



A Toolkit

Making the Case for Conservation: Private Lands Conservation and Conservation Easements

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BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO KEEP IT COLORADO

Keep It Colorado is a nonprofit coalition of conservation organizations working to protect the lands and waters that define our state. We are intent on creating a future in which conservation, protection and stewardship are priorities for Colorado's communities.

Land trusts form the core of our membership, and we represent their interests. We are also a voice for public agencies, nonprofits and other conservation champions that are conserving and stewarding Colorado's private and public lands and water.

Collectively, our coalition's work:

- continues the legacy and heritage of Colorado's working family farms and ranches;
- protects our state's large, connected natural areas that define Colorado - including open spaces and scenic vistas, rivers and lakes, and fish and animals;
- and enables Coloradans and visitors to enjoy our state's iconic beauty, from the prairies and deserts to the mountains, today and in the future.

Keep It Colorado provides a unified statewide voice and leadership for conservation and conservation planning, specifically around private lands. Our core areas of focus are **Policy Advocacy; Member Connection & Coalition Building; Emerging Issues & Opportunities Forum; Health & Sustainability Solutions;** and **Advancing a Culture of Conservation.**

Learn more about [Keep It Colorado's core focus areas.](#)

Private Land in Colorado

Approximately 60 percent of land in Colorado is privately owned. Since 1965, land trusts and their partners have helped Colorado families conserve more than 3.2 million acres* of working lands, wildlife habitat and open spaces that define our state and contribute to our quality of life. Keep It Colorado is the only coalition in Colorado that elevates the voice of organizations doing on-the-ground **private lands** conservation - and we do this by bringing together multiple sectors to advance conservation. This includes advocating for policy that provides landowners with the tools and strategies to conserve land, such as conservation easements and the state's conservation easement tax credit program.

**Keep It Colorado 2020 data collection from 24 land trusts in Colorado and Land Trust Alliance annual 2019 survey data.*



Photo: John Fielder

FACT SHEET:

The Conservation Easement Tax Credit: 20 Years of Conservation Success in Colorado

Colorado is known for its diverse and iconic landscapes. These lands fuel the state's economy through outdoor recreation, tourism and agriculture. Because of the economic, social and ecological benefits it creates, conservation has long been a priority for Coloradans. Investment in conservation of Colorado's natural areas, and the resulting protection of these lands into the future, have been and remain primary goals of sound public policy. Conservation easements and the conservation easement tax credit are the primary tools to achieve these goals.

*Download the fact sheet
"The Conservation
Easement Tax Credit: 20
Years of Conservation
Success in Colorado"*

What is a conservation easement?

[PDF](#)

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization, typically a land trust or a public agency. The conservation easement restricts use of the land (for example, prohibiting building on the land) in order to protect the property's conservation, agricultural and scenic values in perpetuity. The landowner still owns the land and can use, sell or transfer it. Conservation easements are flexible and tailored to meet the landowner's needs and wishes.

What is the conservation easement tax credit?

When a landowner protects property by donating a conservation easement to a qualified land trust, the landowner's charitable act qualifies him or her for a transferable state income tax credit. The state's program enables the landowner to turn a portion of the equity he or she has in the land into a marketable tax credit – and taxpayers seeking to lower their tax liability can purchase the tax credit from the landowner. Currently, the value of the credit is up to 90 percent of the first \$100,000 of donated property value and 50 percent for the remaining donated value. The credit cap is \$5 million per easement.

Why does the conservation easement tax credit matter?

There is real public benefit that results from investing in conservation easements. To date, land trusts and their partners – aided by tools such as conservation easements and the tax credit – have helped families conserve 3 million acres across Colorado. The benefits are economic as well as environmental. A 2018 study found that for every \$1 invested in conservation through the tax credit, the people of Colorado receive up to \$12 in economic benefit through the conservation of prime farmland, habitat for Colorado's wildlife, and land along streams, lakes and rivers.

