

**Rio Grande Basin Roundtable
c/o San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District
623 Fourth Street
Alamosa, CO 81101**

January 25, 2016

To: Colorado Water Conservation Board
C/O Craig Godbout, Program Manager, Water Supply Planning Section
RE: WSRA FUNDING REQUEST *for the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's
Rio Grande Initiative - Nash Ranch Conservation Easement*

Dear Members of the Board:

This letter is to express the support of the RGBRT for the accompanying application for funding from the Water Supply Reserve Account's (WSRA) Basin and State-wide funds for the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's (RIGHT) application for the ***Rio Grande Initiative's Nash Ranch Conservation Easement*** project.

The Rio Grande Basin Roundtable (RGBRT) has determined that the single, most critical water issue confronting the Rio Grande Basin (Basin) is to work toward sustainability of our surface and ground water. The RGBRT has made the decision that water activities that address this issue be favorably considered for funding from the Water Supply Reserve Account, SB 2005-179 (WSRA Funds), providing the proposed water activities meet the SWSI findings for the Basin and the CWCB and IBCC Criteria and Guidelines for funding.

With sustained interest from landowners and funding support from Great Outdoors Colorado, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Rio Grande Water Conservation District, local counties, private foundations and others, RIGHT has effectively tripled the pace of conservation along the Rio Grande in the past eight years. To date, over 25,000 acres and 47 river miles have been protected and over \$40 million of conservation value have been achieved. Across the San Luis Valley, RIGHT and its partners have protected key water resources along with vital wetlands and wildlife habitat on working agricultural lands. They have long worked in close collaboration with the area's various water, wildlife and land management agencies and districts as well as our farmers and ranchers.

Begun in 2007, the *Rio Grande Initiative* is a collaborative project to protect land and water along the Rio Grande corridor in the San Luis Valley. The *Initiative* has a proven track record of success and this landscape scale conservation effort has involved many of our Roundtable members in RIGHT's work. Thanks to the CWCB's prior WSRA awards totaling over \$2 million, along with substantial matching funds and landowner contributions, the *Rio Grande Initiative* has protected a number of working ranches and senior water rights in strategic locations along the Rio Grande and Conejos Rivers.

With this project, **The *Rio Grande Initiative* is an important contributor to the RGBRT's core purpose: "to achieve water sustainability for the Basin."** Conserving key parcels and their senior surface water rights along rivers assists the State in meeting important non-consumptive and consumptive needs by:

- Assisting the Division Engineer in administering the waters of the Rio Grande and meeting Colorado's compact obligations;

- Assisting Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the US Fish and Wildlife Service in sustaining key wildlife habitat for the many species that depend upon the river corridor: big and small game, waterfowl and many migrating and breeding bird species – including the federally endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and threatened Yellow-billed cuckoo, and important fisheries;
- Assisting in maintaining flood plain functions by keeping open lands along the river intact and undeveloped;
- Protecting farm and ranch lands to sustain the Basin's agricultural economy; and,
- Helping secure and sustain river flows for recreational opportunities and preserving the scenic beauty of our river corridors.

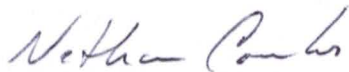
As the application outlines, this project will permanently prohibit development of the Nash Ranch, which contains both banks of almost one mile of river, over 40 acres of federally-endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher habitat, and 1 cfs of the senior Rio Grande No. 2 water right, through the partial purchase of a voluntary conservation easement.

This conservation easement represents an exceptional conservation opportunity to help meet the water needs of the Basin and the State.

At the January 12, 2016 Rio Grande Basin Roundtable Meeting, the Members voted and approved this application with one opposing vote. The opposing view believed that with minimal development there was a better financial gain for the community and that the requested funding could be better spent on projects that he thought would bring real water answers to our basin's issues. That being said this application was strongly supported as a WSRA request for \$10,000 of Rio Grande Basin Funds and \$90,000 of Statewide funds. This Project also has letters of support from the Rio Grande Water Users Association; District 3 Engineer of the Colorado Division of Water Resources; Rio Grande County; and the Town of Del Norte.

Thank you for your consideration and valued support in the Rio Grande Basin.

