



COLORADO

Colorado Water
Conservation Board

Department of Natural Resources

Colorado Water Conservation Board

Water Plan

Water Project Summary

Name of Applicant	Mesa County Land Conservancy Inc. DBA Colorado West Land Trust
Name of Water Project	From Risk to Resilience: A New Model for Farm and Water Security in the Gunnison River Basin
Grant Request Amount	\$1,412,850.00
Primary Category	\$1,412,850.00
<i>Agricultural Projects</i>	
Total Applicant Match	\$0.00
<i>Applicant Cash Match</i>	\$0.00
<i>Applicant In-Kind Match</i>	\$0.00
Total Other Sources of Funding	\$750,000.00
<i>Great Outdoors Colorado</i>	\$750,000.00
Total Project Cost	\$2,162,850.00

Applicant & Grantee Information

Name of Grantee: Mesa County Land Conservancy Inc. DBA Colorado West Land Trust
Mailing Address: 1006 Main Street Grand Junction CO 81501

Organization Contact: Ilana Moir
Position/Title: Director of Conservation Email: ilana@cowestlandtrust.org
Phone: 970-639-7026

Organization Contact - Alternate: Rob Bleiberg
Position/Title: Executive Director Email: rob@cowestlandtrust.org
Phone: 970-263-5443

Grant Management Contact: Ilana Moir
Position/Title: Director of Conservation Email: ilana@cowestlandtrust.org
Phone: 970-639-7026

Description of Grantee/Applicant

Colorado West Land Trust is a Colorado based non-profit organization based in Grand Junction Colorado.

Type of Eligible Entity

- ☐ Public (Government)
- ☐ Public (District)
- ☐ Public (Municipality)
- ☐ Ditch Company
- ☐ Private Incorporated
- ☐

- ☐ Private Individual, Partnership, or Sole Proprietor
- ☒ Non-governmental Organization
- ☐ Covered Entity
- ☐ Other

Category of Water Project

- ☒ Agricultural Projects
Developing communications materials that specifically work with and educate the agricultural community on headwater restoration, identifying the state of the science of this type of work to assist agricultural users among others.
- ☐ Conservation & Land Use Planning
Activities and projects that implement long-term strategies for conservation, land use, and drought planning.
- ☐ Engagement & Innovation Activities
Activities and projects that support water education, outreach, and innovation efforts. Please fill out the Supplemental Application on the website.
- ☐ Watershed Restoration & Recreation
Projects that promote watershed health, environmental health, and recreation.
- ☐ Water Storage & Supply
Projects that facilitate the development of additional storage, artificial aquifer recharge, and dredging existing reservoirs to restore the reservoirs' full decreed capacity and Multi-beneficial projects and those projects identified in basin implementation plans to address the water supply and demand gap.

Location of Water Project

Latitude 39.070000
 Longitude -108.560000
 Lat Long Flag Default/Proponent headquarters: If the location cannot be defined with flags above, use location of project proponent headquarters
 Water Source Uncompahgre River
 Basins Gunnison
 Counties Montrose
 Districts 41-Lower Uncompahgre River

Water Project Overview

Major Water Use Type Agricultural
 Type of Water Project Study
 Scheduled Start Date - Design 7/1/2025
 Scheduled Start Date - Construction
 Description
 Colorado West Land Trust (CWLT) proposes to acquire conservation easements on critical irrigated farmland as part of a Buy-Protect-Sell model to address urgent water and agricultural challenges in western Colorado. This pilot project will acquire and permanently protect three farms utilizing senior, pre-compact water rights, including one with riparian habitat along the Uncompahgre River. CWLT, in partnership with Colorado Open Lands, will place conservation easements that tie water to the land while allowing flexibility for innovative, collaborative water-sharing arrangements.

The project responds to multiple challenges: aging farmers, limited land access for new producers, mounting pressure on water resources, and the need to sustain agriculture through flexible, efficient use of water.

Following the conservation, improvements in irrigation efficiency, and habitat restoration, the farms will be sold at agricultural value to producers committed to agriculture.

This project helps implement Colorado's Water Plan and its vision. It advances multiple Plan goals by preventing "buy and dry" outcomes, preserving senior water rights, and keeping land and water in productive agricultural use. It creates opportunities to restore ½ mile of riparian habitat. By addressing land conservation, water security, and generational transfer, CWLT offers a replicable model for water-smart farmland success in the Colorado River Basin.

