

Protecting Colorado's Legendary Rio Grande River



October 2006, Vol. 1

The Rio Grande Initiative

Welcome:

Welcome to the first newsletter of the *Rio Grande Initiative*. As we launch this exciting project to protect the special qualities of the private lands along the headwaters of the Rio Grande in Colorado, we offer this publication to 1) keep you informed of the progress we are making and 2) hope to engage your help with this ambitious and important endeavor.

The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) and the San Luis Valley Wetlands Focus Area Committee are spearheading this effort to protect private lands along the Rio Grande river corridor in the San Luis Valley, along with many valued partners including The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited and the Colorado Division of Wildlife.



Autumn along the Rio Grande, showing wetlands west of Alamosa. Photo by Rio de la Vista.

Our purpose:

***To protect
as much private land
as possible
along the Rio Grande
corridor in Colorado,
while we have the chance,
through voluntary,
incentive based means,
in partnership with
landowners, communities,
agencies and conservation
organizations.***

Five Key Facts About the Rio Grande:

1. At nearly 1,900 miles, the Rio Grande is the fourth longest river in the U.S (after the Missouri, Mississippi and the Yukon);
2. On average, the Rio Grande supports 308,000 acres of irrigated agricultural lands in Colorado;
3. The Rio Grande begins high in the San Juan Mountains and flows for 175 miles through Colorado's San Luis Valley;
4. There are currently 21,667 acres of protected land (not including the BLM owned land) along Colorado's reach of the Rio Grande. This includes 15,844 acres of Colorado Division of Wildlife and USFWS land and 5,823 acres of private land already held in conservation easements;
5. There are an additional 56,000 acres of private, agricultural and open space land along the river that we have an opportunity to protect NOW!

Strategy for the Initiative:

- 1) create a **strategic plan** for corridor land protection;
- 2) **market** the plan;
- 3) **educate** landowners and elected officials about conservation opportunities;
- 4) develop **funding** sources to carry out the *Initiative*; and,
- 5) **protect** the Rio Grande corridor by placing, incentive based conservation easements on private lands and their senior water rights.



The Rio Grande flowing across the San Luis Valley



Development on the Rio Grande's banks near Creede, 2006

Trends and Threats along the Rio Grande:

Land and water conversion from open space and agriculture to development of subdivisions on private lands threatens the integrity of the Rio Grande. These trends include:

- loss or degradation of wildlife habitat (including the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Federally listed as Endangered),
- increased sedimentation and pollution,
- introduction of invasive and exotic species,
- loss of agricultural productivity and its vital economic contributions,
- water table reductions,
- changing return flows, and
- loss of riparian wetlands that play a significant role in water storage and flood mitigation.

Thank You:

RiGHT would like to thank and acknowledge those organizations that believed in and have provided initial funding to the *Initiative* and have made our work and early successes possible:

The Kodak American Greenways Program

The Colorado Conservation Trust

The Colorado Division of Wildlife

The San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District

US Fish and Wildlife Service

The SLV GIS/GPS Authority

And the landowners and funders who have already worked together to protect their river corridor land!

What You Can Do:

- Learn more about the project on RiGHT's website: www.riograndelandtrust.org;
- Support the *Initiative* through funding opportunities;
- Help us with outreach to landowners and partnering entities, government officials and more; and
- Connect us with groups who may be interested in a presentation about the *Rio Grande Initiative*.