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Conservation Success for Local Land Trust: Rio Oxbow Ranch Protected

Anyone who has driven the winding “Silver Thread Scenic Byway” along State Highway 149 above Creede has probably had their breath taken away. Not just by the high altitude, but also by the scenic beauty that opens when they round the bend to see the majestic Rio Grande meandering across the valley floor of Antelope Park. Six miles of the river flows through the wide curving oxbows that inspire the name of the spectacular Rio Oxbow Ranch. Across the broad valley, the Weminuche Wilderness rises on the far side and the views are indeed breath taking.

The local Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust’s conservation efforts has now insured that this view is protected in perpetuity, with completion of the second phase of the conservation easement on the Rio Oxbow Ranch at the end of 2009. With contributions from many sources, including the ranch owners, the Lisenby Family, along with financial support from Lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado, The Nature Conservancy, the Rio Grande Basin Round Table and Colorado Water Conservation Board, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the many partners that contributed matching funds, this premier conservation accomplishment was achieved.

“Working with RiGHT, their supporters and consultants to protect our ranch has been a pleasure,” said Rio Oxbow Ranch owner Alan Lisenby. “And working together to develop an environmentally sensitive but practical Management Plan for on-going operations has also been a very beneficial exercise. Since conservation easements are perpetual, our family can be assured that our efforts to enhance and preserve the environmental and aesthetic values of the Rio Oxbow Ranch will never be undone.”

“Protection of the Rio Oxbow would be at the top of anyone’s list of conservation priorities,” said Nancy Butler, Executive Director of the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust. “Its scenic beauty, its broad meadows, wetlands and riparian area along the river, its continuity as a historic ranching operation, and the wildlife benefits it provides, along with buffering the wilderness area and national forest, all add up to make it a truly magnificent property to protect. We are so grateful to the landowners and the many partners for coming together to make this project possible over the past two years.

“The *Rio Grande Initiative* that we’ve been working on now for several years was begun for just this purpose, to make a lasting contribution to keeping the beauty of the Rio Grande, its working lands, and its wildlife habitat intact and available for future generations to enjoy as we have,” Butler said. “It’s deeply rewarding to achieve what we set out to do and to know that the river corridor through the Rio Oxbow will be preserved as we see it now.”

The Rio Oxbow Ranch is one of six properties on the Rio Grande that received support from the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Legacy Grant for the *Rio Grande Initiative*. The \$7.4 million grant to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust was awarded in December 2007. Five of those ranches are now under easement with one left for completion in 2010, along with other river corridor properties having been protected through other GOCO and matching grant cycles as well.

“As of the end of 2009, nearly 18,000 acres of river corridor ranches have been protected here in the San Luis Valley, by the collaboration between us and our various partners,” said Rio de la Vista, Co-coordinator of the *Rio Grande Initiative* with the land trust. “It’s a tribute to our community that people here see the value of conserving the land and water along the Rio Grande. Those ranches and all that they encompass are so important to our quality of life in the Valley.

“Private land conservation is something we can do now, it’s voluntary and there are a number of incentives to make it worthwhile for landowners, and many partners who are committed to supporting it,” said de la Vista. “And the landowners’ long term commitment to caring for the Rio Oxbow was recognized when Alan and Patricia Lisenby, along with ranch managers Dale and Anne Pizel, received the 2007 Award for Excellence in Riparian Management from the Colorado Riparian Association for their restoration work and land use practices that made substantial improvements to the riparian area on the ranch. We hope to build on these successes and continue to help interested landowners along the river to protect their land in a way that meets their family’s needs and passes down a wonderful legacy to the future.”

For more information about the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and the *Rio Grande Initiative*, visit www.riograndelandtrust.org, email to info@riograndelandtrust.org, or call the office in Del Norte at 719-657-0800.

*GOCO is the result of a citizens’ initiative that was passed by 58% of the voters in 1992. It receives approximately half of Colorado Lottery proceeds—\$54.3 million in Fiscal Year 2009. It awards grants to local governments and land trusts, and makes investments through the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Colorado State Parks. More than 3,000 projects have benefited from GOCO grants since 1994. All 64 counties in Colorado have received GOCO grants.