Measurable Results

	New Storage Created (acre-feet)
	New Annual Water Supplies Developed or Conserved (acre-feet), Consumptive or Nonconsumptive
	Existing Storage Preserved or Enhanced (acre-feet)
	New Storage Created (acre-feet)
2,745	Length of Stream Restored or Protected (linear feet)
	Length of Pipe, Canal Built or Improved (linear feet)
	Efficiency Savings (dollars/year)
	Efficiency Savings (acre-feet/year)
30	Area of Restored or Preserved Habitat (acres)
600	Quantity of Water Shared through Alternative Transfer Mechanisms or water sharing agreement (acre-feet)
	Number of Coloradans Impacted by Incorporating Water-Saving Actions into Land Use Planning
	Number of Coloradans Impacted by Engagement Activity
Other	
Replicable model available to the 2,646 farms in Montrose and Delta counties; 454 acres conserved (of which 380 acres are irrigated)	

Water Project Justification

This project directly supports the goals outlined in Colorado's 2023 Water Plan (hereinafter, Water Plan) including those related to robust agriculture, resilient planning, thriving watersheds, and vibrant communities (Water Plan, p. 176-177). A grant from CWCB will support the acquisition of conservation easements on productive farmland and associated senior, pre-compact water rights as part of the Buy-Protect-Sell project by Colorado West Land Trust (CWLT.) This project will advance Colorado's Water Plan and Gunnison Basin Implementation Plan, supporting multiple objectives in each.

Robust Agriculture: This project will use conservation easements on critical land and water rights as part of an innovative Buy-Protect-Sell model. This project holds great promise for replicability and scalability. The Land Trust seeks to acquire, in fee, productive farmland with pre-compact water rights. During its ownership, the Land Trust will look at improving on-farm water infrastructure and habitat restoration opportunities. It will then protect the properties with conservation easements, finally selling the land to producers committed to maintaining agriculture. The Land Trust will then use capital from the sale of the land and the conservation easements to acquire additional land and repeat the process.

The farms selected for this project produce high-value crops, lie in an agricultural stronghold, offer restoration potential along the Uncompahgre River, and hold very senior pre-compact water rights. The farms are located in an agricultural production area that is relatively unfragmented and that produces sweet corn, onions, beans, pumpkins, and other higher value crops. (This supports the Water Plan's vision of sustaining profitable production – page 192 of the Plan). Placing conservation easements on important farmland, this project ensures that water

remains available for agricultural use and helping transition land to the next generation of producers. This supports the Water Plan goal to “support economically viable and sustainable agriculture” and reduce the permanent dry-up of irrigated lands (Water Plan, p.195).

The properties to be acquired feature senior water rights, mainly from the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association, the largest irrigation district in the Upper Basin. The conservation easements will utilize innovative water encumbrance language to permanently tie water rights to the land while providing flexibility in how that water can be used. This will include allowing water leasing for agricultural purposes, system conservation, and environmental benefits. This provides both flexibility and certainty. It also creates opportunities to establish and expand the scale of collaborative water sharing agreements and agricultural water conservation, as called for in the Water Plan (Water Plan, p. 196).

Vibrant Communities: This project advances the Water Plan’s vision for Vibrant Communities by protecting the working lands and water resources that form the foundation of rural economies, identities, and livelihoods across western Colorado. As emphasized in both CWLT’s internal Water Protection Plan and the Colorado Water Plan, rural communities thrive when land and water remain locally controlled, economically productive, and accessible to future generations.

CWLT’s approach focuses on farmland with senior water rights in West Slope communities where irrigated agriculture is a cultural and economic pillar. The loss of these lands to development or dry-up would cause irreversible harm to local economies and the communities that depend on them. CWLT’s Water Protection Plan prioritizes the protection of agricultural land and water in these areas as a strategy to sustain “the communities that have grown around – and rely on – irrigated farming and ranching.”

The partnership with Colorado Open Lands (COL) further strengthens this commitment. Together, the organizations are testing innovative tools, including impact investment, flexible water-sharing agreements, and streamlined transactional models that make conservation more accessible and scalable. Both organizations recognize that protecting irrigated land is not just about conservation – it is about ensuring that rural communities can retain their agricultural base and plan for a future in which land remains in production and water remains tied to the land.

This collaboration amplifies the Water Plan’s Partner Actions strategy, showing how a regional and statewide nonprofit can pool resources and expertise to pilot a replicable solution to land and water loss. The project also embodies Colorado’s Water Plan emphasis on integrated water and land use planning, recognizing that resilient, place-based strategies must be rooted in community and supported by trusted local organizations (Water Plan, pp. 176-178).

By preserving productive farms, ensuring water remains on the land, and creating affordable opportunities for the next generation of producers, this project supports agricultural communities – making it a leading-edge example of how conservation can build Vibrant Communities across Colorado.