Conservation easement tax credits help Colorado families stay in production on their farms and ranches, and maintain their land for future generations. The benefits are particularly apparent in rural communities whose economies are rooted in local agriculture. The tax credits also protect our state's wildlife habitat, including protecting habitat necessary to support hunting and fishing. And they help sustain the natural open spaces that Colorado is known for, including providing access to that open space for outdoor recreation and tourism purposes.

Finally, a 2020 survey showed that 81 percent of Coloradans say that issues involving clean air and water, wildlife and public lands are important compared to other issues when deciding whether or not to support an elected official, and 69 percent consider themselves conservationists. The conservation easement tax credit program catalyzes conservation – a clear priority for Coloradans – by helping to ensure that more conservation takes place and that currently protected landscapes continue to stay that way.

Now more than ever.

The conservation easement program and the tax credit have helped Coloradans through a recession before. This critical tool is needed now more than ever as communities plan for economic recovery.

Between the 2008 recession and today, families have leveraged the conservation easement tax credit to stay on their land and keep local agriculture alive. Landowners have used the credit to conserve critical wildlife habitat and open spaces that define our state. Communities have been able to use conservation to acquire properties that would have been developed and instead turn them into

thriving public open spaces for outdoor recreation. Now more than ever, the people of Colorado need conservation as a resource for a path forward. Through conservation, the lands, waters and wildlife that make Colorado so special will be here for future generations.

Sources:

- CSU Study: Investing in Colorado; Colorado's Return on Investments in Conservation Easements: Conservation Easement Tax Credit Program and Great Outdoors Colorado.
- Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project, 2020 Conservation in the West Poll.
- Colorado Division of Conservation: Conservation Easement Oversight Commission: [Learn more here](#).

THE PROCESS FOR DONATING CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

What does the process look like for donating a conservation easement? While every land trust operates differently and follows its own process for conserving land with conservation easements, we have outlined the general steps.

Download the infographic “Land Conservation in Colorado: A Brief Guide to Conservation Easements”

[PDF](#)

LAND CONSERVATION IN COLORADO:
A Brief Guide to Conservation Easements

KEEP IT COLORADO
We envision a Colorado where people, lands, waters and wildlife thrive.

About Conservation Easements
A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally enforceable agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization to protect a specific area of land for conservation purposes. The easement is a legal agreement that allows the landowner to continue to use the land for certain purposes while protecting the natural resources and wildlife habitat on the land. The easement is a legal agreement that allows the landowner to continue to use the land for certain purposes while protecting the natural resources and wildlife habitat on the land.

Get in Touch with Your Local Land Trust
To learn more about the steps in this process, visit www.keepitco.org

www.keepitco.org

A Guide to Conservation Easements / 1

Initial Site Visit or Phone Call
After a property owner has decided to explore the possibility of donating a conservation easement, the first step is to schedule an initial site visit or phone call. This meeting is an opportunity for the landowner and the land trust to discuss the property, the landowner's goals, and the land trust's mission. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the conservation easement process, including the benefits and challenges of donating a conservation easement.

Deciding to Donate or Sell a Conservation Easement
After a landowner has decided to explore the possibility of donating a conservation easement, the next step is to decide whether to donate or sell the easement. This decision is based on the landowner's financial goals, the land trust's mission, and the landowner's personal preferences. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the benefits and challenges of donating a conservation easement.

Property Title Review
Before a landowner can donate or sell a conservation easement, the land trust must review the property's title. This review is to ensure that the landowner has clear title to the property and that there are no liens or other encumbrances on the property. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the title review process.

Land Trust Review and Approval
Once the land trust has reviewed the property's title, the next step is for the land trust to review and approve the conservation easement. This review is based on the landowner's goals, the land trust's mission, and the landowner's personal preferences. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the review process.

Property Appraisal
Before a landowner can donate or sell a conservation easement, the land trust must have the property appraised. This appraisal is to determine the fair market value of the property and the value of the conservation easement. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the appraisal process.

