foundation was officially incorporated as a nonprofit organization on May 1, 1995. The foundation had been laid out, and it was now time to try to open an office and develop a plan of work.

Aside from the Proctors, the charter members included Sandra Attebery, John Barnett, Hank Burdine, Michael O'Hanlon, Arlie Riggs, John Watson, and Randy Woods. Other founding members were Jack McCrory, Mary Kattnig, Jerry Livengood, and Pari Morse.

The San Isabel office was a single desk in the old Westcliffe schoolhouse.[16]

Randy Woods became the first official president to hold full term at the San Isabel Foundation. His vision for a community-based organization was to focus on awareness, education, and discussion to give the people more control over their properties.

Later in 1995, Pari Morse and Randy Woods attended the Land Trust Alliance's (LTA) National Rally. Because the LTA was a membership group for all land trusts in the U.S., it felt intimidating for such a new and tiny land trust to be in attendance, but the purpose was to learn more about the work and make connections. Rally provided them with an introduction to the breadth of land trusts' work across the country, the significant work of establishing, funding, and growing a nonprofit, while also gaining exposure to the technical aspects of preserving family lands with conservation easements. It was a lot to absorb.[17]

15 "Another Meeting is Tonight on Proposed Valley Land Trust," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, March 30, 1995.
16 Shanna Lewis, "Ten Years of Preserving Land in the Valley," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, June 30, 2005.
17 "San Isabel Foundation Reps," 9.

PLAN TO ATTEND

PRESERVING RANCH AND FAMILY LANDS: A LANDOWNER WORKSHOP

Wednesday, January 24, 1996
3:00 PM to 5:00 PM
Bassick Center, Westcliffe, Colorado

Jay Fetcher, Vice-President of the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust and Rancher from NW Colorado, will talk about how and why he protected his ranch so that it would remain in the family.

Larry Kueter, Conservation Attorney, will talk about the legal issues of Conservation Easements and other conservation options and how they are important in estate planning.

There is no charge for this workshop. Please make reservations by January 19th so we will have plenty of room. Free BBQ sausage will be available after the workshop. Call Pari Morse at 783-2058, Alice Proctor at 783-2762, or Randy Woods at 783-2148. **The first 25 reservations will receive a free copy (an $8.95 value) of the book" Preserving Family Lands" by Stephen Small, tax attorney.**

Sponsored by: San Isabel Foundation, Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust, and Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts

Funding provided by: Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Fund

San Isabel FOUNDATION

A 1996 ad in the Wet Mountain Tribune

Randy recounts a moment from the conference when he and Pari realized they'd misnamed their organization: "We realized immediately the first day of that issue when people were going, 'Oh "Foundation," you have money!' And we were going 'Oh god, we don't even know what we're doing here, let alone have money!'"

Money is a perennial concern for nonprofit organizations, and grassroots organizations like San Isabel often launch with no assets. Luckily, San Isabel was able to soon partner with Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) and other organizations. GOCO is a quasi-governmental organization created by a statewide ballot measure in 1992 to use Colorado Lottery funds to invest in parks, trails, and open space across the state. Every year, GOCO invests millions of dollars in preserving open space and is a backbone for the funding of land trusts in Colorado.

The San Isabel Foundation received its first grant, totaling $25,000, from GOCO on June 22, 1995. This grant was meant for organizational development to get San Isabel off the ground by hiring a part-time executive director, beginning a resource inventory of the area, developing membership, and training staff and volunteers.[18]

Part of the grant helped secure the San Isabel team a spot at trainings by the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts and the Land Trust Alliance, both valued partners for land trust practitioners seeking knowledge and guidance.[19]

In these early days, San Isabel facilitated an array of local discussions surrounding land trusts and land conservation. There was a fear among the ranchers that the government would be getting involved and taking control of their ranches. There was no track record to demonstrate that conservation easements do not take management control away from landowners, so the land trust community needed to educate itself on what landowners needed and how a land trust could help them. Good information was needed to build trust.

San Isabel Foundation held its first landowner workshop, titled the "Preserving Ranch and Family Lands Workshop," on January 24, 1996. The event was a collaboration whose partners included Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust and the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts.[20]

Alice and Charles Proctor were among the volunteers running the event, alongside Carly and Bob Stone, Carol and John Barnett, Andrea Lucas, and Michael O'Hanlon. Hank Burdine and John Watson brought the food.[21] Attorney Larry Keuter provided the facts about how conservation easements work and can benefit families. Around 40 people attended, from local ranchers to interested citizens.[22]

The workshop was an attempt to bring the community together to hear from landowners about their interests and needs, learn about conservation easements, and discuss concerns. Landowners were concerned about the restrictions of a conservation easement, the cost of putting easements on their property, and how this would benefit them directly. These conversations are iterative and ongoing. At this point, San Isabel began work to develop a standardized conservation easement document that would then be tailored to each property.[23] Such a standardized document would give landowners and the land trust a basis to begin negotiating and would help decrease consultancy costs.

Conservation easements are very serious undertakings, complex, expensive, and permanent. If landowners were interested in them, San Isabel had to do everything they could to get them completely on board.

18 Leah Lahtinen, "Newly Formed Land Trust Receives $25,000 Grant," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, June 29, 1995, 11.
19 Tichy, "A Little History."
20 "San Isabel Foundation 1996 Plans," *Arkansas Valley Journal*, January 11, 1996, 10.
21 Pari Morse, "Landowner Workshop a Great Success," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, February 1, 1996, 5.
22 Leah Lahtinen, "Area Landowners Learn More About Conservation Easements," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, February 1, 1996, 2.
23 *SIF Holds First Landowner Workshop* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Foundation, 1996), 1.

What is a conservation easement?

Conservation easements are the primary tool of land trusts. They're voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and a land trust with the goal of protecting land in perpetuity — meaning forever. Easements typically involve restrictions in land division and development, but otherwise leave the land in private ownership and control. A conservation easement is permanently part of the land's title, so if ownership of the property transfers through sale or inheritance, so does the conservation easement and the obligation to uphold it.

The basic criteria a property must meet to be eligible for a conservation easement were established by the IRS, given the federal tax benefits. In addition, San Isabel established that a property must meet one or more of the following criteria:

- The land provides significant public benefit. Not public access, but public benefits as open land.
- The land includes active ranching or other agricultural use.
- The land has historic value.
- The land is valuable to the community as open space. This criterion includes protecting scenic vistas and acting as development buffers.
- The land contains significant amounts of natural habitat, especially for rare, endangered, or threatened species.
- The land includes key wildlife habitats or migration routes.
- The land includes wetlands, waterways, and water rights.
- The land shares a boundary with or is nearby public lands or public preserves.
- The land is nearby private land that is already protected (or will be protected in the foreseeable future) and will expand a continuous patch of land.

The land trust works closely with the landowner to confirm the qualities of the property, and studies and documents the property's resources, title work, encumbrances, and other factors. The deed of conservation easement is crafted to meet the needs of the landowners while protecting those attributes. These are complex real estate transactions with many steps and partners, and San Isabel initially faced a steep learning curve to make sure these easements were qualified to the highest standards.

Once an easement has been finalized, the land trust seeks to continue and deepen its relationship with landowners, and will annually visit the property to make sure nothing that occurs on the property violates the easement language.

More detailed information on conservation easements and land trusts can be found on the Colorado Open Lands website: www.ColoradoOpenLands.org

THE FIRST CONSERVATION EASEMENT

San Isabel celebrated its first conservation easement in January 1997 when Jack McCrory put his property, the Lookout Valley Ranch, under a conservation easement. The easement was done in collaboration with the William J. Palmer Parks Foundation (now known as the Palmer Land Conservancy), which then transferred the easement to San Isabel. Lookout Valley Ranch has been used for farming and ranching since the 1880s, with Jack obtaining the property in 1992. Jack had been a founding member of San Isabel and loved the idea of land protection, so he was proud to be the first to protect his ranch so that it would stay the way it was long after he was gone and prove that it could be done well.

Now under easement, the Lookout Valley Ranch is protected from subdivision, commercial use, and land surface alteration. Future owners of the property also have a responsibility to manage its streams to protect trout and other species. The McCrorys maintained all other private property rights, such as the right to harvest timber, graze cattle, sell, lease, and otherwise enjoy the property, and these restrictions are maintained with all subsequent landowners.[24]

Peggy Kavookjian, who has been involved with San Isabel since the start, remembers the property as a pretty little valley. "That's kind of when we all started realizing that there are lots of places in the area, not just the valley floor, that would be great to try to protect too."

24 "Property is San Isabel Foundation's First Conservation Easement," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, January 30, 1997, 1.

Property is San Isabel Foundation's first conservation easement

The San Isabel Foundation has accepted its first conservation easement, protecting the Lookout Valley Ranch in eastern Custer County, owned by Jack McCrory.

The current ranch covers 157 acres. Because this is a working ranch, the owner and the Foundation wanted to make sure the conservation easement would preserve the current quality of the property while maintaining the opportunities for future sustainable agricultural use.

A conservation easement is a deed restriction which permanently limits the amount of future development on a property. Willing landowners place an easement on their property then donate that easement to a qualified non-profit conservation organization or government agency. In return for the donation, the landowner can receive a number of income and estate tax benefits.

Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property will be protected from subdivision, commercial use, and land surface alteration. Present and future owners will have the right to add an additional, historically accurate guest house and barn. They also agree to undertake stream management that will protect and promote the protection of trout and other stream-related species. Owners also retain the right to commercially harvest timber from the property under a plan developed by the owner and the Foundation.

What is now the Lookout Valley Ranch was established in the 1880s as a cattle ranch and farming operation. The first permanent settler in the small valley in which the ranch is located is as yet unknown. When Edwin L. Drake bought the ranch in 1887, the property included a small home, detached kitchen and other outbuildings. By 1900, the ranch house looked much as it does now except for stucco and interior plumbing added in 1933.

In 1911, an Italian immigrant, James Brassea, bought the ranch from the Drakes for $600 and moved there with his wife and five children. The front room of the house was used as the post office of the community, called "Keating."

In 1924, Nello Brassea bought the ranch from his father and married Angelica Pintamoni, a schoolteacher who boarded at the ranch and who taught at the nearby Augusta School. Angelica operated the ranch with Nello until 1938, when Nello died. She operated it with hired help until 1947.

The Jack McCrory ranch along Highway 165 in eastern Custer County is the first property in Custer County to have deed restrictions attached which limit future development of the property. *Courtesy Photo*

During those years, the ranch was used for raising cattle, dairy production and commercial production of head lettuce. With hired help, Angelica also ran a lumber mill on the ranch. Additional cattle grazing was accommodated by U.S. Forest Service permits on adjacent federal lands.