Sincerely,



Nathan Coombs
Chair, Rio Grande Basin Roundtable
(719) 843-5261
cwcd1971@hotmail.com

Enclosure (1)

Cc. Nancy Butler, Executive Director, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust



COLORADO
Division of Water Resources
Department of Natural Resources

Division 3
301 Murphy Drive
Alamosa, CO 81101

January 8, 2016

Colorado Water Conservation Board
c/o Craig Godbout - WSRA Program Manager
1313 Sherman St., Room 721
Denver, CO 80203

RE: *Rio Grande Initiative*: Nash Ranch Conservation Easement
WSRA Application from the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

Dear Members of the Board:

This letter is in support of application from the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) as proposed to the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable at the January 12, 2016 meeting for Water Supply Reserve Account funding to establish a permanent conservation easement on the 198-acre Nash Ranch near Del Norte. This project is part of RiGHT's larger *Rio Grande Initiative* to implement conservation easements that serve to keep the land base intact, tie water rights to the land, and ensure that historic irrigation patterns continue. To complete this project, RiGHT has requested both Basin and Statewide funds that will be matched with additional funding and a significant donation from the landowner.

The protection of the hydrologic characteristics of the riparian corridor of the Rio Grande is important to maintaining a functional river system. This protection includes continued operation of agricultural irrigation along the river; systems which were in place when the Rio Grande Compact was negotiated and are thus a part of the underlying physical framework and assumptions of the Compact. The change of these areas from irrigated agriculture to developed land, or the removal of water rights from these areas, would potentially have a negative effect on the river and the operation of the Compact.

Today, the irrigated lands on the Nash Ranch create a riparian/groundwater buffer and generate significant return flows to the Rio Grande. These return flows allow for further diversion of water downstream or can be used to assist in Colorado's delivery obligations under the Compact. Bigger water year diversions will tend to "fill" this alluvial area making deliveries during subsequent drier years less onerous. Absent this buffer and return flows, delivery of Colorado's obligation under the Compact could become difficult as more water would need to be curtailed from otherwise in-priority water rights to meet the required deliveries to the downstream states. Protection of the existing functional system will protect other vested water rights and Colorado's ability to deliver on Compact obligations.

Additionally, protecting the riparian areas along the Rio Grande is environmentally important. The vast majority of wildlife species in the Rio Grande Basin, including the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, rely on this habitat as part of their life cycle. Protecting habitat through conservation easements not only benefits these species but also reduces the need for federal mandates to accomplish the same goals.



The Rio Grande Basin Roundtable has voted favorably on this application and I recommend the CWCB also approve funding for this project. If you need further information regarding the benefits of this proposal to Colorado's water administration or Rio Grande Compact operations, please feel free to contact me at (719) 589-6683.

Sincerely,



Craig W. Cotten
Division Engineer, Division of Water Resources, Division 3

cc: Mike Gibson, Chair, Rio Grande Basin Round Table
Nancy Butler, Executive Director, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust



The Rio Grande Water Users Association

147 Washington St.
Monte Vista CO. 81144
Telephone: (719) 852-3556 * FAX: (719) 852-5958

January 7, 2016

Colorado Water Conservation Board
c/o Craig Godbout - WSRA Program Manager
1313 Sherman St., Room 721
Denver, CO 80203

RE: *Rio Grande Initiative*: Nash Ranch
WSRA Application from the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

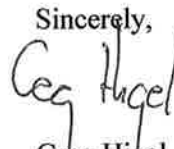
Dear Members of the Board:

On behalf of the Rio Grande Water Users Association, this letter provides our enthusiastic support for the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's (RiGHT) application for the Nash Ranch conservation project, a part of their ongoing *Rio Grande Initiative* to protect private lands along the Rio Grande river corridor. This project will keep important land and water resources intact, helping to sustain the agricultural productivity and local economy here in the San Luis Valley.

Conservation of the Nash Ranch will also help to address our local water resource concerns. The 198-acre Nash Ranch includes both banks of almost one mile of the Rio Grande near Del Norte. In addition to protecting another working ranch and long-time Valley family, a conservation easement will tie the water to the land and help our overall water sustainability. River corridor diversions provide critical return flows to the river and assist the State in meeting its obligations under the Rio Grande Compact. This important hydrology also helps to sustain many non-consumptive water benefits, like essential wildlife habitat and fisheries, that contribute to our quality of life and tourism economy.

