

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**DATE: July 11, 2016**Contacts:

Rio de la Vista
Associate Director
Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust
719-850-2255
riovista@rmi.net

Sarah Parmar
Director of Conservation
Colorado Open Lands
303-988-2373, ext. 220
sparmar@coloradoopenlands.org

Sue Doroff
President
Western Rivers Conservancy
503-241-0151
sdoroff@westernrivers.org

San Luis Valley Conservation Fund awards \$500,000 to enhance conservation, community and livability in San Luis Valley

Denver, CO – The San Luis Valley Conservation Fund, a partnership between [Colorado Open Lands](#), [Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust](#), [Western Rivers Conservancy](#) and the [LOR Foundation](#), announced its first round of grant awards for organizations working in Colorado’s San Luis Valley.

A total of \$500,000 was awarded by the SLVCF to bolster conservation efforts within the valley and to help preserve the region’s rich cultural heritage while enhancing livability for local communities.

Seventeen organizations received grants that ranged from \$6,000 to \$60,000.

The SLVCF was established in 2015 through a grant from the LOR Foundation, the group’s collaborative funding partner. Part of that grant established the San Luis Valley Conservation and Connection Initiative, 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 are intimately linked.

A central focus for the partner organizations is the Rio Grande, which provides crucial habitat for wildlife, including pronghorn, elk, bighorn sheep, over 200 bird species and 95% of the Rocky Mountains’ greater sandhill crane population. The river and its tributaries sustain the working ranches and farms that form the base of the region’s agricultural economy, and they provide essential recreation opportunities for communities throughout the valley.

COL, RiGHT and WRC are working to preserve the valley’s rich heritage, balancing agricultural needs with conservation and recreation along and around the Rio Grande.

San Luis Valley Conservation and Connection Initiative Grants

In this first round, the SLVCF awarded grants to the following.

Adams State Adventure Program – \$6,000

The Adams State Adventure Program and Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado will host a 30-person volunteer project on Earth Day, April 22, 2017 to create an official river take-out on the Rio Grande, within the Rio Grande Natural Area on a section of the river south of the Lobatos Bridge and North of the New Mexico border where no legal take-out currently exists.

Colorado Rio Grande Restoration Foundation – \$40,000

Support for the Del Norte Riverfront Project, a grassroots effort to revitalize the Town of Del Norte's riverfront for both ecological and human benefit. This project will address the issues of fragmented aquatic and riparian habitat and a disconnected recreation corridor along the Rio Grande as it flows through Del Norte. The project will enhance habitat, improve boating passage and recreational trail access, fund a new boat ramp, and enhance the connection between the Rio Grande and the residents of and visitors to the Town of Del Norte.

Conejos Clean Water – \$35,000

This award will support the capacity of the Conejos Clean Water (CCW) staff as they work on a variety of projects, including land and water conservation, restoration, natural resource management and enhancement, recreation, agricultural and water sustainability and environmental education. Programs have a direct community benefit.

Conservation Legacy – \$35,000

In the summer of 2016, the Conservation Legacy's SCC – Los Valles Program will offer two four-week sessions of the Connection Corps, each session engaging six youth from Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande and/or Saguache counties. Each crew will work as a team with two adult crew leaders to complete important local conservation projects, such as building sections of a connector trails and providing maintenance on existing recreational infrastructure on public lands, learning those important skills and developing a greater appreciation for the landscape.

High Valley Community Center – \$15,000

HVCC works consistently to help its participants reach their full potential and understand their potential to become tomorrow's leaders in outdoor recreation and stewardship, agriculture, and conservation. Funding will help provide outdoor recreation opportunities for more than 200 participants during the summer, after-school and Fabulous Fridays programs. Each student will increase their knowledge of environmental stewardship.

Lower Willow Creek Restoration Company – \$36,000

Funding for the Willow Creek Restoration and Recreation Plan to amend floodplain soils and connect connect the community to Willow Creek through stewardship opportunities. The project will also help the LWCRCo plan for recreation at Willow Creek that meets the needs of the community. Finally, this project will build capacity for the LWCRCo by supporting a growing staff.

