



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – January 26, 2009

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RIO GRANDE INITIATIVE PARTNERS WORK TOGETHER TO PROTECT MORE THAN 2,000 ACRES

Governor Ritter Praises Effort

DEL NORTE – A broad-based, public- private effort to protect water and wildlife habitat along Colorado’s Rio Grande River secured the protection of more than 2,200 acres and six miles of river after the partners successfully negotiated a series of transactions in the past several weeks.

Spearheaded by the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT), the Rio Grande Initiative was developed to protect critical private lands along Colorado’s 175 mile reach of the river’s corridor. Voluntary conservation easements have been placed on four ranches resulting in the protection of prime agricultural land in the Rio Grande Corridor that also serves as crucial wildlife habitat. A fifth easement is currently being finalized.

“The Rio Grande River is truly one of our state’s most important natural treasures,” said Governor Bill Ritter, who announced in 2007 that the Rio Grande Initiative had been designated a Legacy Project by the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Board and awarded \$7.4 million. “Its waters sustain productive farms and ranches that were founded before Colorado became a state, and wildlife thrive along its impressive length. All Coloradans should be heartened to know that in these difficult economic times, creative people came together to protect the land, water and wildlife that are the heart and soul of one of our iconic landscapes.”

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The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Ducks Unlimited (DU) completed negotiations on two of the four properties with RiGHT completing the other two. Funding for the projects came from:

- A portion of Lottery funds awarded to the Rio Grande Initiative in December 2007 by the GOCO Board.
- \$1.5 million from the Colorado Water Conservation Board's (CWCB) Water Supply Reserve Account. The funds were used to secure senior water rights along the Rio Grande that are part of the conservation easement transactions. "One word describes the CWCB's decision to help the San Luis Valley protect its land and water: leadership," said Charles Bedford, director of The Nature Conservancy's Colorado Chapter. "We hope Governor Ritter will encourage the CWCB to continue to support Colorado communities looking to make this kind of investment in their future."
- The Colorado Division of Wildlife's (DOW) Habitat Partnership Program (HPP), which is designed to help reduce conflicts between wildlife and agricultural interests, and to assist the DOW in meeting game management objectives on both public and private lands. HPP develops partnerships between landowners, land managers, sportsmen, the public and the DOW to resolve such conflicts.
- A North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant. These grants are provided to organizations and individuals who have developed partnerships to carry out wetlands conservation projects in the United States, Mexico and Canada for the benefit of wetlands-associated migratory birds and other wildlife.
- The Colorado Conservation Partnership (CCP) in order to advance the Colorado State Wildlife Action Plan. The funding from CCP was made possible as a part of a \$2 million grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to help implement on-the-ground wildlife conservation projects in Colorado. "Colorado Conservation Partnership in cooperation with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation was happy to provide funding to this project to help implement the goals of the State Wildlife Action Plan," said Chris Herman, West Slope Field Director for the Colorado Conservation Trust, a member of the Colorado Conservation Partnership. "The Rio Grande Corridor is one of the priority landscapes the partnership is working to protect as part of our "Keep It Colorado" campaign."
- In all four projects, the landowners themselves made significant contributions in conserving their own properties, contributing over \$3.9 million dollars worth of conservation value, exemplifying their commitment to preserving their properties for future generations.

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The four projects completed are:

Gilmore Ranch Conservation Easement (Alamosa County) sponsored by The Nature Conservancy. This 1,025- acre ranch is prime agricultural land with three miles of the Rio Grande running through it. It contains a broad floodplain and lush river corridor wetlands and riparian area that support abundant wildlife habitat. The ranch is in an important wildlife corridor between Monte Vista and Alamosa near three state wildlife areas and 4,700 acres of already protected private land.

River Valley Ranch Conservation Easement (Rio Grande County) sponsored by Ducks Unlimited. The River Valley Ranch, a 585-acre property, protects the habitat of flood irrigated pastures, ox-bow sloughs, and riparian areas bound on the south by the Rio Grande State Wildlife Area. The property provides substantial willows, which are potential habitat for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (federal and state endangered), Western Yellow-Billed Cuckoo (state special concern), as well as for geese, sandhill cranes, and a variety of ducks and other water birds. Many raptors inhabit the area, including bald and golden eagles. The pastures and riparian areas also are habitat and shelter for elk, mule deer and marmots. “We couldn’t be more pleased with our latest acquisition,” said Greg Kernohan, Ducks Unlimited conservation manager for Colorado. “The River Valley Ranch is an exceptional compliment to the work that DU and our partners in the valley have committed to accomplish through the Rio Grande Initiative.” Kernohan says he especially thanks Steve Massey and the River Valley Group for donating the easement value.

Knoblauch Ranch Conservation Easement (Rio Grande County) sponsored by the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust. This conservation easement will protect 122 acres with significant wetlands and senior water rights from the Rio Grande. The ranch has been in the same family for over 100 years. It includes irrigated and native grass pastures that support elk, deer, beaver, and bald eagles that enjoy its exceptional cottonwood gallery. This ranch lies between South Fork and Del Norte in an area that is starting to experience intense development pressure.

Rio Oxbow Ranch (Mineral County) sponsored by Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust. Stretching along the Silver Thread Scenic Byway, US Highway 149, above Creede in Mineral County, 505 acres of the ranch were conserved. Overall, the ranch encompasses both sides of six miles of the Upper Rio Grande and has an extensive boundary with the Rio Grande National Forest. The owners and managers of this ranch have been recognized for their excellent riparian management. The river corridor supports abundant populations of elk, deer, moose, beaver, marmots and many other small mammals.

It is expected that a fifth property, River Valley Ranch II, will close sometime in the next several weeks. The project will protect an additional 400 acres along the Rio Grande immediately north of Monte Vista. The Gates Family Foundation will be a funding source for this project.

“Preserving the Rio Grande, while we have the chance, is one of the most important comprehensive conservation efforts happening in Colorado and the nation today,” said Nancy Butler, Executive Director, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust. “This year’s accomplishments highlight the value of strong partnerships in achieving our ultimate goal of protecting 25,000 acres along the river.”

“The only way projects the magnitude of the Rio Grande Initiative can be successful, is through broad partnerships,” said Lise Aangeenbrug, GOCO Executive Director. “With the impetus of the GOCO grant it received in 2007, such a partnership has been assembled and RiGHT is be congratulated for their resourcefulness. We’re all working together to benefit one of the most important areas in Colorado.”

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Scenic images of this landscape can be requested at adrew@tnc.org.