RiGHT's opportunity to work with the Nash's on this project is the result of years of hard work and previous conservation successes, and we support their continuing efforts. Conserving the Nash Ranch and others like it will help secure our community's land and water for the long term and build on the corridor of protection that RiGHT and their many partners have helped to create over the past eight years.

We encourage your full support of this important project. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Greg Higel
President

RIO GRANDE COUNTY

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

rgcommissioner@riograndecounty.org

January 6, 2016

925 6th St., Room 207
Del Norte, Colorado
81132
(719) 657-2744
Fax (719) 657-2514

Colorado Water Conservation Board
c/o Craig Godbout - WSRA Application Program Manager
1313 Sherman St., Room 721
Denver, CO 80203

BOARD OF
COMMISSIONERS

Doug Davie
Chairman

Pam Bricker
Vice Chairman

Karla L. Shriver
Commissioner

RE: *Rio Grande Initiative*: Nash Ranch
WSRA Application from the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

Dear Members of the Board:

This letter is to provide the support of the Rio Grande County Commissioners for the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's (RiGHT) efforts to protect the Rio Grande river corridor and their current request for funding to protect the Nash Ranch. Rio Grande County has supported the *Rio Grande Initiative* since its inception because it serves to protect many of the key resources that are vital to our county and the people who live here. Voluntary conservation such as this is specifically supported in our county's Master Plan.

ADMINISTRATION OFFICE:

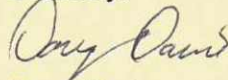
ADMINISTRATOR
Suzanne L. Benton
H.R./Financial Officer
Kristy Dennis

Protection of the Nash Ranch will benefit Rio Grande County by helping to preserve vital agricultural lands and water rights, which are the base of our economy. Additionally, conserving properties like the Nash Ranch protects important wildlife habitat for many species, including the federally endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Preventing future development of this working ranch also contributes to public safety by keeping the floodplain intact and functional, which reduces the risk of downstream flooding. In addition, this assists the State of Colorado in meeting its obligations under the Rio Grande Compact.

The people of Rio Grande County value our agricultural way of life and the scenic beauty of our region, and we support the efforts of RiGHT to keep working lands along the Rio Grande intact for the future. The protection of the Nash Ranch is another critical contribution to the overall efforts of conservation groups and local governments to preserve the land and water, so that our valley will remain beautiful and our agricultural and recreational economies can continue to thrive.

Rio Grande County strongly encourages your support of RiGHT's effort to conserve the Nash Ranch. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Doug Davie
Chairman

GATEWAY TO ALL SEASON FUN

TOWN OF DEL NORTE

140 SPRUCE STREET
P.O. BOX 249
DEL NORTE, CO 81132



PHONE NO. (719) 657-2708
FAX NO. (719) 657-2035

January 12, 2016

Colorado Water Conservation Board
Craig Godbout - WSRA Program Manager
1313 Sherman St., Room 721
Denver, CO 80203

RE: *Rio Grande Initiative*: Nash Ranch
WSRA Application from the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust

Dear Members of the Board:

The Town of Del Norte strongly supports the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's (RiGHT) application to the Colorado Water Conservation Board for Water Supply Reserve Account funding to protect the Nash Ranch. Even though the Nash Ranch is not within the town limits, RiGHT's efforts to protect it and other nearby ranches are critical to sustaining the landscape and rural values that are central to our economy and way of life in Del Norte.

Conservation easements preserve vital agricultural lands and jobs, wildlife habitat, and the scenic beauty of the area. Conserving the Nash Ranch is particularly important because it will protect almost one mile of the Rio Grande river corridor just a few miles east of town. The Rio Grande is absolutely critical to our livelihood in Del Norte and across the San Luis Valley. It carries the water we need for our crops and grass to grow and so our grandchildren will be able to catch their first trout in our favorite fishing holes.

We are grateful to live and work in such a beautiful area and applaud RiGHT's hard work to keep our landscape open, scenic, healthy, and productive – especially along the Rio Grande. RiGHT and their partners reached their initial goal of protecting 25,000 acres near the river in 2015, and we certainly hope they are able to continue their conservation successes into the future.

The Town of Del Norte gives its enthusiastic support for the conservation of the Nash Ranch. Thank you for your consideration.

Town of Del Norte

Chris Trujillo
Mayor