In 1947, when Angelica sold the ranch to Glen Jones for $6,000, it included 280 acres, the ranch house, two barns, a still, a root cellar, an ice house, a log garage, a smoke house and a small school house.

The ranch was used by Jones strictly for raising cattle. In 1985, his widow, Treva, sold the ranch to John and Dorothea Gauss as a second home and the Gauss's in turn sold it in 1992 to McCrory.

McCrory entered into the conservation easement with the San Isabel Foundation because it was his desire to see that this ranch would be protected long after we are all gone.

The purpose of the San Isabel Foundation is to provide a local resource or partner for local land owners to facilitate the stewardship and preservation of agricultural lands, wildlands and wildlife habitat, open space, water scenic beauty and other natural and historic resources now and for future generations.

For more information, please call the Foundation at 783-3018.

14 **Wet Mountain Tribune, January 1997**

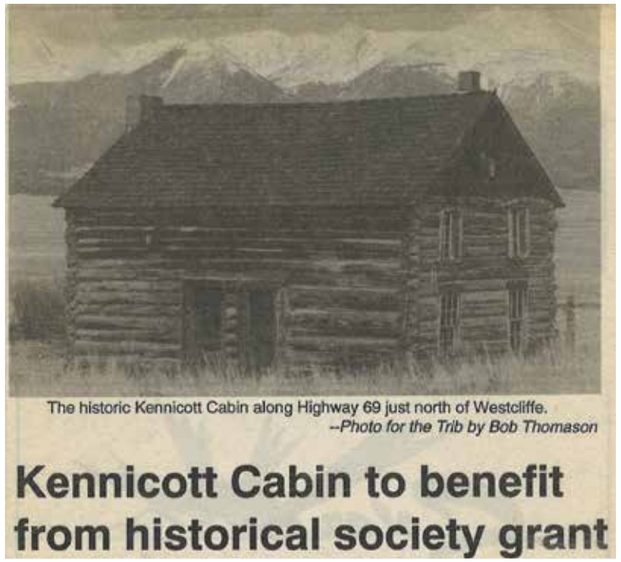
Lookout Valley Ranch in 2022

15

A TOUCH OF HISTORY

As San Isabel figured out how it wanted to operate, it included historically important lands and structures as part of its programming. The historical preservation committee, led by Charles Proctor, worked to put the old Kennicott Cabin on Colorado's registry of historical sites.

The cabin was built in 1869 by Frank Kennicott and is rare for its two-story construction. After it was listed, Charles applied for grants with the Colorado Historical Society to help restore the cabin, as the structure needed to be stabilized. The first grant, totaling $3,375, came in January 1997 to fund stabilization plans.[25] A second grant of $7,500 followed to support repairing the rotten logs in the bottom courses.[26] In the end, restoration work for the cabin was complete and it still stands today, visible from Highway 69 north of Westcliffe.



The historic Kennicott Cabin along Highway 69 just north of Westcliffe.
--Photo for the Trib by Bob Thomason

Kennicott Cabin to benefit from historical society grant

Wet Mountain Tribune, January 1997

25 Pari Morse, "Kennicott Cabin Project Receives Colorado Historical Society Grant," *San Isabel Foundation Newsletter*, no. 2 (Spring 1997).
26 Bailey, "Needed: Cheap Workers."

Kennicott Ranch today. Photo by Annie Layman

THE SAN ISABEL RESOURCE PLAN

The San Isabel Foundation was ready to work on conservation. But there was a bit of a problem in trying to comprehend what resources the land has if no one has ever taken a full inventory of those resources.

"It's pretty hard to conserve something when you cannot speak to what it is you are trying to conserve," said Randy Woods. "The resource plan gave us legs, gave us a benefit."

So the San Isabel Resource Plan was born. The goal was to conduct a thorough assessment of Custer County's natural resources and compile a menu of conservation strategies that individuals, communities, and governments could choose from to best serve their purposes.[27]

Work on the San Isabel Resource Plan officially began in April 1996 when San Isabel received a $30,000 grant for the project from GOCO.[28] Project Coordinators Pari Morse and Susan Tichy led the effort on grant applications. The plan had multiple objectives, including addressing open space, agricultural land, historic sites, structures, and natural resources.

The Project Management team consisted of Carol and John Barnett, Pam Coffey-Urban, George Draper, Bill Jack, Billie Malchow, Gerald Merfield, Alex Parrot, Cindy Rivera, Linda Swift, Ron Verlarde, and John Watson. Their job was to handle the overall concept and planning of the project and communicate it to the rest of the community, and deal with the feedback that was received. GIS mapping was completed by Gary Fleener, a hydrologist and local GIS expert.

Because of San Isabel's small size, some members who worked on the plan were from partner organizations. Cindy Rivera for example was District Manager of the U.S. Forest Service. Also on the San Isabel Resource Plan Team were Mike Smith (a USF ecosystem management specialist), Pete Zwanfeld (Bureau of Land Management), Ron Verlarde (Regional Director of the Department of Wildlife), Alex Parrow (NRCS) and Billie Malchow (CSU).

Marty Zeller, who was part of an organization called Conservation Partners (and who had also served as President of Colorado Open Lands), and Carol Barnett were to lead public workshops for the Plan. Each workshop would be hosted twice, and the entire series had three steps. The first workshops focused on describing the objectives of the San Isabel Resource Plan and introducing the different land protection strategies. The second set of workshops had participants learn more about the strategies and rank them. The third workshop reported back on the rankings and how to implement them.

During the project, San Isabel found that the mapping of riparian areas in Custer County was incomplete. This was a key missing data point because riparian areas are the most important habitat for wildlife in Colorado. Another grant application to GOCO resulted in an additional grant to complete those maps.[29]

When information gathering for the plan was complete, everything was assembled through an arduous process of writing and rewriting by Marty Zeller and Susan Tichy. The plan was officially completed in summer 1997 and was first presented to local government in spring of 1998.

Despite being small and new, San Isabel was able to overcome its limitations by applying for grants, partnering with other organizations, and matching funds. As a result, Custer County had a comprehensive plan of the natural resources people valued and was ready to get to work.

27 *San Isabel Receives $30,000 Grant from Great Outdoors Colorado* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Foundation, 1996), 1.
28 "San Isabel Foundation Receives $30,000 Grant," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, April 25, 1996
29 "Foundation Awarded Funds," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, May 22, 1997, 12.

ART FOR THE SANGRES

Now that San Isabel was established and had an official easement under its belt, it was gaining momentum and watching the rising expenses required to maintain an organization, including staff, offices, training, attorneys, and insurance. It was time for San Isabel to begin raising some money. As the saying goes, "conservation without money is just a conversation." If San Isabel wanted to pay its staff so that it could help landowners with conservation easements, some money needed to begin to flow.[30]

The Wet Mountain Valley is stunningly beautiful and inspiring, and it is natural that this landscape inspires art. Westcliffe had been home to an artist community and galleries for some years.

Charles Proctor taught art at Pikes Peak Community College. Along with Alice's sister and fellow professor, Merr Shearn, he would bring out students in the summer to Custer County where he and Merr would teach a hybrid art and anthropology course. Students would bring sleeping bags to the ranch and sleep in the barn. They would explore how the cultural definition of art changes in different places and how the landscape of Custer County inspired art.

Alice Proctor began fostering her own community of artists. Instructors and their classes would be brought to Custer County, where they would set up their gear and paint in the valley for a day.

Over the years, a strong connection between the land and the arts developed. So when it came time to come up with a fundraiser for San Isabel, connecting the event to art seemed a natural fit.

In 1997, the San Isabel team conceived of "Art for the Sangres," an art show where a part of the proceeds would go to the San Isabel Foundation to help pay for conservation easement costs its clients struggled to afford. The artists would receive a new market to sell their craft, and the buyers would have exclusive access to unique works. It was a win for everyone.

"Our thought was, if you can bring artists into a beautiful area, there is a way of preserving an area that goes through art," said Peggy Kavookjian.[31] Mary Ellen Lesage remembered that the original venue for the art show, the Historic Pines Ranch, was donated. "We had a community who really believed in conservation and what it can do for a place," she said. The dance hall was where the event was set up.

The first Art for the Sangres was held on September 27, 1997.

Charles Proctor was the volunteer electrician for the event. "There was a little stage and a little auditorium. We had to be very careful about making holes in the wall. So it was an interesting problem to hang art on a wall without messing up the wall."

The first Art for the Sangres was a resounding success. San Isabel had expected to break even, but the event earned them $18,000. The event returned the next year, and the next, and then the next. San Isabel held an Art for the Sangres every year through 2019.

People started coming in from beyond Colorado, including Texas, California, and Georgia.[32] New artists and forms of art would be added as the event continued to keep things fresh.

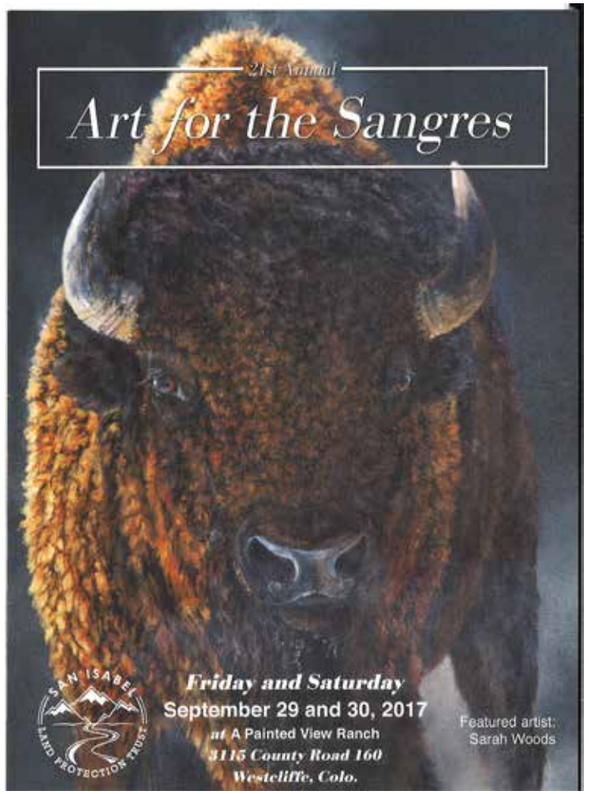
Prepping for Art for the Sangres however, was a herculean task. Scouting artists to invite, finding lodging, setting up the venue, marketing, and staffing the event were all-out efforts.