Drafting the Agreement
Once the land trust has reviewed and approved the conservation easement, the next step is to draft the agreement. This agreement is a legal document that outlines the terms and conditions of the conservation easement. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the drafting process.

A Guide to Conservation Easements / 2

Reviewing the Agreement
Once the land trust has drafted the conservation easement agreement, the next step is for the landowner to review the agreement. This review is to ensure that the landowner understands the terms and conditions of the agreement and that the agreement meets the landowner's goals. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the review process.

Creating the Baseline Documentation Report
Once the landowner has reviewed and approved the conservation easement agreement, the next step is to create a baseline documentation report. This report is a detailed description of the property's natural resources and wildlife habitat. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the report process.

Completing the Project
Once the landowner has reviewed and approved the conservation easement agreement and the baseline documentation report has been created, the next step is to complete the project. This step involves the landowner signing the agreement and the land trust recording the agreement. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the completion process.

Stewarding the Land
Once the conservation easement has been completed, the land trust will take responsibility for stewarding the land. This stewardship involves monitoring the property's natural resources and wildlife habitat and ensuring that the property is managed in a way that is consistent with the landowner's goals and the land trust's mission. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the stewardship process.

Enjoying a Beautiful Legacy
Once the conservation easement has been completed and the land trust is stewarding the land, the landowner can enjoy a beautiful legacy. The landowner's property will be protected for future generations, and the land trust will ensure that the property is managed in a way that is consistent with the landowner's goals and the land trust's mission. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about the legacy process.

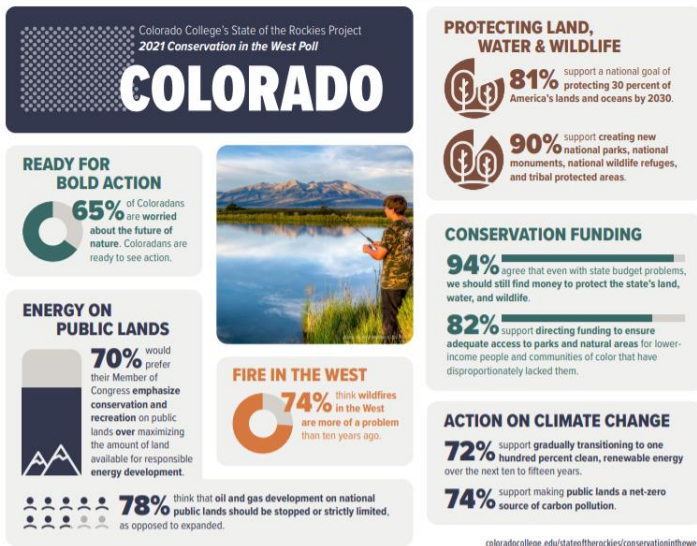
Added Incentive for Colorado Landowners
The federal government provides a tax incentive for landowners who donate a conservation easement. This incentive is a charitable deduction that allows the landowner to deduct the fair market value of the property from their taxable income. The land trust will provide the landowner with information about this incentive.

KEEP IT COLORADO

COLORADANS' VIEWS ABOUT CONSERVATION AND THE WORK OF LAND TRUSTS

Where Coloradans Stand on Conservation

Among Colorado voters, 81 percent support a national goal of protecting 30 percent of America's lands and oceans by 2030. And 94 percent agree that even with state budget problems, we should still find money to protect the state's land, water and wildlife.



Download the infographic "Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project 2021 Conservation in the West Poll"

[PDF](#)

[PNG](#)

Compared to other issues, 81 percent of Coloradans say that issues involving clean water, clean air, wildlife and public lands are important in deciding whether or not to support an elected official, and 69 percent of Coloradans consider themselves a conservationist.



Download the infographic "Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project 2020 Conservation in the West Poll"

[PDF](#)

[PNG](#)

Source: Colorado College State of the Rockies Project (2020 and 2021).

