



WESTERN RIVERS
CONSERVANCY



RIO GRANDE
HEADWATERS LAND TRUST

News Release

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Conservation Win for Fish, Wildlife and a Family ranch on Colorado's Rio Grande & Conejos Rivers

ALAMOSA, Colorado—In Colorado's San Luis Valley, Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) successfully conserved the Olguin Ranch, permanently protecting 1,168 acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat along the Rio Grande and Conejos Rivers and ensuring a longtime working family ranch stays in production.

WRC and RiGHT conserved the property by placing a conservation easement on the ranch. The easement protects fragile habitat critical to the fish, birds and other wildlife of the San Luis Valley, while ensuring permanent public access to the western bank of the Rio Grande.

The easement also guarantees that the Olguin Ranch will remain undeveloped and part of a unique Colorado landscape defined by its scenic views, working ranches and family farms.

“This is a major achievement for the San Luis Valley,” said Nancy Butler, RiGHT’s executive director. “The community and an outstanding group of nonprofit, private and government partners came together and protected a ranch, a river, a landscape and a way of life—all the things that make this valley so special.”

WRC purchased the ranch from the Olguin Family in 2016 as part of its larger effort to conserve land along the upper Rio Grande and its tributaries. WRC then partnered with RiGHT to place a conservation easement on the property and successfully finalized it last week.

“The Olguin Ranch will forever remain a haven for songbirds and waterfowl, and for the fish and wildlife that depend on the Conejos River and the Rio Grande for their survival,” said Dieter Erdmann, WRC’s Interior West program director. “The fact that we were able to achieve this while preserving part of the valley’s legacy of working ranches ensures that people are winners in this effort as well.”

The location of the Olguin Ranch makes the property especially important. It lies near the confluence of the San Luis Valley’s two major rivers, the Conejos and the Rio Grande and within the Rio Grande Natural Area. It is just downstream of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge, upstream of New Mexico’s Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River corridor, and east of the Bureau of Land Management’s McIntyre-Simpson Wetlands Area.

The ranch also lies immediately across the Rio Grande from the new 17,019-acre San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area in Costilla County, which WRC created earlier this year. Adding the ranch to this mosaic of protected areas helps the confluence and the valley function as a true refuge for fish and wildlife.

The Olguin Ranch boasts excellent habitat for endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo, as well as a wealth of other bird species, including bald eagle, ferruginous hawk and greater sandhill crane. It is also home to northern leopard frog and river otter, and provides important range for Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, pronghorn, black bear and mountain lion.

The Olguin Ranch also controls key shares of the Los Sauces Ditch as well as a critical warm-water spring that provides waterfowl habitat year-round. These rights will remain tied to the property and ensure continued traditional land uses that will be supportive of wetland and riparian habitat.

Given the property's importance, RiGHT and WRC received broad support for the project. Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) contributed a major grant through its "Protect Initiative," and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supported the effort with funding through its North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

The project was also made possible through generous grants from Colorado's longtime Gates Family Foundation, as well as The Conservation Alliance, a nonprofit that engages businesses to fund and partner with organizations to protect wild places for their habitat and recreation values.

Additionally, the project received support from the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund, which was created in 2015 by the LOR Foundation, WRC, RiGHT and Colorado Open Lands. The fund is a collaborative effort to bolster local conservation efforts in the San Luis Valley and to preserve the region's rich cultural heritage, all while enhancing livability for valley communities.

ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Yampa, John Day, Gunnison, Salmon, Hoh, Snake and Madison Rivers. To learn more, please visit www.westernrivers.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.

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