Resilient Planning: This project helps integrate the Water Plan with local land use planning. Montrose County’s Master Plan seeks “to encourage the continued use of lands for agricultural productivity and the right to farm and ranch.” Through this project and its conservation easements, CWLT is marrying the county land use goal with the vision and objectives of the Water Plan. The project further advances the Water Plan vision by integrating conservation easements that prohibit the permanent severance of water and allow for flexible, adaptive transfer mechanisms, thereby meeting Water Plan goals around “adaptive management and flexible sharing agreements” (Water Plan, pp 177, 216-227).

Thriving Watersheds: The project advances the Thriving Watersheds vision laid out in the Plan (Water Plan, p. 204, 208). The Land Trust will implement on-farm water conservation practices and habitat restoration. Through this project, CWLT plans to restore up ½ mile of riparian habitat along the Uncompahgre River, including over 30 acres of natural habitat. This will directly advance thriving watersheds by improving riparian habitat. By removing invasive phreatophytes such as tamarisk, this project will contribute to Wise Water Use, as envisioned in the Water Plan.

By integrating multiple benefits – supporting agriculture, water conservation, habitat improvement – this project helps realize that Water Plan’s Vision for Healthy Lands (Water Plan, p. 194).

Basin Implementation Plan (BIP) Alignment: This approach directly supports the Gunnison Basin Implementation Plan (BIP), which prioritizes protecting existing water uses – its primary goal (Water Plan, p. 97). Supporting goals include discouraging the conversion of productive agricultural land and improving agricultural water supplies to reduce shortages. The Basin Roundtable strongly opposes “buy and dry” and instead promotes voluntary, property-rights-respecting tools like conservation easements to sustain agriculture and water use (BIP, Volume 1, p.14). By providing a platform for public and partner education around land and water stewardship, this project provides opportunities for education and outreach. This aligns with the Gunnison Basin BIP, which includes a public education and outreach goal encouraging the preservation of agricultural land. (BIP, Volume 1, 2022, pages 14 & 18.) The attached letter of support from the Gunnison Basin Roundtable reflects the alignment.

By addressing the overlapping crisis of agricultural land loss, aging producers, and water pressure, this project represents an innovative and scalable solution to a key Colorado water problem.

Related Studies

This project has grown out of and helps implement Colorado West Land Trust’s Water Plan for the Future of Agriculture, Community, and Conservation. CWLT’s plan is a regionally driven roadmap for the future of water and land in western Colorado, developed with broad input from over 40 local stakeholders, including agricultural producers, ditch companies, conservation partners, and municipal and irrigation leaders. A CWCB grant, Climate Resilient Agriculture Futures and Transformation awarded to Palmer Land Conservancy in 2022, with CWLT as a sub-grantee, helped fund the creation of CWLT’s plan. The Land Trust’s plan builds on Palmer Land Trust’s Bessemer Ditch project, applying and adapting its methodologies to a six-county region in the Gunnison and Colorado River basins.

CWLT’s goals and plan directly aligns with the objectives of Colorado’s Water Plan and the Gunnison and Colorado River Basin Implementation Plans. (See attached Summary of CWLT’s Water Plan for the Future of Agriculture, Community, and Conservation Plan.)

CWLT’s Water Plan outlines the core challenges facing the region – loss of irrigated agricultural lands, increasing development pressure, limited access for young producers, and growing water scarcity. The conservation easement acquisitions and Buy-Protect-Sell model proposed in this grant application are a direct response to those challenges. They represent a tangible, scalable solution that aligns with key priorities identified in CWLT’s Water Plan, including:

- Keeping water connected to the land to maintain long-term agricultural viability;
- Supporting generational transition by enabling new and next generation producers to access conserved, affordable farmland;
- Advancing voluntary, innovative water-sharing agreements that promote water efficiency and flexibility without leading to permanent dry-up;
- Preserving critical pre-compact and senior water rights to strengthen community and agricultural resilience in

the face of climate uncertainty.

The Land Trust will partner with Colorado Open Lands (COL) on this project. COL, a recognized leader in land and water conservation, and CWLT support each other's water planning and conservation efforts, serving as thought partners, and exploring how water conservation efforts can be replicated and scaled across the state.

The project complements and builds upon ongoing CWCB-supported programs focused on agricultural water sharing, efficiency upgrades, and integrated land and water conservation. The proposed project is both a direct outcome of and a next step to implement CWLT's Water Plan. It represents the kind of integrated, community-driven work that Colorado's Water Plan envisions – protecting water, sustaining agriculture, and fostering resilience for future generations.

Taxpayer Bill of Rights

n/a