Coloradans' Views about the Work of Land Trusts

Coloradans value the benefits of land, water and wildlife conservation, and they value the role land trusts play. For example, 96 percent of voters have a favorable opinion of land trusts once they hear a quick explanation of land trusts' work, and more than half say that actions related to conserving the land are extremely important land trust responsibilities.

Further, 85-91 percent believe that important land trust activities include conserving wildlife habitat, restoring forest health, conserving lands along streams and rivers, conserving mountain areas, conserving lands that have rare or important plant life, conserving historic lands, and conserving native prairies and grasslands.

Where Coloradans Stand on Climate Change

About 87 percent of Coloradans believe in protecting the land from climate change and ensuring that future generations can continue enjoying it as they have.

And 88 percent of Coloradans say "Yes, climate change is occurring." These numbers are high across political party affiliations:

- Republicans: 73%
- Independents: 90%
- Democrats: 98%

Source: Dec. 2020 survey of 424 registered Colorado voters who live in counties served by a land trust.



Download the infographic "Understanding and supporting the work of land trusts"

[PDF](#)

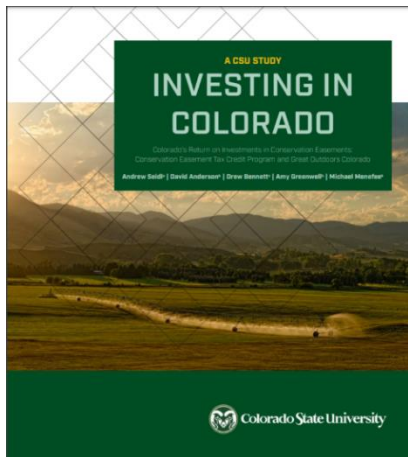
[JPG](#)

THE ECONOMIC ROI OF CONSERVATION

Conservation tells a clear and strong economic story in Colorado. Below are references to reports and studies, case studies highlighting the impact of investments in conservation, and examples of projects that demonstrate economic return.

Reports and Studies

For every \$1 invested in conservation through the tax credit, the people of Colorado receive up to \$12 in economic benefit through the conservation of prime farmland, habitat for Colorado's wildlife, and land along streams, lakes and rivers.



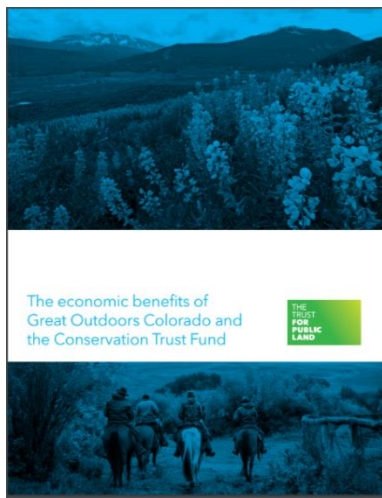
Download the report "A CSU Study: Investing in Colorado"

[PDF](#)

Recreation and Tourism

90 percent of Coloradans participate in outdoor recreation activities in Colorado each year. Conservation creates opportunities for people to hike, camp, see wildlife, fish and hunt, and for companies that manufacture and sell equipment for those activities – pumping dollars into our state's economy.

15 percent of leisure visitors to Colorado come specifically for the parks, trails, rivers, open spaces, recreation amenities, and wildlife. People who come primarily to visit the outdoors are estimated to spend \$1.21 billion annually in Colorado, generating tens of millions of dollars in state and local tax revenues.



Download the report "The Economic Benefits of Great Outdoors Colorado and the Conservation Trust Fund"

[PDF](#)

In the agriculture sector alone, new investments in conservation programs have the potential to pump hundreds of millions of dollars into Colorado’s economy, and give a much-needed boost to our rural communities, too.