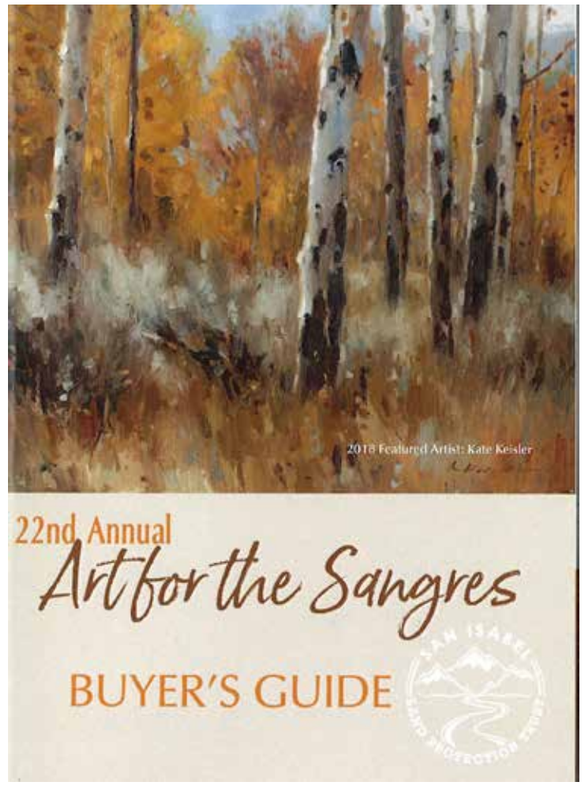
The event was spearheaded by Peggy Kavookjian, who got involved after telling Sarah Woods about her experience fundraising with a similar event for Phoenix at Liberty Wildlife. But because of how much work was involved with Art for the Sangres, Kavookjian struggled to organize the event herself. "And so Annie Layman started helping me." Annie Layman had joined San Isabel as office manager.

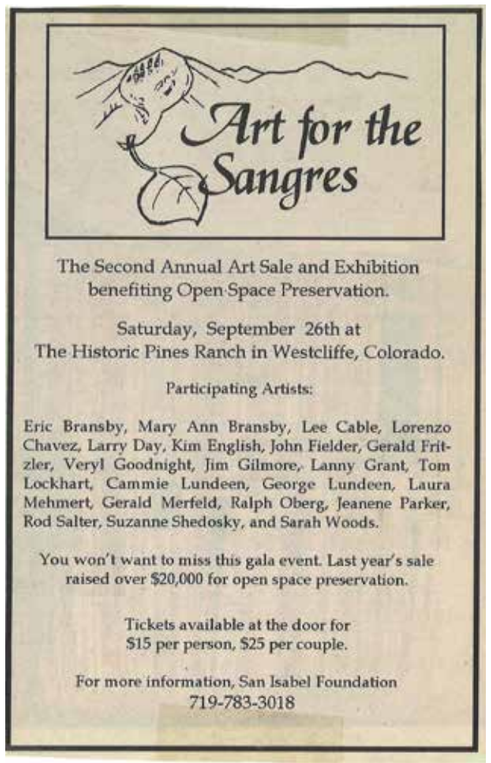
"I don't even remember what year it was," said Kavookjian, "but I was just so stressed out and I had a breakdown after the art sale. Because you do all this work getting it up and running, and you have the art sale, and then there was nobody there to help me break it down. Then Annie and I got together, and I had a little breakdown and she said, 'Oh, this is crazy. The board needs to get involved.' So, she went to the board and said 'Peggy needs help.' So then after that it was great because all the board members got involved and made it a lot easier."

As San Isabel continued to host Art for the Sangres, the event grew into a renowned art show in Colorado, eventually moving from the historic Pines Ranch to one of the Painted View Ranch's horse barns. As it grew, it became intertwined with the organization's reputation. In Custer County, art and nature are tied in more ways than one.

30 Tichy, Susan, "A Little History."
31 Rayna Bailey, "Art Sale Helps Preserve the Valley's Beauty," in *Wet Mountain Tribune*, 1998, 11.
32 Rayna Bailey, "Art Sale Brings in Some $69,000," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, September 30, 1999, 2.







Promotional materials and photographs from Art for the Sangres over the years

Part II: Trust earned (2000-2010)

The 2000s were an especially exciting time for the San Isabel Foundation, which changed its name to the San Isabel Land Protection Trust in 2004. As more conservation easements came in and people became more interested in its work, the organization experienced a period of rapid growth. New employees, paid employees, and an ambitious project were on the horizon.

Above - a board meeting; Below - Jacke Barnes, Marty Frick, Randy Rusk, and Doug Cain enjoy a San Isabel event

GROWING WISELY

For the organization's 10-year anniversary newsletter, San Isabel President Dianne Whalen wrote "We want to grow, but we want to grow wisely." That meant not losing the lifestyle and landscape that built the Wet Mountain Valley communities.

Dianne first got involved with San Isabel by organizing floral arrangements for Art for the Sangres. She joined the board in spring of 2003 and became San Isabel's president in the fall of 2004.

The 2000s were an exciting time for San Isabel. The first full-time executive director, Brian Riley, had been hired and conservation work was gaining steam. More and more people became interested in placing conservation easements on their properties, and the financial incentives to protect land were improving.

"It was very exciting because we started really adding acreage, easements, and that was just exciting as heck," said Dianne. "It was like going to a candy shop because we were doing so well and so quickly."

Brian also definitely felt the energy. "It was a busy time, so we knew the opportunity was there and we took advantage of it. It was great to work with people that just care about the land, and it just snowballed from there."

San Isabel staff and board members also continued to attend symposiums every year to build their knowledge of land trusts.

Photo by Bill Gillette

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

As San Isabel began to grow, Mary Ellen Lesage was determined to ensure that there was always at least one rancher on the board. Mary Ellen knew how important this was to build and maintain community trust.

"Ranching here had made a big stamp and part of it is keeping ranchers on the board of San Isabel," she said. "If you don't have a rancher on the board, then you don't have anyone to talk to other ranchers, period."

Many folks were still critical of the idea of conservation easements. When Randy and Claricy Rusk put their land under easement, people would stop them on the streets, asking how could they do such a thing to their kids. The misconception that the government would take control of a ranch once it's under easement persisted.

Each completed conservation easement had to be monitored to make sure everything that happens on the properties remained within the terms of the easement. The board members themselves would go out to monitor the properties, taking notes and photos, and taking time to connect with the landowners. Working personally with other community members during the monitoring process greatly cemented connection within the community. People began to trust them more, and if people donated to San Isabel, they did so because a personal relationship was involved.

San Isabel's early doubters saw the evidence of a smooth-running organization.

Conservation ideology in Custer County generally came in two flavors. Agricultural advocates prioritized sustaining production, a reliable water supply, and the cultural connections to ranching as a traditional land use. Conserving land was important to them because it can continue a family legacy, facilitate the transfer of land within families and provide significant revenue that can be invested into the operations and needed improvements. Residential development, both of family-owned and leased range, eliminates the opportunity for grazing and agricultural production.

Then there were the environmentalists, who focused on protecting the resources on the land, from the wildlife to the natural habitats and healthy watersheds. Their goals included preserving biodiversity and what made the local ecology special. And everyone was also, of course, concerned with preserving the scenic beauty of the area.

In addition to differences in conservation ideology, there continued to be tension between old ranchers and newcomers to the community. Even though everyone ultimately wanted the same thing, there wasn't a venue for discussion.

So the Sonoran Institute, in collaboration with San Isabel, became that venue. Ben Alexander of the Sonoran Institute came to Custer County in 1999 and began organizing workshops and meetings to open dialogue between the different groups and further the momentum of San Isabel.

The "Keep Custer County Special" forum was held in July 2004 as a collaboration between San Isabel, Custer Heritage Committee, and the Sonoran Institute to help facilitate conversation.[33] After the forum, Ben Alexander consolidated the reports into a summary of priorities the community could pursue.[34]

In the end, people came together to protect the things they love.

Despite "divergent opinions" people would listen. Randy Woods said, "The common ground was our love for the ground."[35]

And that love for the ground soon led to partnerships with landowners and other organizations that would rapidly accelerate San Isabel's work.

33 Brian Riley, "The Director's View," *San Isabel News* (Fall 2004), 4.
34 Vic Barnes, "Valley Residents Attend Forum," *San Isabel News* (Fall 2004), 5.
35 Lewis, "Ten Years."


$2 million grant given for land preservation

GoCo funding will help preserve Music Meadows Ranch

Headline in Wet Mountain Tribune, December 6, 2007.
Photos on this page of Music Meadows by Dan Ballard

THE WET MOUNTAIN VALLEY RANCHLAND PRESERVATION PROJECT

First conceptualized in 1999, the goal of the Wet Mountain Valley Ranchland Preservation Project was to preserve 10,000 acres of the Wet Mountain Valley floor north and west of Westcliffe. Partners in this endeavor included a number of landowners, San Isabel, the Trust for Public Land, Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust, and the Sonoran Institute.[36]

The first grant for the project came in December 2001 from the Colorado Conservation Trust.[37] Part of these funds went specifically to helping find San Isabel a full-time Executive Director who can help increase the land trust's organizational capacity.[38] The project officially began in 2002.[39]

A game-changing grant award came in December 2002 when Great Outdoors Colorado gave $2.55 million to purchase conservation easements in the valley's north end.[40] The properties that were protected in this effort include the Rusk Hereford Ranches, the Comstock-Rogers Ranch, and the Frank Kennicott Ranch.

The community agreed that this project was crucial to maintaining Custer County. More than $100,000 of the matching funds for the project came from private donors in the community.[41]

By the end of 2003, the Wet Mountain Valley Ranchland Preservation Project had acquired the development rights for nearly 3,000 acres of the valley floor. The rights, obtained through conservation easements, were held by San Isabel and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.[42]

In 2007, GOCO granted an additional $2 million to extend the range of the Preservation Project to the southern end of the Wet Mountain Valley as well. The cornerstone piece of that effort was to purchase the development rights of Music Meadows Ranch.[43]

The 3,800-acre Music Meadows Ranch is located south of Westcliffe and next to the San Isabel National Forest and is owned by the Parker Family. Bill and Dorothy Parker had six kids, and each have fond memories of the ranch, including catching their first trout.[44] Today their daughter Elin Ganschow continues to reside on and manage the ranch.

