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**San Luis Valley Conservation Fund awards \$511,000 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 today its second round of grant awards for organizations working in Colorado’s San Luis Valley.

A total of \$511,000 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 \$10,000 to \$50,000.

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 second round, the SLVCF awarded grants to the following.

**Alpine Achievers Initiative, Backyard to Backcountry Program (B2B) \$30,000**

B2B Programs are designed to provide age appropriate programming that progress in complexity as youth move through grades K to 12. AAI is reaching out to all SLV schools to offer B2B programs and is working with other SLV organizations to enhance their existing environmental education programs. B2B programs are offered during the school day, after school, on weekends, alternative breaks and the summer.

**Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, Conservation Easement on a Conejos River ranch \$40,000**

This overall project will conserve over 500 acres of productive agricultural land, including river frontage on the Conejos River and 200 acres of riparian and wetland habitat. The conservation easement will help a ranching family ensure that their historic family lands in Conejos County remain unchanged for generations come.

**Colorado Rio Grande Restoration Foundation, Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project-2017 Project Development \$32,500**

The RGHRP has assembled partners to plan a diverse range of projects to improve the health of the Rio Grande. Projects include habitat restoration, streambank stabilization, irrigation infrastructure improvements, recreation access, watershed health, and outreach and education. Requested funds will support staff resources required to develop and fund the implementation of these valuable projects.

**Conejos Clean Water, Building Community: Developing Youth Engagement & Outdoor Recreation in the Conejos Land Grant Region \$30,000**

This project aims to further develop enhanced livability and health of communities, especially through outdoor recreation and environmental education opportunities for youth and families, additional preservation of the Conejos Land Grant Region's rich cultural heritage, and conservation of land and water through sustainable natural resource management practices.

**Conservation Legacy, San Luis Valley Youth Conservation Stewardship Program \$10,000**

In 2017, the 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. This is in addition already funded youth Corps programs. Each crew will work as a team with two adult crew leads to complete important local conservation projects on local lands.

**Costilla County, Costilla County Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Trails \$37,150**

The project will build the Overlook Trail in Rito Seco Park in the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt area, utilizing local youth crews for construction. The Overlook Trail is a one-way .75 mile trail to a major vista with excellent views to the west. As part of the County's trail and open space efforts, this will be the first new trail built in Costilla County in over 40 years.

**Lower Willow Creek Restoration Company, Engaging Stewardship \$20,000**

The Engaging Stewards project initiates the "Adopt an Oxbow" program on the recently restored floodplain site below the town of Creede to engage volunteers in a meaningful service learning experience and to assist in the recovery of the community gateway and reconnection to local

waterways. The project will increase restoration success, improve recreation opportunities, and foster stewardship in the community of Creede.

**Rio Grande Emergency Action Coordination Team, Bill Zeedyk Road and Stream**

**Restoration Workshop #1** **\$30,000**

SLV Partners will deliver a free workshop for 40 participants with renowned restoration expert, Bill Zeedyk. Through hands-on restoration of a road and creek in the Rio Grande National Forest, the workshop will focus on training practitioners, agency personnel and professional restoration contractors. Zeedyk's methods are easy to install, reduce long-term maintenance costs maintenance, and are designed make the most of available water resources. This project will directly improve public access, watershed health, and habitat while providing participants with knowledge and experience to implement additional restoration projects and can be expanded upon in future workshops and taught to others in the SLV.

**Rio Grande Watershed Conservation and Education Initiative, Rio Grande Watershed**

**Conservation & Education Initiative Building Core Programs** **\$15,000**

Core Programs are dedicated to providing quality K-12 curriculum on topics related to water and other natural resource conservation issues. Students and teachers will connect with professionals through a variety of programming that transitions from classroom activities to field based experiences, as well as through the annual conservation camp and Envirothon workshops.

**San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition, Design Phase for the Rio Grande Farm Park \$40,000**

This project convenes experts and community members to implement the design phase of RGFP's Master Plan, including facilitation activities, more detailed designs of each RGFP element (children's area, cultural spaces, etc.), and formal architectural plans to move RGFP toward final build out. This project is integral to the Rio Grande Corridor collaboration and will create community space for all.

**San Luis Valley Trout Unlimited, Palisade Campground Boat Ramp Improvement Project**

**\$25,000**

This project takes a shovel ready project complete with surveys, designs, and NEPA compliance to fruition. The public benefits from increased access for river based recreation is a boon for locals and visitors, and will result in economic benefits to the rural towns in close proximity. Sustainable, safe, environmentally sound infrastructure on our public lands serves both people and the resource.

**San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District, Weminuche Creek Bridge Protection Project**

**\$12,500**

The Project will deliver the much needed replacement of the Weminuche Trail bridge, which provides the critical crossing for Weminuche Creek on one of the highest-used trails in the Rio Grande National Forest. The Project will benefit the local community of recreation enthusiasts, private businesses, and water managers that rely on access to the Weminuche Wilderness by way of the bridge.

**Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association, Implementing the Future Sustainability and Traditional Governance of Acequia Culture (IFSTGAC)**

**\$49,800**

This project will implementing the strategies developed during the Association’s strategic planning for 2017/2018. This includes hiring a qualified Executive Director, identifying members in Costilla and Conejos counties, developing training sessions for acequia producers. It will also allow for partnering to provide mini-grants to the underserved acequia population and to continue the Congreso de Acequias.

**SLV Development Resource Group (DRG), San Luis Valley Great Outdoors Capacity Building and Communications Hub \$50,000**

The SLVGO coordinator started in December of 2016 and has begun the process of assembling the Board of Directors and establishing a 501c3 organizational structure. This award will allow SLVGO to add capacity with a Vista Volunteer, increase their website's ability to disseminate information on trails and outdoor recreation and develop a business plan to help achieve long range capacity.

**Town of Crestone, Eastern San Luis Valley Trail System \$24,050**

The “School to School Trail”, Phase 2 of the ESLVTS, will establish an unbroken route connecting the Town of Crestone, Crestone Charter School, Baca Grande Subdivision, Colorado College Baca Campus, and Baca National Wildlife Refuge. It will be an inviting non-motorized corridor accessed by multiple trailheads, and will provide unique recreational, educational, and interpretive opportunities.

**Trout Unlimited, Jim Creek Rio Grande Cutthroat Habitat Restoration Project \$40,000**

The Jim Creek Restoration Project is a collaborative community based effort to use local materials to restore critical habitat to an imperiled population of the native Rio Grande Cutthroat. The project creates opportunities to educate people, and by restoring habitat and improving ecological function, the project ensures that people will be able enjoy the region’s native fish on their public lands.

**Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, Measuring Success in the San Luis Valley – an Impact Framework \$25,000**

VOC will develop the framework and infrastructure for San Luis Valley Conservation and Connection Initiative (SLVCCI) grantees to evaluate and demonstrate their impact - individually and collectively. Impact Framework activities will include establishing collective goals, developing common metrics, and producing a toolkit and training for efficiently collecting and broadcasting program successes.

**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](http://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](http://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](http://www.westernrivers.org).

**The LOR Foundation** is dedicated to improving quality of life in the Intermountain West through locally-driven solutions. The Foundation partners with rural communities in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming. For more information, please visit [www.lorfoundation.org](http://www.lorfoundation.org).