Economic Return on Farm Bill Investments

Bolstering Rural Colorado Economies with Increased Investments in Farm Bill Conservation Programs

THE OPPORTUNITY

185,395 ACRES

A dozen Colorado land trusts have a current and pending project portfolio of 151 properties comprising 185,395 acres of private working landscapes with an estimated conservation easement value of about \$325 million.



CONSERVING RURAL COLORADO

Of the 185,295 acres of landscapes, 74% of the properties and 83% of the acreage are located in rural Colorado counties.



FILLING THE NEW PANDEMIC GAP

COVID-19 has made rural Colorado’s agriculture sector more vulnerable. Financial stimulus related to conservation will offer much-needed relief in regions that need greater support to recover.



FINANCIAL STIMULUS

\$195 MILLION IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Identified ranch and farmland conservation projects could generate \$195 million in Colorado economic activity across sectors, from banking and real estate to retail.



1,233 NEW JOBS

Additional economic activity means over a thousand new jobs at an average wage of \$50,000 per year and an additional \$97 million in economic value (e.g. profits, wages, rent, taxes) in Colorado.



STRONGER FUTURE

BOLSTERING RURAL ECONOMIES

Conservation-based stimulus makes our rural communities stronger. Economic infusion programs and more in-state match funding help mitigate risk, reduce debt and increase savings for the future.



COLORADO IS THE PRIVATE LANDS CONSERVATION LEADER

It is reasonable to expect similar effects of investments in conservation easements in other states.



REDI@CSU

Regional Economic Development Institute

Source: "Economic impact of future federal conservation easement investments on (rural) Colorado communities," June 2020 report, Andrew Seidl, professor and associate head, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University (redi.colostate.edu).

[Download the study "Economic impact of future federal conservation easement investments on \(rural\) Colorado communities"](#)

[PDF](#)

[Download the infographic "Economic Return on Farm Bill Investments"](#)

[PDF](#)

[PNG](#)

LAND CONSERVATION AND OUTDOOR RECREATION ARE LOCAL ECONOMIC DRIVERS.

A research study found that parks, trails and open spaces in Colorado Springs:

- Raise the value of nearby residential properties by \$502 million and increase property tax revenues by \$2.58 million a year.
- Provide health benefits and reduce pollution control costs by \$201,000 per year and equate to an annual medical cost savings of \$56.5 million.
- Provide residents a benefit of \$58.7 million annually for the use of these facilities.
- Are frequented by visitors who are estimated to spend \$135 million annually in Colorado Springs and generate \$6.36 million in local tax revenues.
- Support \$32.4 million in resident spending on sports, recreation, and exercise equipment annually at 88 sporting goods stores that generate \$178 million in sales and provide 986 jobs.

Source: Trust for Public Land

- ➔ **Greater investments in conservation would have measurable social, economic and health benefits for Coloradans – and should be a priority.**



*Download the case study
“The economic benefits of
parks and recreation in
Colorado Springs”*

[PDF](#)

OPEN SPACE SALES TAX PROGRAMS ARE EFFECTIVE AND ACCEPTED TOOLS FOR ADVANCING CONSERVATION.

A case study in Chaffee County showed that:

- In 2018, 52 percent of residents voted “yes” on a ballot measure to incur a ¼-cent sales tax in perpetuity.
- In 2019, the first year of collection, the tax generated \$1.1 million revenue.
- Of that revenue, at least 25 percent was devoted to improving forest health, at least 25 percent to preserving working ranches/farms, and at least 5 percent to providing greater stewardship for public recreation lands.

*Download the case study
“Chaffee County, CO Case
Study: A thoughtful,
locally driven vision 10
years in the making”*

[PDF](#)

Public support of conservation is growing, as evidenced by approval of open space sales tax programs. Unfortunately, only 23 Colorado cities and counties* have a tax program that supports conservation or open space acquisitions, and the majority of those are in the Front Range and resort communities.