The Colorado Conservation Partnership (CCP) had identified the southern Wet Mountain Valley as "one of Colorado's last undeveloped high mountain valleys," highlighting the importance of preserving the property.[45] Key ecological benefits come from the property's riparian habitats along Grape and Crystal Falls Creeks. The property also holds habitat for black bear, antelope, deer, and elk, while boasting stunning views of the Crestone Needles, and is especially productive for raising beef.[46]

Despite the $2 million grant, San Isabel was still short on money and needed an additional $750,000 to match the grant. While $375,000 of those matching funds came from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the rest San Isabel managed to fundraise from the Gates Family Foundation and private donors.[47]

Due to the size of the ranch, the Parker family had worked with San Isabel for years to try to get the property under easement. The agreements were completed in two phases. Two-thirds of the ranch (2,740 acres) was put under easement in 2008.[48] Following a GOCO legacy grant, the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Gates Family Foundation, and other generous private donors, the remaining 1,200 acres followed in 2010.[49] This NRCS grant was the first land-trust facilitated "Grasslands of Special Importance" conservation easement to be completed in the country.

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36 "GOCO Gives $465,000 for Two Local Projects," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, December 8, 2005.
37 Tom McAvoy, "Westcliffe Ranchland to Be Preserved," *The Pueblo Chieftain*, December 11, 2001.
38 "Colorado Conservation Trust Gives $320,000," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, December 13, 2001.
39 *The First 20 Years* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Land Protection Trust, 2015), 2.
40 "San Isabel Land Trust…," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, 2004, A-9.
41 Dianne Whalen, "Progress on Ranchland Project," *San Isabel Foundation Newsletter* (Spring 2003), 1.
42 *Update: WMVRPP* (Westcliffe: San Isabel Foundation, 2003), 3.
43 "$2 Million Grant Given For Land Preservation," *Wet Mountain Tribune*, December 6, 2007.
44 San Isabel 2011 Spring/Summer newsletter p1,3 "Music Meadows Ranch – It's legacy in the valley" by the Parker Family
45 "Grant to help land trust preserve music mountain ranch," published in unknown, undated, Newspapers 1 folder.
46 "Music Meadows Ranch—its legacy in the valley"
47 "Grant to help land trust preserve music mountain ranch," published in unknown, undated, Newspapers 1 folder.
48 San Isabel 2008 Fall/Winter newsletter p5, "2008 land conservation projects completed to date"
49 San Isabel 2011 Spring/Summer newsletter p6, "Conservation report – Spring 2011" by Ben Lenth

ACCREDITATION AND A GROWING STAFF

As land trusts grew and developed in the 2000s, and as financial benefits improved, naturally some folks looked to game the system. Around 2007, two unscrupulous land trusts in other parts of Colorado began to use fraudulent, inflated appraisal processes and cookie-cutter conservation easements to benefit from tens of millions of dollars of the Colorado state tax credit.[50] At the same time, the IRS was trying to make an example of Colorado, auditing many landowners based both on a misunderstanding of conservation easements, and in an effort to ferret out bad actors.[51]

With all this bad press, San Isabel wanted to reassure the community that it was here to help preserve land. And to do that, it needed to prove that the land trust was ethical and matched the highest standards of conservation by applying for accreditation with the National Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

Dianne Whalen first learned about accreditation through the symposiums she attended. San Isabel was a much smaller land trust compared to the statewide organizations, but Dianne believed that accreditation would be a great boon to San Isabel.

"I was able to persuade the board that we should go after becoming accredited, even though we were a small organization. It would really help us make ourselves more organized and we could become more credible when we presented ourselves to people."

At this point, she had stepped down from serving as President but had remained on the board and led the effort to get the San Isabel Land Protection Trust approved by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. The accreditation team was led by Whalen, and comprised Brian Riley, Kevin League, Holly Wray, Ann Robey, Annie Layman, and Peggy Kavookjian.[52]

To receive accreditation, San Isabel would have to present extensive amounts of original documentation justifying and detailing its easement process. San Isabel also had to prove that it had electronic protocol for making easement documents accessible as technology evolves.[53]

Land Trust Accreditation Commission
An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

June 2, 2009

Dianne Whalen and Brian Riley
San Isabel Land Protection Trust
PO Box 124, Westcliffe, CO 81252-0124

Dear Dianne and Brian:

It was a pleasure for Henry Tepper and me to join you, Peggy Kavookjian, Ann Robby, Kevin League, Annie Layman, and Terry Nimnicht on the phone on May 19, 2009. Thank you for reviewing our questions in advance and for your time on the call. We very much enjoyed learning about your work.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 6, 2009

San Isabel Land Protection Trust Receives national accreditation

Headline in Wet Mountain Tribune

The accreditation process came at a time of change for San Isabel. Riley, who had served as executive director for almost six years was stepping down. Kevin League, San Isabel's land protection specialist, was also leaving. Both were key members of the accreditation team.[54]

The full application was due on November 14, 2008. The physical materials of the application weighed 47 pounds,[55] with a hefty FedEx charge to match. Following the review of application materials, the Accreditation Commission requested follow-up meetings and additional materials by July 17, 2009.[56]

After nearly a year of waiting, San Isabel proudly announced its accreditation status in August 2009, becoming only one of six land trusts in Colorado at the time to meet the Accreditation Commission's standards.[57]

50 San Isabel newsletter Spring/Summer 2008, p1,6-7 "Increased scrutiny of conservation easements in Colorado" by Brian Riley
51 San Isabel newsletter Spring/summer 2007, p9 "2007-a busy year" by Brian Riley
52 San Isabel newsletter fall/winter 2008, p7, "It's finished…the Accreditation Application."
53 Email chain between Dianne Whalen and the Committee on October 15, 2008. Accreditation binder.
54 Letter from Dianne Whalen to Henrietta Jordon off the LTA committee on July 9, 2009. Accreditation binder
55 San Isabel newsletter fall/winter 2008, p7, "It's finished…the Accreditation Application."
56 Letter to Dianne and Brian from the Land Trust Accreditation Committee on June 2, 2009. Accreditation binder.
57 "San Isabel Land Protection Trust receives national accreditation" in WMT, August 6, 2009. Accreditation binder.

Whalen wrote in San Isabel's newsletter, "San Isabel Land Protection Trust's accredited status demonstrates our commitment to permanent land conservation. Our land trust is a stronger organization today, having gone through the rigorous accreditation program."[58]

With accreditation status, San Isabel had set itself apart from the rest as a land trust truly dedicated to protecting the ground Custer County walks on, and one that holds itself to the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct.

TRANSITIONS – THE STAFF OF SAN ISABEL

San Isabel hit its stride in the late 2000s, closing over 20 conservation easements in both 2007 and 2008. Times were good: land values were high, incentives were generous, and San Isabel was well staffed. Brian Riley had been there several years and was supported by two part-time staff, Annie Layman, who was responsible for the conservation easement monitoring program and Art for the Sangres, and Holly Wray, administrative assistance and bookkeeper. In 2007, the Colorado Conservation Trust granted San Isabel a two-year fellowship, which allowed them to hire Kevin League, a geographer. Working together with Brian Riley, board members including Vic Barnes, attorney Paul Snyder, and others in the community, this team managed to complete a record-setting number of conservation easements in those years. They surpassed 15,000, then 20,000 acres protected.


THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2009

Wet Mountain Tribune

San Isabel Land Trust has new key staffers

There are two new faces at San Isabel Land Protection Trust to replace former executive director, Brian Riley and land protection specialist, Kevin League. Riley left the organization to work with the Peace Corps administration in Panama and League took a position in Colorado Springs.

Ben Lenth is the new Land Protection Specialist at San Isabel Land Protection Trust (SILPT) in Westcliffe. He is not only on the job, but already out taking documentation photos of some of the 103 properties already in the trust program.

Lenth grew up in Niwot in the northern part of Colorado. He comes to Westcliffe via

Ben Lenth

Katherine Ripley-Williams

Unfortunately, in 2008, the Great Recession slowed the economy and momentum declined. Donors were forced to be less generous, and landowners held tighter to their assets. In 2009, both Brian and Kevin left San Isabel for other opportunities, and as a result, significant conservation expertise exited the Wet Mountain Valley. The board was determined to continue the momentum and hired a new executive director, Katherine Ripley-Williams. Katherine had moved to the Wet Mountain Valley with her husband, Roland, from San Francisco, bringing a strong background in fundraising and organizational leadership. Ben Lenth was hired at the same time as a land protection specialist and became responsible for a number of ongoing projects. The staff faced a difficult learning curve and the time period was harsh for nonprofit fundraising. Katherine left San Isabel in 2011, and the organization contracted to three, with Ben Lenth as the only full-time staff. He soon moved into the executive director role and the staff size continued to fluctuate for the next decade, with many knowledgeable and dedicated staff members employed there through the years, providing a high level of professionalism and expertise.

SILPT Staff:

Executive Directors:

Nancy Kendrick
Brian Riley
Katherine Ripley-Williams
Ben Lenth
Linda Poole

Other staff:

Annie Layman: Monitoring Specialist and Art for the Sangres Coordinator
Holly Wray: Administrative Assistance
Kevin League: Land Protection Specialist
John Oribello: Intern
Kristie Nackord: Development Director
Michael Downey-Hodson: Land Protection Specialist
Kate Spinelli: Stewardship Specialist
Adam Belmonte: AmeriCorps member / GIS specialist
Megan Hosterman: AmeriCorps member / Stewardship specialist
Martin Aksentowitz: AmeriCorps member / Forester
Janet Smith: Development Director
Anita Bomgardner: Bookkeeper
Valda Terauds: Hydrologist
Karen Foley: Land and Water Steward
Jerry Glassman: Bluff Park Steward

58 "San Isabel Land Trust wins kudos" in Pueblo Chieftain, August 18, 2009. Accreditation binder.

Part III: Legacy in perpetuity (2010-2021)

EVOLVING PRIORITIES

The so-called H2O Ranch, located on Hermit Lane and visible from town, was one of the most productive hay ranches in the Wet Mountain Valley. In 2009, the H2O ranch was purchased by Fountain and Widefield, suburban municipalities of Colorado Springs with a growing thirst for water. The community knew this was the start of "buy and dry" in the Wet Mountain Valley – the practice of acquiring ranches and stripping them of their water for use in distant Front Range municipalities.[59]

As drought gripped Colorado and pressures from rising water demands increased, San Isabel began to focus on water as part of its conservation efforts. Losing water would mean that the Wet Mountain Valley would lose its agricultural productivity and heritage, as well as the habitat and ecological benefits of irrigation. If San Isabel wanted to protect the land and support agriculture in the community, it also needed to protect the water. [60]

San Isabel clarified its objective to tie water to the land, which means preventing the separation of water from irrigated land by selling it, usually to a municipality. San Isabel's mission is directly tied to water because of its connections to agriculture, ecology, and scenery—all values conservation easements aim to protect.[61]

The fear of water leaving the Wet Mountain Valley was heightened by the completion of the Northern Delivery System, a pipeline from the Pueblo Reservoir to Colorado Springs in 2016. This made Custer County a potential target for additional buy and dry.[62] But through conservation easements, landowners can dedicate their water rights to their agriculture, which will in turn support the natural habitats on their property.[63]

However, San Isabel also needed to re-examine its policy of "tying water to the land," especially if that approach does not meet all of a landowner's needs. There needed to be a middle ground, especially if more and more ranchers sold their land and water.

