

Conserving Colorado

A 10-year Roadmap for the Future
of Private Land Conservation

Executive Summary

2023







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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



The Nature Conservancy



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COLORADO
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Executive Summary

Colorado is a special, uniquely beautiful and diverse place. The landscapes here are unlike anywhere else, from the expansive eastern plains to the iconic 14ers to the Grand Mesa – and the forests, canyons, high plains, rivers, and everything in between. In addition to their intrinsic value as natural places, people’s connection to these lands is real, it’s visceral, and it dates back to time immemorial. Today, Colorado’s landscapes support a productive agricultural economy, a booming outdoor recreation industry, and thriving cities – all of which have relied on conservation for decades and will continue to rely on it for generations to come.

The majority of lands in Colorado – roughly 60% – are privately owned. While in private ownership, the benefits they offer to the public are widespread. These lands feed people, even beyond Colorado’s borders. They are anchored by the plants and trees that are signs of a healthy ecosystem. The streams and rivers that run through them sustain life for a variety of animals. The conservation movement has worked with many landowners to support these landscapes and, for decades, hundreds of private landowners have protected and stewarded lands in partnership with land trusts (nonprofit conservation organizations) and local and state public agencies such as open space and natural resources departments.

Building on the historical success of the conservation movement as a foundation, the work of private land conservation is growing and evolving to better meet Colorado’s needs. As the demands for natural resources such as land and water increase and change, so must our approaches to protecting the lands and waters people and nature need to thrive.

The next decade will be particularly important for securing a healthy, livable future. Colorado’s people, landscapes and wildlife are experiencing the impacts of a changing climate every day, from record-breaking wildfires, extreme drought and dwindling water supplies, to more severe weather patterns and the loss of habitat for native plants and animals. Addressing these challenges requires

a multitude of creative solutions and approaches – conservation being critical among them.

Conserving Colorado: A 10-year Roadmap for the Future of Private Land Conservation considers what the lands movement will require over the next 10 years to rise to the challenges before us, and to remain robust and relevant far into the future – as is required by the “forever” nature of perpetual land conservation.

Designed by and with the conservation organizations and partners that comprise the Keep It Colorado coalition, this collaborative plan has rallied land trusts and other conservation-minded groups around common goals for land, water and species protection in Colorado – while carefully considering the many needs of people and how they interact with and live on the land. The plan also allows for individual organizations to bring their mission-driven work forward to serve a bigger vision for the future of conservation. Building on the conservation successes of the past several decades, *Conserving Colorado* offers a roadmap with a focus on protecting more landscapes; supporting and engaging more people in conservation and stewardship; and building a strong, healthy and impactful conservation movement that can successfully carry this work into the future.

While this roadmap speaks primarily to the work of the private land conservation sector, it is unique in that it takes a holistic view of the conservation movement and what it needs to be successful.

Land trusts work closely with local, state and federal agencies to conserve land. For example, Fishers Peak State Park in Trinidad, Colorado, was conserved through a joint effort between the City of Trinidad, The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. This roadmap is designed to connect with larger statewide planning efforts for a more coordinated approach to protecting land, water, wildlife, agriculture, outdoor recreation, and climate and community resiliency.

The roadmap establishes five strategic pillars, or areas of focus, that guide land conservation approaches, community-centered conservation efforts, and the support the conservation sector needs to make it all happen. The goals are oriented around ensuring that ecosystems and communities are resilient to the impacts of climate change, and sharing strategies that leverage conservation as a climate action tool to mitigate the effects of drought, wildfire, water loss and biodiversity loss. The roadmap also acknowledges that conservation work and programming can best serve Colorado's people by including all voices, especially those that have been historically underrepresented in conservation or are disproportionately impacted by environmental threats. And it identifies concrete strategies to increase the resources available to conservation organizations and landowners to make land conservation and community conservation goals a reality.

OUR VISION OF SUCCESS IS BOLD, BUT ACHIEVABLE.

If we are successful, over the next 10 years, we will double the number of acres protected, from 3.3 million to 6.6 million acres; double the number of people engaged in and supporting conservation; and double the resources available to advance diverse approaches to conservation work. This major investment in conservation across Colorado will help protect the quality of life we all share.



Why Is the Roadmap Needed, and Why Now?

As Colorado grows and changes, the environment we live in is also changing. The climate crisis is a severe and growing threat, but strategic, coordinated conservation of climate-resilient landscapes can be part of the solution. Population growth and increased demands on dwindling water resources pose significant risks to wildlife habitat, local agriculture and healthy ecosystems, but innovative approaches and collaborative conservation efforts are effective in addressing these threats as well.

There has never been a more urgent moment for a coordinated, strategic and collaborative approach to private land conservation. Land trusts and their partners in private land conservation are poised to rise to the challenge. Voluntary private land conservation in Colorado has successfully protected over 3.3 million acres since 1965, while local government open space programs have conserved an additional 1 million acres. This long history of impactful conservation provides a strong foundation for the future and elevates the important role private land conservation plays in securing a Colorado where people, lands, waters and wildlife thrive.