Source: Trust for Public Land

**Great Outdoors Colorado informal research*

- ➔ **Access to local funds through tax programs as matches for other funding could make a significant difference in advancing conservation across the state.**



Conservation has well-known ecological benefits – but the impacts on Colorado’s economy are also very real. Here are three examples of local economies that have benefited from conservation aided by conservation easements.



The Economic ROI of Conservation

Conservation has well-known ecological benefits – but the impacts on Colorado’s economy are also very real. Here are three examples of local economies that have benefited from conservation aided by conservation easements.

CREATING A COMMUNITY ASSET CLOSE TO HOME

On the Western Slope, following the 2008 recession, the region’s most precious landscapes became susceptible to being filled with housing developments. Colorado West Land Trust wished to enhance quality of life and connect the community to nature close to home. It purchased private land slated for development and deeded it to the City of Grand Junction for public open space—then created a paved trail to connect downtown Grand Junction and surrounding neighborhoods to the Lunch Loop Trail system. Today the trailhead is the most popular in Mesa County and is one of three there that contribute \$15 million to the local economy.



[Download “The Economic ROI of Conservation”](#)

[PDF](#)

SAVING A LOCAL GEM, ENABLING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

In Crested Butte, Long Lake offers a balance of scenic views, wildlife habitat, recreation, clean water and critical ranchland. For a decade, public lands on the east side of the lake were slated to be auctioned off. In February 2020, the Crested Butte Land Trust completed a 750-acre federal land exchange with the U.S. Forest Service that protected 120 acres, granting public access to this beloved and popular open space; added 630 acres to the Gunnison National Forest; and generated \$2.6 million for affordable housing projects in Gunnison County.



PRESERVING A FAMILY RANCHING LEGACY

In the wake of the 2008 recession, the Hanna Ranch, a fourth-generation cattle ranch between Colorado Springs and Pueblo, faced potential division due to Front Range development pressure, a family dispute and a challenging cattle market. The conservation-minded Hanna family worked with Colorado Open Lands to employ a conservation easement on part of the ranch, complementing a long history of sustainable ranching practices. The conservation easement has allowed the family to keep its ranch in production and ensure a generational transition—and also allowed the family to navigate drought and recession with more liquidity and flexibility than would have otherwise been possible.



INVESTING IN COLORADO

For every \$1 invested in conservation through the tax credit, the people of Colorado receive up to \$12 in economic benefit through the conservation of prime farmland, habitat for Colorado’s wildlife, and land along streams, lakes and rivers.

Source: A CSU Study: Investing in Colorado; Colorado’s Return on Investments in Conservation Easements: Conservation Easement Tax Credit Program and Great Outdoors Colorado.



PUBLIC POLICY THAT ADVANCES CONSERVATION

One of Keep It Colorado's primary focus areas is Policy Advocacy. We advocate for sound public policy that supports and advances more on-the-ground conservation based on our coalition's collective input and priorities. Forward-thinking conservation policy protects the investment our communities have already made in conservation, enables landowners to conserve more land, and permanently protects Colorado's natural outdoor spaces and places.

In 2021, Keep It Colorado's policy priorities include:

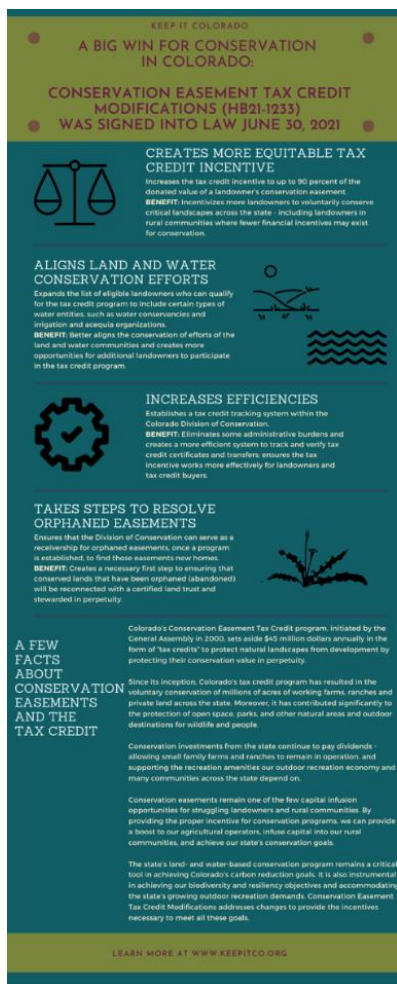
- Promoting and supporting a strong and efficient conservation easement tax credit program.
- Enhancing access to the tax credit program in ways that support more landowners and better align water and land conservation efforts.
- Working toward new and innovative tools that support more conservation.
- Supporting our partners and statewide efforts around natural climate solutions.