59 San Isabel Fall 2008 newsletter p1, "The Dry Mountain Valley?" by Brian Riley.
60 San Isabel Fall 2008 newsletter, "The Dry Mountain Valley?" continued p3 by Brian Riley.
61 San Isabel Spring 2011 newsletter p6 "Conservation report—spring 2011" by Ben Lenth
62 "Ben Lenth to step down as director of land trust" in WMT, August 3, 2017. Newspapers 2 folder.
63 San Isabel Fall 2012 newsletter, p2 by Ben Lenth "Drought, food and water"

Keith Hood, owner of the Hood Ranch, one of the oldest ranches in the valley, and long-time board member of San Isabel, had an idea. He was looking for a balance between water for agriculture and food production, and water for urban use. His easement language from the mid-2000s reflects this, allowing him to periodically lease water, but never to sell it separately from his land.[64] Keith was ahead of his time in this approach. Twenty years later, Colorado is still catching up.

San Isabel hoped to adopt a proactive approach, knowing that growing communities on the Front Range means that water in rural areas, such as the Wet Mountain Valley, will be pursued for export. While conservation easements can protect water rights, what of the farmers and ranchers who could not afford, or were otherwise uninterested, in a conservation easement?

In the early 2010s, San Isabel co-hosted a series of water forums in Westcliffe and western Fremont County, together with partners including the Custer County Conservation District, NRCS, CSU Extension, and Coaldale Alliance. It was argued that if dry up is to occur, that the institutions should take responsibility and compensate for the loss of resources. Land trusts like San Isabel could be a facilitator of community dialogue and provide support when landowners had to navigate difficult processes to hold onto their water. The forum led to a coalition of local community members formally enjoining with San Isabel as objectors to the water court case on the CB Ranch in Coaldale, which had been dried up by Security Water District, and which resulted in a "revegetation covenant" on the property to ensure a full and complete revegetation after dry up. [65]

The risk of agricultural water dry up remains a top concern in the area and across much of Colorado, and the protection of water rights remains a top conservation priority in the San Isabel region.

Hood Ranch, photo by Kate Spinelli

64 San Isabel Spring 2013 newsletter, p4-5 by Megan Hosterman, "A Practical Approach"
65 San Isabel Fall 2014 newsletter, p4-5 by Kristie Nackord, "Dry up of a special ranch—a proactive approach

REMEMBERING AND HONORING OLD FRIENDS

As San Isabel approached its twentieth anniversary in 2016, many had joined the efforts, but there were also those who had to say goodbye.

Alice Proctor, one of the founding members of the organization and wife of Charles Proctor, passed away in 2012. San Isabel and the wider Custer County community remember her as beloved volunteer and artist. In addition to creating art for San Isabel's newsletters, she was also instrumental in the behind-the-scenes work for Art for the Sangres in both set up and clean up.[66] In her honor, San Isabel created the "Alice Proctor Volunteer of the Year Award."

Alice Proctor, photo by Bill Gillette

The inaugural award was given to Peggy Kavookjian in 2013. In addition to her contributions to organizing Art for the Sangres, it also recognized her efforts for her involvement with San Isabel from the beginning.

In 2014, the award went to Dianne Whalen for her time as board president between Fall 2004 to Spring 2007 and for leading San Isabel's accreditation efforts. She was also involved in Art for the Sangres, doubling the event's profits in only two years.[67]

Jacke Barnes, second from right, holds Vic Barnes' Alice Proctor Award at Sunday's San Isabel Land Trust celebration. With her are members of the late Alice Proctor's family: from the left, Merr Sohearn, sister; Nancy Mellow, sister; Charles Proctor, husband; and Shannon Proctor, daughter.
– Trib photo by W.A. Ewing

Note: Wet Mountain Tribune the photo caption misspells Merr Shearn's last name

66 San Isabel Fall 2012 newsletter, p6 by Annie Layman, "In honor of Alice Proctor"
67 San Isabel Fall 2014 newsletter, p6 "2nd annual Alice Proctor Outstanding Volunteer Award"

Alice Proctor Volunteer of the Year Award winners:

2013: Peggy Kavookjian
2014: Dianne Whalen
2015: Charles Proctor
2016: Anita Welch
2017: Vic Barnes
2018: Mike Liebman
2019: Cathy Griffin
2020: intentionally paused
2021: Greg Smith
2022: Peter Hedberg
2023: Larry Vickerman
2024: Bill Donley
2025: Pari Morse

Charles Proctor was awarded a special Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015, at the celebration of San Isabel's 20th anniversary.

"I want people to know, I didn't do any of this alone. There were so many people that I have worked alongside all of these years," he said upon receiving the award. Being active in San Isabel since before its conception, Proctor more than earned this special honor.[68]

San Isabel had the chance to honor another old friend, Paul Snyder, following his passing in 2014. Snyder was a lawyer from Boulder and moved to Custer County in 1998, where his love for land conservation reached the members of the San Isabel community. He joined San Isabel's board in 1999 and served for eight years, providing legal assistance and guiding the Land Preservation Committee. Snyder was a valuable resource for land trusts across Colorado. San Isabel's spring 2014 newsletter estimates that Snyder "had his hand in about 200 conservation easements protecting nearly 100,000 acres [across Colorado]." The board of directors decided to dedicate the Paul Snyder Fund in his honor, which was used as a loan program to help landowners with the upfront expenses of conservation easements.[69]

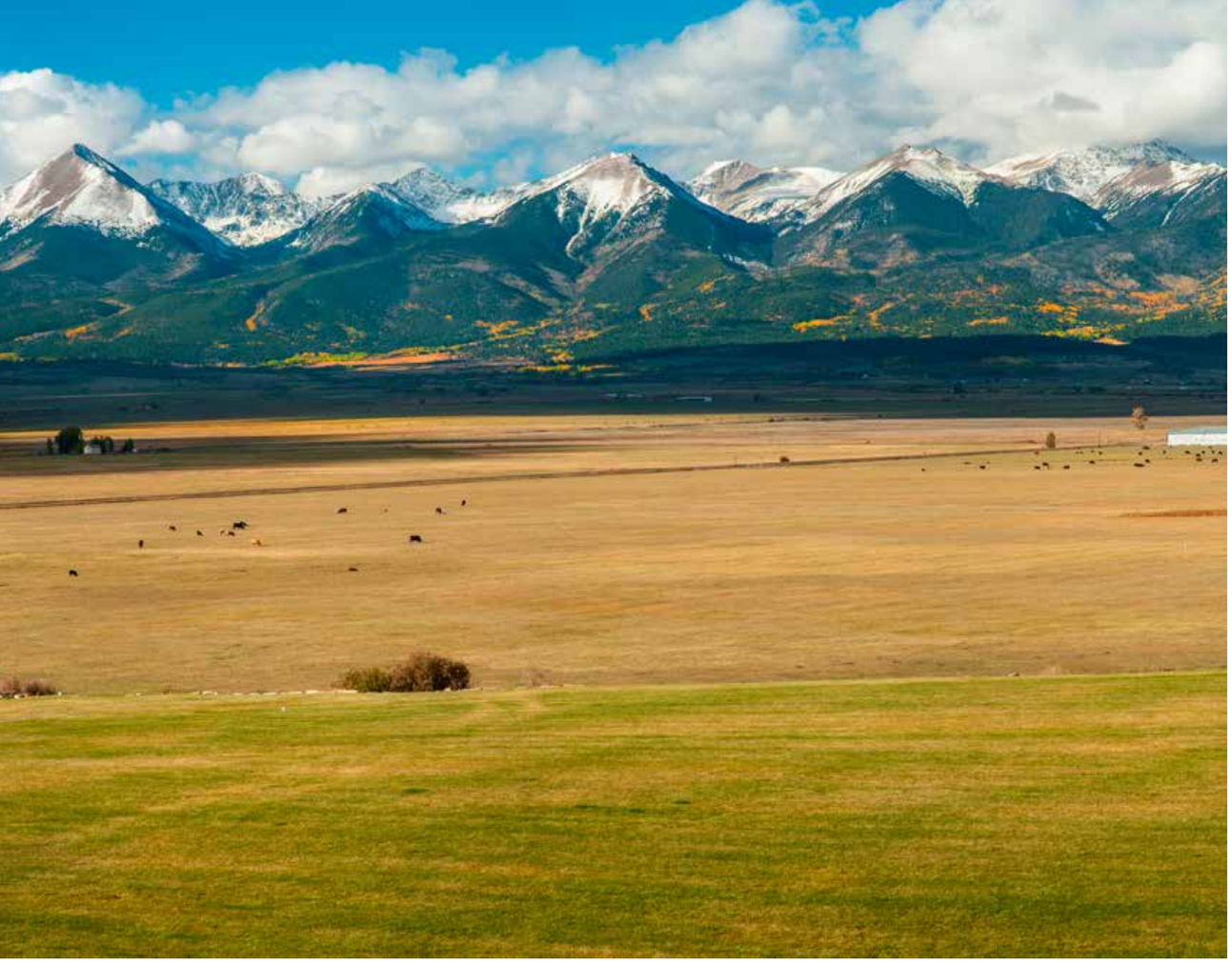
The 2016 Alice Proctor Volunteer of the Year Award went to Anita Welch for her work in recruiting and coordinating with the artists who participate in Art for the Sangres. She was also chair of the Art Selection Committee and had been a long-time volunteer for San Isabel.[70]

The late Vic Barnes was the winner of the 2017 Alice Proctor Award. He had been part of San Isabel's board of directors since 1999 and served as Vice President consistently from 2000 to 2016. He also chaired the Land Preservation Committee (LPC) which reviewed and oversaw every easement San Isabel worked on. Even after stepping down from the board, Barnes continued to lead the LPC[71] until his death in the summer of 2022. Vic was a wildlife biologist who grew up working on his family's place, Walker Ranch, off Willows Lane, and led them to protect their ranch with a conservation easement in 2000. Vic also chaired the Custer County Planning Commission, the Wet Mountain Valley Community Foundation, and the High Mountain Hay Fever Bluegrass Festival for many years. He was well-known and deeply trusted not only to land trust board and staff, but to many in the community. For many years, Vic Barnes was the glue and foundation of San Isabel's efforts.

