



News Release

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Stretch of the Rio de Los Pinos Now Conserved and Open to the Public for First Time in Memory

CONEJOS COUNTY, Colorado—Western Rivers Conservancy and the Rio Grande National Forest successfully completed a project on the Rio de Los Pinos that conserved 628 acres of scenic open space, including more than a mile of the river, and created new recreational access to this high-elevation trout stream.

The project has been in the works for over a year. It began in 2017, when WRC purchased the first of two adjacent properties on the Rio de Los Pinos. It transferred the first one to the Forest Service immediately after acquiring it and transferred the second property to the agency at the end of September.

“This project was the perfect meeting of conservation and recreation,” said Dieter Erdmann, WRC’s Interior West program director. “Working with the Forest Service and the previous landowners, we were able to add hundreds of acres of protected open space to the National Forest while conserving a critical reach of what is truly a gem of a trout stream.”

The Los Pinos flows from a series of pristine, alpine lakes in the San Juan Mountains and descends 40 miles to the San Antonio River, a tributary to the Conejos River and the Rio Grande. It possesses healthy populations of brown and rainbow trout and excellent habitat for native Rio Grande cutthroat, which once thrived in the river and could one day be reintroduced.

The combined properties are bordered on two sides by the Rio Grande National Forest and lie just off Highway 17, near Cumbres Pass. They are a key part of the natural landscape that defines the historic, narrow-gauge Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, which runs through the properties where it crosses the Rio de Los Pinos.

"Due to the addition of public access to the Rio de Los Pinos, we are thrilled with the outcome of this effort," said Andrea Jones, district ranger for the Rio Grande National Forest. "It will benefit fish and wildlife, recreationists, and the landowners of these parcels, who wanted them conserved for all to enjoy."

WRC purchased the properties from a family with deep, multi-generational ties to the San Luis Valley, who wished to see their former summer pasture lands permanently conserved as open space. Combined, the two holdings protect just over a mile of the Rio de Los Pinos along one of its most accessible reaches.

The properties also include wetlands and a natural pond, which host migratory waterfowl in the spring and fall. Rocky Mountain elk, black bear, mule deer, mountain lion and other wildlife are found on the property.

Conservation of both properties was made possible through Recreation Access funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF was established by Congress in 1964 as a bipartisan effort to safeguard the nation's most important natural areas and to ensure recreational access for all Americans, including anglers, hikers, hunters, boaters, birders and others.

“Our efforts on the Rio de Los Pinos received critical funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund thanks to support from Senator Gardner, Senator Bennet and Representative Tipton,” said Erdmann of Western Rivers Conservancy.

Protection of the property was also made possible with support from the San Luis Valley Conservation Fund, which was created in 2015 by WRC, the LOR Foundation, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust 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.

The Jacob and Terese Hershey Foundation was an important supporter of the project, as was The Conservation Alliance, a nonprofit that engages businesses to fund and partner with organizations to protect wild places for their habitat and recreation values.

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 Rio Grande, Yampa, John Day, Gunnison, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua, Klamath and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

Rio Grande National Forest is 1.82 million acres located in southwestern Colorado and remains one of the true undiscovered jewels of Colorado. The RGNF is composed of a myriad of ecosystems ranging from high elevation desert at 7600 feet above sea level to rocky crags at over 14,300 feet in the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Recreational pursuits include outdoor activities of camping, hiking, skiing, backpacking, fishing, boating and canoeing, rafting, observing nature, photography and bicycling. To learn more, visit www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande

CONTACT INFORMATION

Western Rivers Conservancy
Dieter Erdmann, Interior West Program Director

303-645-4953

derdmann@westernrivers.org

Rio Grande National Forest

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Specialist

719-852-6212

mblakeman@fs.fed.us