Conservation Easement Enhancement and Rural Stimulus Act (HB21-1233)

Keep It Colorado's bill, the Conservation Easement Enhancement and Rural Stimulus Act ([HB21-1233](#)), was introduced in the Colorado State Legislature on March 19, 2021, passed the Senate on June 7, 2021, and was signed into law by Governor Polis on June 30, 2021.

Key elements of our bill include:

- Increases efficiencies of the tax credit program and creates a tracking system for tax credit transfers.
- Expands the types of eligible entities that can donate easements and receive tax credits to include certain water conservation entities.
- Allows landowners to receive up to 90% of the donated value of their easement.
- Specifies that the Division of Conservation can hold easements in preparation for future work to resolve orphaned easements.



Download the infographic "Big Win for Land Conservation: Conservation Easement Tax Credit Modifications Passes into Law"

[PDF](#)

[JPG](#)

Blog | [Published on Keep It Colorado's Website](#)

Conservation is the key to rural economic stimulus and climate solutions

By Melissa Daruna, Executive Director, Keep It Colorado

Most everyone is aware of the ecological benefits of conserving land – clean water, healthy plants and wildlife, and rich habitat for animals, birds and fish. But two other critical outcomes of conservation immediately rise to the top for me: a strong economy and climate change mitigation. Most Coloradans agree.

After a year rife with the pandemic, wildfires and economic hurdles, these arguments for advancing and protecting legislative policy that drives more conservation are stronger than ever.

One tool we have worked hard to protect is Colorado's Conservation Easement Tax Credit program. The state allocates \$45 million dollars annually in the form of "tax credits," and issues those to landowners who voluntarily agree to protect their land's conservation value in perpetuity. These are values that benefit all Coloradans, including protection of natural resources, diverse wildlife and plants, open space, and historic and recreation resources.

Colorado's tax credit program has resulted in the voluntary conservation of millions of acres of working farms, ranches and other private land. And it has contributed significantly to the protection of open space, parks, and other natural areas and outdoor destinations.

We know Coloradans value this work. In a Keep It Colorado survey, 96 percent of Coloradans expressed a favorable opinion of land trusts, and more than half say that actions related to conserving land are extremely important responsibilities for land trusts to undertake. Land trusts rely on those voluntary agreements with landowners (called conservation easements); the tax credit program incentivizes landowners to make such arrangements.

How does this translate to supporting our rural economies?

Conservation investments from the tax credit program allow small family farms and ranches to remain in operation, and in this pandemic year, that's crucial. Conservation easements remain one of the few capital infusion opportunities for struggling landowners and rural communities. In fact, a recent Colorado State University study showed that in the agricultural sector alone, new investments in conservation programs have the potential to add \$195 million into Colorado's economy, and give a much-needed boost to our rural communities.

Conservation investments also support the recreation amenities our outdoor economy and many communities across the state depend on. Consider this:

- About 90 percent of Coloradans participate in outdoor recreation activities annually. Conservation creates opportunities for hiking, camping, viewing wildlife, fishing and hunting, and for manufacturing and selling equipment for those activities – pumping dollars into our state's economy. It's worth noting that during the pandemic, two-thirds of Coloradans report that they continued or increased their outdoor activities at parks or in nature.
- About 15 percent of leisure visitors to Colorado come specifically for the parks, trails, rivers, open spaces, recreation amenities and wildlife, which are available because of conservation. People who come primarily to visit the outdoors are estimated to spend \$1.21 billion annually in Colorado, generating tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues.