Mosca-Hooper Conservation District – \$40,000

Support for the “SLV Soil Health Regeneration Project,” will bolster conservation and restoration efforts in the San Luis Valley through local land-owner soil-health education, technical assistance, and soil lab analysis. The project represents a new partnership of the Mosca-Hooper Conservation District (MHCD) and the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition (LFC). The partners will educate both producers and consumers about the importance of soil health and market the sustainable soil-health food production methods all the way through to the end consumer.

Revitalizing Sustainable Agriculture – \$10,000

Funding for Revitalizing Sustainable Agriculture will go toward the exploration of a consortium of nonprofit and local government entities in Costilla County to formally cooperate to address shared goals and projects that will meet community needs for more space for recreation, agricultural product processing, and education programming that is linked to the County’s unique heritage and environment.

Rio Grande Watershed Conservation and Education Initiative – \$20,000

Funding will help meet increased demand by supporting additional part-time staff at RGWCEI and expanding programs for schools in the six counties of the San Luis Valley. Increased outreach to students will mean continued skill growth, increases in school measurable outcome testing, continued participation in the Youth Conservation Camp and increased participation in the and growth of the Envirothon Program, North America's largest high school environmental education competition.

San Luis Valley Development Resource Group – \$60,000

Funding to develop a full-time coordinated office and position to manage and implement the 2014 SLV Trails & Recreation Master Plan in collaboration with the SLVGO Coalition and SLV Inspire Coalition, both volunteer coalitions. The office would assist local governments and other agencies and entities with coordination, technical assistance, and when needed, act as the fiscal agent for recreation and trail projects and other initiatives under the Master Plan.

San Luis Valley Development Resources Group/BLM – \$11,000

Funding to support acquisition of a 600-acre parcel that will also connect to an existing 160-acre parcel that is currently landlocked, all of which will make additional public lands along the Rio Grande accessible by public road (County Road 15). Support will pay for costs such as appraisals and title work. The property will serve as an access site for hunting, fishing, hiking, boating and mountain biking.

San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition – \$60,000

This project focuses on the Rio Grande Corridor in and near Alamosa, and funding will enable multiple goals: 1) improve the recreational and educational opportunities along the Rio Grande; 2) establish designated river access points; 3) restore, improve and maintain the ecological systems and soils within the Corridor; and 4) uphold participatory planning principles that engage the greater community and support the overall vision and goals of the SLV community.

San Luis Valley Trout Unlimited/Wetland Dynamics – \$42,000

The 'SLV Watershed and Wildlife Conservation Assessment' will assess Valley wetlands to a guide cooperative conservation goals and promote partnerships to manage, monitor, and conserve habitat resources across the San Luis Valley. The assessment involves local, regional and state agencies and conservation organizations, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Natural Resource Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, Ducks Unlimited, Inc., Intermountain West Joint Venture, National Park Service and many others.

Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association – \$33,000

Funding for the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association will build the capacity of the organization to further its mission to sustain and support the acequia system and the families and communities that depend on it. Funding will provide training to the Board to increase its effectiveness and will support community outreach through the annual Congreso de Acequias.

Town of Crestone – \$10,000

Funding for Phase 1 of a trail project that will enhance outdoor recreation opportunities for communities, including improved public access and connectivity to BLM, USFS, and USFWS lands. The planning and design of the trail system will focus on connectivity between points of interests including communities, parks, schools, public buildings and public lands. This trail project will provide opportunities for economic development for the Town of Crestone and surrounding communities by supporting and enhancing recreation.

Trout Unlimited – \$29,000

Funding will enable an aquatic and riparian habitat restoration project for small streams within the Culebra River watershed, utilizing local materials and reducing heavy equipment operations. Trout Unlimited and the landowner will improve a segment of habitat and focus on a holistic educational and outreach approach to link healthy rivers with healthy farms, a philosophy well aligned with acequia tradition.

Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado – \$18,000

VOC will establish a technical assistance program, called Ready, Set, Volunteer!, that offers organizations, particularly those which may be receiving funds through the SLVGO and SLV Inspire Initiatives, to more easily and effectively undertake the stewardship projects they propose and strengthen long-term environmental stewardship in the Valley.

About the Lead Partners

Colorado Open Lands 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.

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.

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.