2018's Volunteer of the Year went to Mike Liebman for his work monitoring protected properties as part of San Isabel's stewardship program. He also led efforts to refurbish a barn at A Painted View Ranch as the new venue for Art for the Sangres.[72]

The Alice Proctor Award was a way to honor Alice's legacy while thanking the volunteers of the present. Volunteers have always been at the heart of San Isabel, and the organization relied on their passionate support.

68 San Isabel Fall 2015 newsletter, p3 "San Isabel honors Charles Proctor with lifetime achievement award"
69 San Isabel Spring 2014 newsletter, p1,3 "Honoring our friend and mentor"
70 San Isabel Fall 2016 newsletter
71 San Isabel Fall 2017 newsletter p5, "Volunteer of the year"
72 San Isabel Fall 2018 newsletter, p5, "Volunteer of the year"



The Bluff - top photo by Bill Gillette. Bottom row, left to right: High Mountain Hay Fever Festival, Colorado Open Lands CEO Tony Caligiuri celebrates the Bluff easement with San Isabel Board Chair Larry Vickerman, stars visible from the Smokey Jack Observatory

THE BLUFF

In 2014, San Isabel received ownership of the Bluff Park. The property was donated by Dick and Audrey Stermer, who had bought the land from Celesta Adams. While there had been talk of developing the land into a high-rise hotel before the sale, the Stermers were certainly not interested in doing so. Dick had said that just thinking about driving through Main Street and not being able to see clear through to the mountains beyond drove him crazy.

The Bluff Park, known informally as "the Bluff," is a special place for the Westcliffe community. The park is the venue for many local events, including the annual High Mountain Hay Fever Bluegrass Festival.[73]

Even though the Town of Westcliffe did well with managing parks, the Stermers continued to be wary of development.

"If you [just] give it to the town, we might lose control over what happens there. Whereas if you put an easement on it, you know in all likelihood, it can be protected better than giving it to the town," said Dick.

The Stermers were strong supporters of San Isabel and important members of the community. In return for receiving ownership of the land, it became San Isabel's responsibility to make sure the Bluff remained a park for the people of Westcliffe. It accomplished that objective by completing a conservation easement on the Bluff in 2015. Colorado Open Lands held the easement.

Visitors frequently come to the Bluff to admire the view of the mountains it provides. The beauty there is special, even in a valley with already majestic views.

"In different times of the day it just looks different," said Audrey. "In the morning the pink in the hills is breathtaking."

"I say I want to charge a dollar per photograph [taken from the Bluff]," joked Dick. "And then it would take care of itself for a long time."

Under San Isabel, volunteer efforts are coordinated to maintain the Bluff so that it may remain a special place for the people of Westcliffe for years to come.

Audrey is grateful that the Bluff has been kept the way it was meant to be. "Even today, if you drive into town and you see people on the Bluff, it was just so worth it."

In 2024, ownership of the Bluff was transferred to the Town of Westcliffe after all. But now with a permanent conservation easement on it, the land is legally protected from becoming anything different than what it is today – a beloved community resource.

73 San Isabel Fall 2014 newsletter, p1, "San Isabel receives ownership of the Bluff Park" by Ben Lenth

WILDFIRE & ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

The work of a land trust doesn't stop when the conservation easement is signed and recorded. In addition to annual monitoring and site visits, San Isabel sought to maintain easements while conserving the land's ecological value. That meant working with landowners to address forest health, fire risk, and various management options through a new Stewardship Services Program.[74]

The urgency for this program was increased of San Isabel's work in 2016 in the aftermath of local fires. The Hayden Pass Fire, triggered by a lightning strike in July, burned more than 16,500 acres near Coaldale. The overwhelming amount of available fuel – dead and living trees – created high-intensity burns.[75] In another devastating blow just a few months later, the Junkins Fire burned around 18,000 acres in October. Of those 18,000 acres, around 7,000 were private land, including six properties with conservation easements with San Isabel.[76] San Isabel staff supported landowners and firefighting agencies, providing information and access during and after the fire.

In response to the wildfire damage, San Isabel began working with landowners and public agencies to develop wildfire mitigations plans, as well as working to restore the land damaged by fires. Part of this effort is through supporting the Burned Area Emergency Response Team (BAER) and their assessments of damaged areas. BAER then uses the surveyed information to help mitigate habitat damage and stabilize the soil to limit erosion.[77]

Other efforts from San Isabel on the wildfire front led volunteers to restore burned landscapes. San Isabel hired Youth Corps crews and leveraged other resources to help with post-fire restoration with partners including Coalitions & Collaboratives, the Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative, and the Custer County Office of Emergency Management.[78]

14 — Wet Mountain Tribune — Thursday, May 24, 2018

Run, then party down, at upcoming Hardscrabble Trail event

The 2018 Hardscrabble Mountain Trail Run is fast approaching, and you won't want to miss its breath-taking views, unique course and fun after-race party – all for a great cause.

The sixth annual Hardscrabble run takes place at 10 a.m. Saturday, June 2, on Bear Basin Ranch, a 3,400-acre ranch just east of Westcliffe. Participants enjoy the rare opportunity to run on private, protected land that offers incredible views and a trail system you'll only experience if you participate.

Proceeds benefit San Isabel Land Protection Trust, a nonprofit organization that works with landowners to protect land, water and wildlife in southern Colorado while there is still time. San Isabel has helped preserved nearly 41,000 acres in Custer, Fremont, Pueblo and Huerfano counties.

A key component of the event is introducing youth to the importance of land and water conservation and giving them the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful Wet Mountain Valley in a fun and challenging way. That's why kids 17 and younger participate for free, thanks to generous sponsors.

The Hardscrabble courses are intended to provide a sense of accomplishment for runners and walkers, with challenging, fun and scenic 5K and 10K routes on rugged equestrian trails, two-track jeep roads and short stretches of open meadow. Participants can walk or run the adventuresome 5K or tackle the 10K run. Both routes offer spectacular views of the Wet Mountains and the nearby Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The start and finish are at 8,913 feet in elevation. The 5K features 475 feet of vertical gain and the 10K 1,083 feet of gain. The 10K tops out at 9,039 feet. The 5K walk (3.1 miles) is a great option for those who aren't ready to take on the course at a faster pace.

After the run, participants and spectators will enjoy a gourmet lunch, live music and prize drawings.

Registration is $40 until May 28; $45 the day of the race. In addition to free registration for youth, school staff in Custer, Chaffee, Fremont, Huerfano and Pueblo counties enjoy a $10 discount on registration.

For more information and to register, go to hardscrabblerun.com or call San Isabel at 783-3018.

Youthful runners take on the 2017 Hardscrabble Mountain Trail Run. Kids ages 17 and younger run for free, thanks to generous sponsors.

–Photo courtesy Greg Smith; imediasmith.com

74 San Isabel Fall/Winter 2015 newsletter, "New stewardship services program supports landowners"
75 San Isabel newsletter Winter 2016, "Hayden Pass Fire brings change to wilderness, residents' lives" by Kate Spinelli, p1
76 San Isabel newsletter Winter 2016 "Junkins Fire" p4
77 San Isabel Fall/Winter 2016 newsletter, "Restoration, repair work"p5
78 San Isabel Spring 2017 newsletter, p1 "Volunteers to help in burn area recovery"

NEW WAYS TO CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY

In the early 2010s, the organization recognized it needed to broaden its audience and relevance, and began expanding the types of outreach and projects it engaged in. 2013 saw the launch of the Hardscrabble Mountain Trail Run. This event was a collaboration among San Isabel Land Protection Trust, Palmer Land Trust, and a group of Tarahumara Runners from Chihuahua, Mexico to celebrate Colorado Land Trust Conservation Week. The proceeds from the event were split between the three organizations.[79] This event ran for over five years on the protected Bear Basin Ranch, 12 miles east of Westcliffe, attracting hundreds of people from across southern Colorado. One year included a 50-mile route that looped onto San Isabel National Forest, then back on the ranch. The day was long, and the risk of losing runners too high, so that portion of the race was eventually scrapped. However, the event continued with over 100 runners each year for several more years, introducing many new people to the land trust.

79 San Isabel Spring 2013 newsletter p3, "hardscrabble mountain trail run 5k/10/-protect the adventure!"

Photo by John Fielder

A NEW BEGINNING

The challenge with a land trust is that conservation easements are not assets – rather, they are liabilities, in that they are responsibilities for the land trust to maintain ever-changing landowner relationships, to monitor properties each year, and to legally defend conservation easements when necessary – all on land owned by someone else. Those are real costs in a complex business, and the staff at San Isabel, as with many small land trusts, struggled over its last decade to develop new projects while maintaining fundraising, managing operations, monitoring, and stewardship legal challenges, amid other responsibilities. San Isabel's success had created a portfolio of responsibilities that were difficult to manage without a larger professional team than the organization had ever supported.

With these responsibilities and the need for specialized staff come ever-growing costs. The local community had always been generous with its support, through volunteering, direct donations, or making purchases at Art for the Sangres, but San Isabel's conservation successes also created a need for funding to steward the land it had protected. A funding gap was looming. Relying on a county of less than 5,000 to support its operation would no longer cut it.

"We started because we needed a local trust," said Charles Proctor. "We took easements further and further away 'til we reached a point where monitoring was a real project." In 2020, when executive director Linda Poole was pulled back from her new home in Westcliffe to her true home in Montana, the board of San Isabel decided to explore merging with a larger land trust. To keep up with stewardship obligations during the transition, a new staff member needed to be recruited.

San Isabel's board chair during these years was Larry Vickerman, who was raised on a family ranch south of Westcliffe and who led his family to protect their home ranch in 2009. Larry's career at nonprofits, local family ties, and protected ranch all lent strong credibility to lead the organization through these staffing and organizational transitions.

Enter Karen Foley, who had a chaotic first year at her dream job. After working random field jobs and earning a master's degree, she was hired as San Isabel's land and water steward in May 2021. Karen's first year coincided with this transformation of the conservation community in the Wet Mountain Valley.

