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GOCO awards \$2.8M to Western Rivers Conservancy and Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust for conservation efforts in San Luis Valley

Costilla County, CO – Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) awarded a \$2.8 million “Protect Initiative” grant to Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) last week to conserve more than 18,000 acres of critically important riverlands, uplands, fish and wildlife habitat, and scenic open space along the Rio Grande and Conejos River, in the San Luis Valley.

The project, a joint effort by WRC and RiGHT, spans more than 28 square miles of the southern San Luis Valley, including more than five miles of the Rio Grande and a mile of the Conejos River. The lands along the Rio Grande lie within the congressionally designated Rio Grande Natural Area, downstream of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge.

“Great Outdoors Colorado is funding a true collaborative, landscape-scale conservation effort,” says WRC President, Sue Doroff, “and at the heart of our work is the Rio Grande, one of the West’s great rivers and the lifeblood of the San Luis Valley.”

WRC is partnering with RiGHT, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Costilla County and private landowners to conserve three properties with crucial fish and wildlife habitat and outstanding recreation opportunities in an area with almost no public land.

The GOCO grant will help fund WRC’s acquisition of two of those properties, the 16,707-acre Brownie Hills property along four miles of the Rio Grande; and the 1,330-acre Olguin Ranch, at the confluence of the Conejos River, directly across the Rio Grande from Brownie Hills. The grant will also help fund RiGHT’s permanent protection of the Olguin Ranch and the 142-acre Crowther Ranch on the Conejos River.

“We’re thrilled to move forward with these exceptional conservation projects on the Rio Grande and Conejos River and grateful for GOCO’s support of our *Rio Grande Initiative*,” said Nancy Butler, RiGHT Executive Director. “And our partnership with WRC is making it possible to

protect these two beautiful working ranches, along with their water rights, wetlands and superb wildlife habitat.”

Protection of these lands is part of WRC and RiGHT’s larger conservation efforts within the San Luis Valley at the headwaters of the Rio Grande. The upper reaches of this iconic western river provide vital habitat for the valley’s diverse wildlife, which includes 200 bird species and 95 percent of the Rocky Mountains’ sandhill cranes.

WRC’s purchase of the Brownie Hills property will conserve key winter habitat for big game, including elk, pronghorn and mule deer, as well as many smaller mammals and birds. Its acquisition of the Olguin Ranch will lead to RiGHT’s protection of the exceptional wetlands and habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher on the property. Conservation of the Crowther property will likewise protect exceptional wetlands and important habitat for southwestern willow flycatcher.

The partners are working to preserve the rich heritage and agricultural landscape of the area and, at Brownie Hills, ensure passive public access to the Rio Grande and the property’s upland game areas. The Brownie Hills property will add substantially to Costilla County’s public land, which at 99% private land has less public land than any county in Colorado.

WRC and RiGHT have been working together since 2015. In November of last year, the two organizations, along with Colorado Open Lands, partnered to create the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund, which was made possible through a major grant from the LOR Foundation. In addition to supporting the work of these three partners, the grant established the San Luis Valley Conservation and Connection Initiative, a four-year, \$2 million re-granting program, to increase the capacity of organizations throughout the valley, bolster local conservation efforts, preserve the region’s rich cultural heritage and enhance livability for Valley communities.

GOCO’s grant this week will play a critical role in WRC and RiGHT’s larger efforts to conserve the Rio Grande and its key tributaries within the San Luis Valley.

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.

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 Great Outdoors Colorado

Great Outdoors Colorado invests a portion of Colorado Lottery proceeds to help preserve and enhance the state's parks, trails, wildlife, rivers, and open spaces. GOCO's independent board awards competitive grants to local governments and land trusts, and makes investments through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Created when voters approved a Constitutional Amendment in 1992, GOCO has since funded more than 4,700 projects in urban and rural areas in all 64 counties without any tax dollar support. Visit GOCO.org for more information.