■ Five Strategic Pillars

Conserving Colorado is organized under five focus areas or "pillars," each accompanied by a set of goals and strategies for action:

- **Climate-resilient Landscapes:** Protecting more resilient and connected landscapes, healthy ecosystems, and biodiversity.
- **Community-centered Conservation & Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice (DEIJ):** Authentically engaging diverse perspectives and experiences in conservation, so we can conserve more land and deliver more direct benefits to more people.
- **Collaborative Water Solutions:** Increasing work with water conservation partners on solutions and projects that protect water for nature and people.
- **Resilient Agriculture:** Protecting more farmland and ranchland; expanding opportunities to cultivate landscape and economic resiliency; and increasing equitable access to local food production, land ownership and conservation programs.
- **Lasting Conservation Movement:** Increasing awareness of and funding for this critical work and building a conservation movement that is more responsive and relevant to Coloradans now and in the future.

■ Goals and Metrics

Goals in the roadmap include:

- Strategically conserving climate-resilient and biodiverse landscapes.
- Collaborating on land and water conservation solutions that support healthy rivers, landscapes and communities.
- Protecting landscapes with vital water resources and habitats.
- Increasing conservation of farms and ranches and supporting landowners' ability to cultivate lasting landscape and economic resiliency.
- Increasing community-centered conservation that engages people who have been underrepresented in conservation.
- Expanding conservation outcomes that equitably benefit all Coloradans.
- Incorporating different perspectives on and approaches to conservation.
- Supporting more equitable access to landownership and conservation programs.
- Increasing awareness and support for private land conservation, including expanding policies, tools, and funding needed to protect more key lands and engage more people.

These goals will help create a stronger, more relevant and resilient conservation movement well into the future.

In 10 years, success looks like:

- Doubling the amount of protected land, an additional 3.3 million acres.
- Doubling the engagement in conservation efforts and programs.
- Doubling the resources to support the myriad approaches to conservation work.



Call to Action

Keep It Colorado is well positioned to facilitate and support state-level implementation of the roadmap's goals, and provide the convening structure for conservation organizations to share ideas, collaborate on solutions and track progress.

The details of implementation will be driven by the conservation community, and will therefore require participation from the Keep It Colorado membership and partners in conservation. Colorado's land trusts and public agencies focused on conservation will be instrumental in engaging landowners and communities and in delivering conservation outcomes.

The roadmap is designed to allow individual organizations to build on their current successes and bring their mission-driven work to the forefront in service of the larger vision. This will give organizations the ability to lean into specific goals that align with their unique current and future work. Each organization approaches conservation in different ways, and this flexibility allows for a robust, relevant and multifaceted approach to putting the roadmap into action and delivering lasting, durable, and impactful conservation.

The conservation sector cannot do this work alone, however. This roadmap calls for ambitious action that can lead to the transformational change needed to secure a more sustainable future for Colorado. For conservation to succeed, more robust and innovative funding, incentives and tools must be developed. Also needed for conservation to succeed at scale are policies that support these tools and programs. Finally, it is vital to increase the number and diversity of people who engage with conservation organizations and work in their own communities in order to create a lasting, relevant and successful conservation movement.

The coalition's call to action is that people across Colorado see themselves as part of the statewide

conservation movement – supporting conservation wherever they can and in whatever ways they can. We ask that policymakers look for legislative opportunities to support and enhance conservation programs and incentives, reduce barriers to entry, and create new programs and incentives that keep Colorado, Colorado. We seek funding partners eager to support conservation approaches that include land protection, community programming and organizational capacity needed to accomplish the roadmap's goals. And we call on Coloradans everywhere to support conservation efforts in their community by volunteering, advocating, voting, donating, participating in programs, and considering conservation as a lasting opportunity for their Colorado.

Developing the Roadmap

Conserving Colorado would not have been possible without the dedicated support and participation of Colorado's land trusts, public agency partners, nonprofit partners and generous funders. The project was guided by the Keep It Colorado board of directors and an external advisory council comprised of a diverse cross-section of voices from within and adjacent to the conservation sector. The process allowed time to listen to those doing conservation and stewardship work to understand their vision for the future and the current challenges they face.

Additionally, the process included perspectives from those who have been underrepresented in conservation discussions, giving the conservation sector more ideas about the opportunities ahead. Technical trainings allowed conservation professionals to explore new data and tools for landscape analysis. Development of the plan's strategic pillars, goals and metrics was informed by land trusts, open space agencies and their partners during facilitated meetings.

The project was facilitated by a team of consultants and Keep It Colorado staff. We thank the many individuals and organizations for walking on this journey with us, and for sharing Keep It Colorado's vision to create a Colorado where people, lands, waters and wildlife thrive.

To read the complete plan, visit www.keepitco.org.

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