That transformation culminated with a merger with Colorado Open Lands, which works statewide in much the same way that San Isabel operated at the local, community level. By merging, San Isabel gained additional professional staff, economies of scale, in-house expertise on land management issues, and a team of fundraising professionals that could help secure large grants and leverage a pool of private donors from the state beyond the Wet Mountain Valley. As San Isabel's only full-time employee at the time of the merger, Karen now works for Colorado Open Lands and kept her title as land and water steward.

Karen Foley at Bluff Park

"San Isabel had a very grassroots feeling as an organization," she said. To help preserve that feel and connection to the locals, Karen continues to operate out of the office in Westcliffe that has served for San Isabel's base of operations for at least a decade.

The San Isabel advisory board is still active, and Karen regularly speaks with many of the members. All the easements have been maintained during the merger as well.

"We try to get out there and meet with the landowners every year, as much as we can," said Karen. "And keep those relationships and know that we're going to interact with them the same way that San Isabel did."

Karen wasn't the first person from San Isabel to transfer over to Colorado Open Lands. Ben Lenth, San Isabel's executive Director for six years, had joined Colorado Open Lands in 2017, and continued a supportive role with the San Isabel board and staff. When San Isabel decided to merge, Ben managed the merger proceedings.

Ben says, "Having lived in the Wet Mountain Valley and managed San Isabel, I'm pleased to see this community take this step. The merger was intended to continue the work of San Isabel, but with more resources and expertise, and without having to worry about fundraising and administration. The day-to-day work has changed, but the purpose remains the same. Local work has been gaining momentum, and it is personally very rewarding to carry some of these relationships forward. Many of our new conservation easement projects are the result of over a decade of conversation and careful consideration, with true continuity from San Isabel's efforts. This can't happen without the community's support."

When Karen heads out to meet a landowner for the first time, she mentions that working with conservation easements was her dream job. She had interned with a land trust in Vermont and had fallen in love with the work.

To her, it was critical that open lines of communication with landowners in Custer County were maintained so if they wanted to do anything on their property, Colorado Open Lands can be a resource for them to make sure everything is in accordance with their easement. "Easements are supposed to be held in perpetuity, but we can't do that if we don't have the money or staff to do it," said Karen.

Photo by John Fielder

25 years later...

Lookout Valley Ranch, San Isabel's first conservation easement, still stands strong. For the founding members of San Isabel, they can drive down the twisty mountain road between Westcliffe and Rye and have a visual reminder of that first great success. Colorado Open Lands continues to steward Lookout Valley. Twenty-five years after it was put under a conservation easement, the revving of chainsaws breaks the birdsong among the Engelman Spruces and Douglas Firs. Thankfully, the chainsaws are not for deforestation purposes.

The ranch, which has since been renamed the Lonesome Valley Ranch by successor landowners, had suffered damage following the Junkins Fire in 2016. Embers from the fire on the hillside beyond jumped the road and onto the property, igniting trees and shrubs. While firefighters were able to save the ranch, the property sustained lasting fire damage.

So now, a team of Mile High Youth Corps, coordinated by Karen Foley, is on scene to help restore the landscape. The corps is an AmeriCorps program that trains young adults in hands-on restoration work so that they gain field experience and firsthand knowledge of land management.

On the Lonesome Valley Ranch, the crew removed hundreds of pounds of invasive weeds that cropped up. Trees were planted to break up flowing debris in the wetlands, and natural treatment to the soil was applied to help return crucial nutrients for native plants.

As for the chainsaws, they were for the removal of "ladder fuels," plants in the underbrush that allowed fire to spread to the canopy. Most of the ladder fuel that was removed was diseased trees and young conifers.

Shouts of "Coming down!" echoed through the trees. Falling branches shook the ground. Once the Mile High Youth Corps had completed their work, they left Lonesome Valley Ranch in better shape than when they first arrived.

No matter who holds its conservation easement, be it a grassroots land trust organization in the Wet Mountain Valley or a larger state organization, the Lonesome Valley Ranch carries on its business. It gets to be green, feed birds, and allow animals to pass through its trees, in perpetuity.

Mile High Youth Corps on Lonesome Valley Ranch

A legacy that will last forever

In twenty-five years of operation, San Isabel Land Protection Trust's successes are undeniable. Over forty thousand acres of land are permanently protected. Taken together, that's over 62 square miles of land that can never be subdivided or developed.

A single acre of land holds many things.

It holds habitats for animals, from fluttering butterflies to majestic herds of grazing elk. It holds a stream with water rights that support local agriculture. It holds childhood memories of catching trout. It holds a grandfather's cabin that he built with his own two hands. It holds generations of ranchland legacy.

Add all those things in one single acre. Now multiply them by the over 40,000 acres of land protected through conservation easements with the San Isabel Land Protection Trust. Consider that this was accomplished simply by local people who cared. People who saw changes coming to their community and said, 'Stop. Not here. This is simply too special.'

And because that small group of people took action, their grandchildren's grandchildren will have the same opportunity to enjoy every one of those 40,000 acres and experience all of the peace and wonder that they bring. They will be able to ranch the land. They'll find solace in the sublime viewsheds. They'll see wildlife loping through meadows and fish in the streams.

The story of San Isabel Land Protection Trust doesn't end, it simply continues, because the nation's best tool in protecting private land – the conservation easement – was brought to the region. Those accomplishments can never be erased. Stewardship of these lands has been passed to a new generation of people who care enough to stand up for it.

The people that come after them will do the same. Because anyone who sees the San Isabel landscape instantly falls in love with it. Because once land and water is gone, it's gone forever. Because generations to come are inspired by a group of people who gave their time, their money, their attention, and their devotion to the land that they loved with their whole hearts.

The closing words of this document shall be theirs.

"It was a grassroots effort and the organization existed because a few people really cared.
Who saw some development happening that they were worried about,
and they took it into their own hands.
We always say that perpetuity is a long time and we want to make this
organization live in perpetuity. I think it's on its way now."

– Brian Riley

"Initially I thought it was just the beauty of the area. And it still remains the beauty,
and the openness and the vastness, but it's also the people.
The people that come here to enjoy the beauty, the wildlife, and the openness,
it's just wonderful."

– Dianne Whalen

"We made mistakes, but we went ahead and we went real fast for a while,
and when it finally got over dead center on it, we rallied hard
and we put a lot of land together across the state and in this valley.
And I'm glad we did that."

– Claricy Rusk

"There are people coming in, but when they come here
and understand they really are going home.
So we're hoping that it just continues to evolve."

– Audrey Stermer

"By maintaining local trust, COL will be able to make good on its promise of
being a durable institution that will continue to respond to the needs of landowners
and this community for the long term. We're off to a great start!"

– Ben Lenth

"It was a gift to the community that San Isabel gave
and the community gave back."

-Randy Woods

"We had clear obligations to save that view and the land.
And do what's right for the land."

– Marty Frick

"I think I'm just thrilled with the accomplishments. I'm proud to be a little part
of it in the beginning,
I'm thrilled about the next step, bringing it all together."

– Pari Morse

"In order to keep this whole movement alive and well funded,
there's going to have to be mergers.
You just got to consolidate."

– Dick Stermer

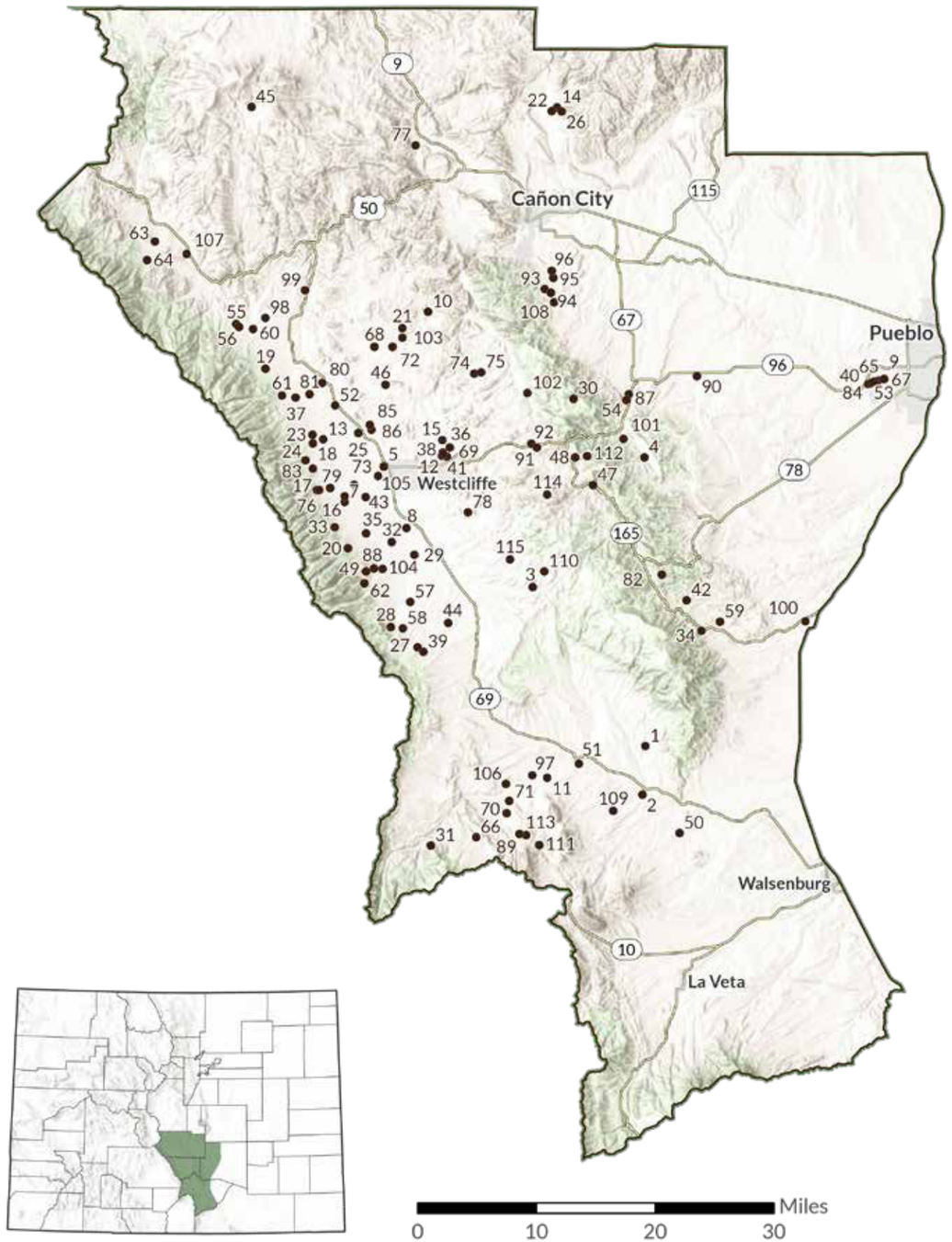
"When we had the horse in the race we spurred and rode pretty hard.
You can't take it with you, but you can leave something behind."

