



COLORADO

Colorado Water
Conservation Board

Department of Natural Resources

Sustaining the Valley's "Culture of Conservation"

Helen Smith

Intern - Rio Grande Basin Roundtable

Collaboration and tradition are two approaches to conservation in the San Luis Valley that have proven beneficial, but most importantly, resulted in successful conservation.

Clearly, natural resources are essential to the San Luis Valley. Whether from agriculture, or tourism and recreation, they are vital to the welfare and economy of the Valley's communities. As a result they are critical for the future. However, the San Luis Valley's resources are not only limited, but also in high demand. The Rio Grande River is a prime example of the fine line rural communities walk when it comes to natural resources. Even though the Rio Grande is the fourth longest river in the United States, it runs through very dry lands and so there is tremendous competition for its flows. The water that comes from the Rio Grande is vital to the Valley and its people. So, how are these resources protected and responsibly managed? One way is through conservation efforts and programs that are implemented by land trusts.

A land trust is a non-profit, private organization that has a mission to aid landowners in conserving properties that have outstanding agricultural and natural values. Conservation easements protect those values in perpetuity.

By definition, a Conservation Easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust, this agreement contains permanent restrictions for the use and development of the land and its resources. The purpose is to protect the "conservation values" of the property, such as scenic open space, wildlife habitat and agricultural productivity. Land trust staff work with interested landowners to outline their goals and outcomes for a property.

When a piece of land is protected with a conservation easement, the land trust pledges to protect that land forever. The land is still privately owned, and may change hands - a landowner can leave it to heirs or sell it, but the conservation easement remains tied to the land. When the ink is dry on the conservation easement, the work of permanent stewardship begins. While the landowner continues to take care of the property day to day, a land trusts stewardship program monitors the land and administers the easement, and provides counsel to the landowners to ensure that all parties have the knowledge and tools to hold up their end of the agreement.

When it comes to conservation, Colorado is considered innovative. There are incentives beyond preservation offered to landowners through Conservation Easements. These include not just maintaining the property in perpetuity; conservation easements include federal tax deductions, estate tax incentives, Colorado state tax credits, and property tax benefits. Another pioneering approach to conservation in Colorado is Great Outdoors Colorado which uses lottery funds to provide grants to many conservation projects across the state. A common thread that each of these projects has is collaboration.

No conservation Easement is done in isolation. Nancy Butler, Executive Director of the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) notes that there has been a “Spirit of Collaboration” in the work that has been accomplished. She said that the focus of these collaborative efforts is “How can we take care of this together?” As the San Luis Valley’s local land trust, RiGHT recognizes that welcoming partners and/or new individuals into the process is critical and is done in hopes that they will become part of the team, working to positively shape the Valleys’ future.

Rio de la Vista, Associate Director of RiGHT, notes that “Conservation Easements have increased in viability and the demand for many landowners is increasing in the valley and across State of Colorado. Due in part, to growing rates of development.” In addition, de la Vista pointed out that Colorado is looked to as an example, because we are at the forefront of many land conservation innovations.

Judy Lopez, San Luis Valley Conservation Program Manager for Colorado Open Lands, echoed what Butler shared, agreeing that the process of establishing conservation easements is “very much” about individuals and their values for a landscape. As a statewide land trust, Colorado Open Lands (COL) works across Colorado to conserve critical areas identified as “Priority Landscapes,” often conserving landscapes that are considered vitally important agricultural expanses. One of these priority landscapes is the Sangre de Cristo/ Southern San Luis Valley region, particularly around San Luis where the acequia culture continues to guide agriculture and water use. Tradition is a way of life for this region and its people, creating the context of their culture and how to move forward to conserve their way of life for the future is what COL is working on.

Even though the concepts of collaboration and tradition have differences, there is a common goal through all of them: to preserve scenic landscapes, vital water resources and agriculture, treasured wildlife and a long-standing way of life.

To learn more about conserving your property, contact Right at www.riograndelandtrust.org, and/or Colorado Open Lands at www.coloradoopenlands.org.