

Conserving Our
Land, Water & Way of Life in
Colorado's Rio Grande Basin,
The San Luis Valley



Background

The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) was conceived out of a community based water group and has grown into the primary local land and water protection organization in the San Luis Valley. RiGHT is a local non-profit committed to working with private landowners, public agencies and other conservation organizations to preserve the natural beauty and ecological values that can still be experienced today in Colorado's San Luis Valley, as well as to promote a sustainable agricultural lifestyle.

The Mission of RiGHT is to "Conserve Our Land, Water and Way of Life in Colorado's Rio Grande Basin, The San Luis Valley" for present and future generations. Toward this end, RiGHT is currently designed to work within the region in the following ways:



The Upper Wright's Ranch, protected by a conservation easement in 2003.

- Assist landowners interested in land and water protection, particularly through permanent, voluntary restrictions of development rights known as conservation easements;
- Expand awareness and understanding of land protection tools, and how land conservation and estate planning can compliment one another;
- Partner with other conservation groups and local governments to assess conservation needs and to explore tools for planning for growth on a regional basis;
- Provide increased access to educational workshops for family farmers and ranchers that address issues of economic sustainability while encouraging land stewardship;
- Provide a coordinator for the San Luis Valley Wetlands Focus Area Committee to explore means to strengthen and protect the Valley's water, water rights and wetlands.

The individuals that make up RiGHT believe that through the use of conservation easements and other tools currently available for the long-term protection of land, RiGHT can impact the future development of the Valley- preserving agricultural lands and open space for our children and grandchildren. We act out of a deep-seated belief that land and water conservation contribute to sustaining the vitality of our agricultural heritage and economy, our exceptional wildlife habitat, our scenic beauty and our rural quality of life. Though the lifestyle in the Valley remains largely rural and agricultural, it may not remain so if we do not act now to maintain the values that are important to us.

RiGHT is the only land trust in the San Luis Valley that serves the entire Valley. RiGHT is the only organization providing extensive educational workshops. RiGHT is the only organization that has done a comprehensive inventory of land use and conservation efforts in the Valley.

Accomplishments

Land Protection

RiGHT has completed 14 conservation easement transactions and owns fee title to one property, all together permanently protecting 10,385 acres in the San Luis Valley.

- 9,440 acres are prime agricultural lands
- 945 acres of open space
- Protecting more than three miles of the Rio Grande river
- Conservation easements in Alamosa, Mineral, Rio Grande and Saguache counties
- Owns land in Costilla County, which will be protected by a conservation easement and sold to a conservation buyer
- Eight of the conservation easements are adjacent to other protected lands including the Rio Grande National Forest (and Weminuche Wilderness Area), the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy's Medano-Zapata Ranch and Mishak Lakes.



The Dunn Ranch, protected in 2005. (photo by Jane Bernard)

The Rio Grande Initiative

In 2006 RiGHT started the *Rio Grande Initiative*, a community-based project to protect Colorado's Legendary Rio Grande river, an effort to protect at least 25,000 acres of private land along Colorado's stretch of the Rio Grande through voluntary – incentive based conservation easements with various partners. Key partners include The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited and The SLV Wetlands Focus Area. Currently there are over 10,000 acres of private land already held in conservation easements. In December of 2007, RiGHT received a \$7.4 million grant from Great Outdoors Colorado to protect an additional 5,600 acres along the river.

Education

RiGHT has made an effort to increase educational opportunities for landowners in the Valley as well as for the professional advisors who work with them (attorneys, CPAs, realtors, etc.). Hundreds of local residents have attended the workshops. Attendees say they value having access to these educational opportunities in our rural area at an affordable fee. Our list of forums and workshop include:

- Keeping Family Land In The Family: Estate Planning and Conservation Options for Landowners (2000)
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- Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (2001)

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- San Luis Valley Land Use Conference (2002)
- Keeping Family Land In The Family (2002)
- San Luis Valley Land Use Conference (2003)
- Getting Ready for Rain and Making the Most of It When It Comes (2003)
- Conservation Easements and Professional Service Providers (2003)
- Farming and Ranching for Prosperity and Posterity (2003 and 2004)
- Conservation Easements: Concepts to Completion (2004)
- Proper Functioning Conditions for Riparian Areas (2004)
- Estate Planning and Conservation Easements (2005)
- Conservation Easements for Rio Grande Landowners (2006)
- Conservation Easements for San Luis Valley Landowners (2006)
- Estate and Succession Planning for Farmers and Ranchers (2006)
- Conservation Excellence (2007)

Wetlands

RiGHT provides the coordinator position for the San Luis Valley Wetlands Focus Area Committee. The current coordinator, Rio de la Vista, aptly heads up this committee which works to find solution and funding the challenge of restoring, managing and protecting the 200,000 acres of wetlands throughout the San Luis Valley. This committee is a combination of federal, state, local officials, non profit representatives and interested citizens in wetland issues. To their credit, they have already helped fund over two million dollars worth of wetlands projects in the San Luis Valley.

Planning

In 2002 through 2004 RiGHT had a major planning grant to take an inventory of all the protected land in the San Luis Valley. We worked collaboratively with many partners including counties, federal agencies and other conservation organizations to create the first inventory of its kind in the San Luis Valley. We also used this inventory to prioritize our goals and objects to conserve the most important lands with the resources at hand.

(updated 3/08)