– Randy Rusk

"The values we have in Custer County are truly special.
There's going to be more people and it's going to be a challenge.
But we've still got the land and the open space and the wildlife
that will be with us for a long time."

– Vic Barnes

Conservation Easements completed by San Isabel Land Protection Trust



Label	Property Name	Acres	County
1	Agape Ranch	600	Huerfano
2	Aguirre Property	160	Huerfano
3	Aspen Creeks Ranch	171	Custer
4	Billington Ranch A&R	3160	Custer
5	Bluff Park CE	10	Custer
6	Bolin Property	50	Pueblo
7	Brandenburg Ranch	160	Custer
8	Bredehoft Property	161	Custer
9	Brian Van Wyhe (Parcel E)	16	Pueblo
10	Brockett - Anderson	232	Fremont
11	Charro Ranch 1	540	Huerfano
12	Clear Nights of Colorado	40	Custer
13	Comstock & Rogers Ranch A&R	3183	Custer
14	Coons Smith	320	Fremont
15	Cottonwood Springs Ranch	121	Custer
16	Crooked Spruce Ranch	157	Custer
17	Devai	42	Custer
18	Drager Heritage Property	156	Custer
19	Duckett Creek Ranch	400	Custer
20	Elk Crossings Ranch	340	Custer
21	Elk Springs Ranch	162	Fremont
22	Embleton	160	Fremont
23	Ferree	154	Custer
24	Frank Kennicott Corporation - Garrett Parcel	40	Custer
25	Frank Kennicott Ranch	1020	Custer
26	Garden Park Placer Mine Claim	120	Fremont
27	Glen Livengood Property	480	Custer
28	Greenhorn Ranch	190	Custer
29	H.G. Vickerman Ranch	720	Custer
30	Hardin Wetmore Place	160	Custer
31	High Mesa Ranch	320	Huerfano
32	Hood Ranch	500	Custer
33	Horn Mountain Ranch	74	Custer
34	Huckleberry Hills Ranch	461	Pueblo
35	Humboldt Peak Ranch A&R	323	Custer
36	Husvet Property	76	Custer
37	Jane Lawrence Property	110	Custer
38	Janssen Parcels	70	Custer
39	Jerry Livengood Property	480	Custer
40	K. Van Wyhe (Parcel A)	17	Pueblo
41	Kee Property	35	Custer
42	La Tierra	426	Pueblo
43	Little Bluestem Ranch	160	Custer
44	Livengood Home Place	627	Custer
45	Loco Mountain Ranch	360	Fremont
46	Lonesome Dove	70	Custer
47	Lonesome Valley Ranch	139	Custer
48	Manweiler Property	189	Custer
49	Markert Ranch	640	Custer
50	Marrella Property	80	Huerfano
51	Martinez Ranch	155	Huerfano
52	Mile 66 Ranch	199	Custer
53	MITB (Parcel B)	18	Pueblo
54	Montez Ranch	192	Custer
55	Mosher Creek Ranch I	85	Fremont
56	Mosher Creek Ranch II	76	Fremont
57	Music Meadows Ranch I & III	3680	Custer
58	Music Meadows Ranch II	1200	Custer
59	Nelson Property (Pueblo)	107	Pueblo
60	Nimnicht Property	105	Fremont
61	North Brush Creek Tract	157	Custer
62	Osterkamp Preserve	82	Custer
63	Oxford I	96	Fremont
64	Oxford II	160	Fremont
65	Pearson Property (Parcel D)	18	Pueblo
66	Perrino Property	200	Huerfano
67	Quail Ridge (Parcel F)	22	Pueblo
68	Rancho Bendito	447	Fremont
69	Red Rock Ranch	808	Custer
70	Redwing Ranch I	365	Huerfano
71	Redwing Ranch II	1665	Huerfano
72	Relph Property	131	Fremont
73	Riggs Ranch	160	Custer
74	Roberts Ranch I	324	Custer
75	Roberts Ranch II	310	Custer
76	Robey Property	76	Custer
77	Roger Rupp Ranch	400	Fremont
78	Rosita 117	117	Custer
79	Ruzanski Property	80	Custer
80	Saddle Rabbit Property	378	Custer
81	Samuelson Ranch	541	Custer
82	San Isabel Scout Ranch	410	Pueblo
83	Schulz-Stoneman Property	115	Custer
84	Scott Van Wyhe (Parcel C)	16	Pueblo
85	Seven Diamonds Ranch 1	116	Custer
86	Seven Diamonds Ranch 2	285	Custer
87	Sheffield Ranch	154	Custer
88	Shining Mountain Ranch	80	Custer
89	Sierra de Hierro Ranch	155	Huerfano
90	Siloam Ranch	560	Pueblo
91	Singing Acres 3	245	Custer
92	Singing Acres Ranch	320	Custer
93	Slanovich Property I	400	Fremont
94	Slanovich Property II	457	Fremont
95	Slanovich Property III	475	Fremont
96	Slanovich Property IV	360	Fremont
97	Sperry Mountain Farms (Kavookjian-Nora Property)	157	Huerfano
98	Spring Valley Ranch	129	Fremont
99	Stagecoach Ranch	141	Fremont
100	Stewart Thoroughbreds Horse Ranch	213	Pueblo
101	Stillpoint Ranch	166	Custer
102	Stocker - Bear Ridge	200	Custer
103	Tchoupitoulas Refuge	335	Fremont
104	Three Creeks Ranch	72	Custer
105	Ute Springs Ranch	466	Custer
106	Valdez Ranch	345	Huerfano
107	Vallie Ranch	170	Fremont
108	Van Norman Property	526	Fremont
109	Vargas Ranch	426	Huerfano
110	Vickerman Ranch	1394	Custer
111	Weeping Rock Ranch	80	Huerfano
112	Wet Mountain Ranch	346	Custer
113	Wheeler Preserve	452	Huerfano
114	Wixson Mountain Ranch	1515	Custer
115	Yankovich	197	Custer

Board of Directors Names & Terms

BOARD OFFICERS

BOARD PRESIDENT	VICE PRESIDENT	SECRETARY
Randy Woods; Winter 1996-Fall 1998	John Barnett; Spring 1996-Fall 1998	Alice Proctor; Winter 1996-Summer 1998, Winter 2000-Spring 2004
Margaret Karsten; Winter 2000-Spring 2004	Vic Barnes; Winter 2000-Fall 2016	Margaret Karsten; Fall 1998, Fall 2006-Spring 2007
Dianne Whalen; Fall 2004-Spring 2007	Keith Hood; Spring 2017-Fall 2020	Mary Ellen Lesage; Fall 2004-Spring 2006, Spring 2008-Fall 2015
Terry Nimnicht; Spring 2008–Spring 2015		Keith Hood; Fall 2016
Larry Vickerman; Fall 2015-Fall 2020		Ann Robey; Spring 2017-Fall 2020

BOARD MEMBERS AND TERMS OF SERVICE

Sandra Attebery; Winter 1996-Winter 2000
Jacke Barnes; Winter 2000-Spring 2003
Vic Barnes; Winter 2000-Fall 2016
John Barnett; Winter 1996-Fall 1998
Carol Barnett; Summer 1996-Fall 1998
Woody Beardsley; Fall 2005-Spring 2009, Fall 2015-Fall2020
Don Belveal; Spring 2008-Fall 2009
Hank Burdine; Fall 1996-Summer 1997
Mattie Burtt; Fall 2006-Fall 2011
Doug Cain; Fall 2014-Spring2019
Claudia Cole; Winter 2000-Spring 2006, Spring 2008-Spring 2011 Fall 2013-Spring 2016
Dana Derick; Fall 2005-Spring 2011
Bill Donley; Fall 2006-Fall 2020
Dick Downey; Summer 2012-Fall 2017
Ray Herrick; Fall 2005-Spring 2006
Jan Hildebrand; Fall 2010-Spring 2013
Keith Hood; Winter 2000-Fall 2004, Spring 2008-Fall 2020
David Huber; Spring 2018-Fall 2020
Bill Jack; Summer 1996, Winter 1997-Winter 2003
Margaret Karsten; Fall 1998-Spring 2007
Fred Karsten; Winter 2000-Spring 2006
Mary Kattnig; Winter 1996-Spring 2005
Sara Kettle; Fall 2003-Winter 2003
Mary Ellen Lesage; Fall 2004-Spring 2007
Jerry Livengood; Winter 1996-Spring 1996
Jack McCrory; Winter 1996-Spring 1997
Pete Michaelson; Winter 2020
Pari Morse; Spring 2020
Kristie Nackord; Spring 2017-Fall 2017
Terry Nimnicht; Fall 2006-Spring 2015
Michael O'Hanlon; Winter 1996-Winter 2000
Blake Osborn; Fall 2016-Fall 2018
Steve Oswald; Spring 2019-Fall 2020
Annie Overlin; Spring 2019-Fall 2020
Alice Proctor; Fall 1998-Spring 2007
Charles Proctor; Winter 1996-Spring 2007
Debbie Rabinowitz; Summer 2012-Fall 2014
Gary Roberts; Spring 2003
Ann Robey; Spring 2009-Fall 2020
Claricy Rusk; Fall 2003-Fall 2015
Rebecca Samuelson; Fall 2003-Spring 2006
Sara Shields; Spring 2004-Spring 2009
Chris Skagen Spring 2017-Fall 2018
Paul Snyder; Spring 2005–Spring 2007
Bob Steimle; Spring 2008-Fall 2020
Kurt Stocker; Fall 2004-Spring 2007
Susan Tichy; Spring 1997-Spring 2003
Walter van Woudenburg; Fall 2004-Fall 2009
Larry Vickerman; Spring 2013-Fall 2020
Greg Watkins; Fall 2010-Summer 2012
Dianne Whalen; Spring 2003-Spring 2020
Randy Woods; Winter 1996-Winter 2000

ADVISORY BOARD

Mike Adams
Sandra Attebery
Jacke Barnes
Vic Barnes
Doug Cain
John Fielder
Bill Jack
Fred Karsten
Margaret Karsten
Dick Kerr
Jan Lee
Jerry Livengood
Pete Michaelson
Pari Morse
Alex Parrot
Arlie Riggs
Gary Roberts
Kirk Ruzanski
Don Simonton
Judge John Tracey
Susan Tichy
John Watson

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