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New Fund Launches to Promote Conservation and Livability in Colorado's San Luis Valley

SAN LUIS VALLEY, CO – [Western Rivers Conservancy](#) (WRC), [Colorado Open Lands](#) (COL) and [Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust](#) (RiGHT) are pleased to announce the creation of the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund. The Fund is a collaborative effort to bolster local conservation efforts in Colorado's San Luis Valley and to preserve the region's rich cultural heritage, while enhancing livability for Valley communities.

Over the next four years, WRC, COL and RiGHT will develop and administer a \$2 million re-granting program to increase the capacity of organizations throughout the valley, where land conservation, water rights and a heritage of *acequia* agriculture go hand in hand. The unique partnership among WRC, COL, RiGHT and community groups will preserve working agricultural lands, open space, and water resources, and create new outdoor recreation opportunities which are all vital to the long-term health of the region.

The San Luis Valley is one of Colorado's and the West's greatest natural and cultural resources. It is home to a wealth of public protected lands, from the Rio Grande National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands that comprise the high mountains and foothills surrounding the Valley, to the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, and the Alamosa, Baca and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges.

The Valley's unique heritage has been further highlighted by federal designations, such as the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area, and the Rio Grande Natural Area on the Valley floor. In addition, over 340,000 acres of private lands have been protected by landowners and many conservation partners in the region.

At the heart of the San Luis Valley is the Rio Grande, which flows from the headwaters in the San Juan Mountains on the west, out across the Valley floor and then south to New Mexico. Its tributaries and riparian areas provide habitat for over 200 bird species, including 95% of the Rockies' greater sandhill crane population. The waters of the Rio Grande also sustain the working ranches and farms that are the base of the region's agricultural economy.

“The Rio Grande is one of the West’s most iconic and important rivers,” says Sue Doroff, President of WRC. “This landmark partnership will allow us to conserve outstanding riverlands along the upper Rio Grande and its tributaries for the benefit of the region’s incredible wildlife and to enhance river access for the communities that live along and near this great river.”

“Land and water conservation in the San Luis Valley is key to sustaining the vitality of our agricultural heritage and economy,” says Nancy Butler, Executive Director of RiGHT. “The Fund will also allow us to work even more effectively with many local partners on projects that can protect, restore and enhance our key land and water resources, as well as create new agricultural, recreational and cultural opportunities for our community, our youth and visitors to the Valley.”

A key component of the Fund is the re-granting program, which aims to increase the capacity of and collaboration between community organizations to achieve land and water conservation, acequia protection, restoration and outdoor recreation initiatives in the San Luis Valley. The re-granting program application guidelines will be available in early 2016.

The San Luis Valley Conservation Fund is supported by a grant from the [LOR Foundation](#), which works to enhance livability throughout the Intermountain West through community-driven conservation.

“This is an investment in the communities and people of the San Luis Valley,” says Jake Caldwell, Program Officer at LOR. “By strengthening local partnerships and investing in collaboration, we believe that communities in the Valley can define their future and protect the long-term health of this remarkable region.”

The lifeblood for the working ranches and farms is water. Community-based strategies to support water sustainability are critical to the future of the entire Valley and will be a focus of the Fund. Unique to two of the Valley’s six counties are acequias, a system of community water distribution which often predate Colorado’s statehood and in some cases even its status as a territory. Acequia ditches support hundreds of small-scale farmers in Costilla and Conejos counties and form the organizational core for small communities in the southern San Luis Valley

While acequias represent some of the oldest water rights in Colorado, many of the networks operate informally. Their long-term viability, and that of the communities they have supported for over a century, is a particular focus of the Fund.

“This is an incredible opportunity to not only protect acequia water rights, but also to support acequia leadership and organization in Colorado,” says Sarah Parmar, Director of Conservation at COL “Creation of the fund is a real boost to our ongoing effort to ensure healthy futures for the culture and communities the acequias have sustained for generations.”

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About Colorado Open Lands

Colorado Open Lands (COL) is a statewide land trust, founded in 1981, whose work permanently protects Colorado's working farms, ranches, wildlife habitat, rivers, and irreplaceable scenic lands. Colorado Open Lands has worked with private landowners to conserve 109,185 acres in the San Luis Valley, and is working in different ways with the Valley's acequia communities to protect their water rights, including hosting the Colorado Congreso de Acequias and facilitating a water rights legal assistance program in partnership with the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association and the University of Colorado Law School. To learn more about Colorado Open Lands, visit www.coloradoopenlands.org.

About the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust serves as the community's land trust in the San Luis Valley of south central Colorado. Founded in 1999, RiGHT's conservation work aims to sustain the vitality of our agricultural heritage and economy, our exceptional wildlife habitat, the scenic beauty all around us and our rural quality of life and to inspire a culture of conservation in our community. Partnering with private landowners, public agencies, and other conservation organizations to achieve meaningful conservation outcomes, to date our Rio Grande Initiative has protected over 25,000 acres of working lands and important habitat along the Rio Grande and its key tributaries. To learn more about RiGHT, visit www.riograndelandtrust.org.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that protects outstanding river ecosystems in the western United States. WRC acquires lands along rivers to protect critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By applying decades of experience in land acquisition, WRC is able to effectively secure the health of whole ecosystems. It has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great rivers like the Yampa, Gunnison, Salmon, Hoh, Snake, Madison, Klamath and John Day. Founded in 1988, WRC is the nation's only conservation program dedicated solely to the acquisition of riverlands. To learn more about WRC, visit www.westernrivers.org.