Another CSU report shows that conservation easements yield a \$12:1 return on investment to the state.

How does all this tie to climate change?

More extreme weather patterns, chronic drought, a longer and more intense wildfire season, and diminished snowpack are becoming more prevalent and dire. People acknowledge these threats: 88 percent of Coloradans say "Yes, climate change is occurring," and 87 percent believe in protecting the land from climate change.

While land conservation alone cannot end climate threats, it plays a key role in creating natural solutions to mitigate the impacts. For example, conservation strategies store carbon in plants and soils, remove harmful gases from the atmosphere, protect wildlife habitat, and increase the diversity of plants and animals that make up a healthy ecosystem.

Good legislative policy addresses these challenges. On June 30, 2021, Governor Polis signed into law Conservation Easement Tax Credit Modifications ([HB21-1233](#)). At its core, the statute helps ensure that the tax credit program can work as well as possible for as many landowners as possible in a critical time of economic recovery, especially in rural Colorado. It addresses changes to the tax credit program that will ensure that the tax credit incentive is adequate to encourage conservation and make the program more accessible to landowners across the state; increase efficiency in credit processing and tracking; and expand the definition of “eligible landowner” to include water entities in an effort to better align land and water conservation.

We developed our bill based on feedback from the conservation community and landowners over the years. Now, in a year when conservation solutions are especially poignant, we are grateful to the Colorado Legislature for enacting policy that progresses conservation efforts we know Coloradans support.

A call to conserve Colorado the beautiful

By Melissa Daruna, Executive Director, Keep It Colorado

When I hear the lyrics to our country's patriotic song, *America the Beautiful*, it's easy to imagine that they're about Colorado: *Oh beautiful, for spacious skies; For amber waves of grain; For purple mountain majesties; Above the fruited plain.* In fact, the piece was written as a poem by a woman who was inspired by the majestic views of the Great Plains during a trip to Colorado Springs over a century ago.

Colorado's virtues may have inspired the U.S. government when it titled its recently released report "Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful." The report is a call to action to protect 30 percent of the Earth's lands and waters by 2030, and Coloradans have reason to celebrate it.

Appropriately, the report highlights the importance of protecting both public *and* private lands. This is an essential component here in Colorado. Because nearly 60 percent of Colorado's lands are privately owned, voluntary actions of private landowners can play a significant role in helping ensure conservation resiliency and connectivity across the state's many different communities.

We know why resiliency is important. Phenomena like a radically changing climate and population growth threaten our lands and waters every day, threatening the ability of people and wildlife to survive and thrive. Adaptation to change is a requirement.

Why is connecting public and private lands important? Many privately owned landscapes in Colorado are adjacent to public lands, and nature moves through them all. Migrating elk don't heed the boundaries that separate private and public lands. Rivers don't stop flowing at the edges of forests. Strategically connecting our public landscapes through private land conservation will protect them from becoming covered by buildings and highways, or withering away from severe and ongoing drought.

Private and public land conservation strategies must work together; if not, the landscapes as we know them today will continue to disappear, and Colorado's communities and wildlife will feel the consequences.

Continuing a legacy of conservation in Colorado

The idea of creating connected, resilient private and public lands is not new; it's at the heart of the longtime work of nonprofit land trusts and their partners. Since 1965, they have conserved more than 3.2 million acres of Colorado working lands, wildlife habitat and open space private lands. Their collective mission is to conserve Colorado's lands and waters in perpetuity.

Importantly, Colorado voters align with these values, and agree that land trusts are central to conservation. Surveys indicate that 81 percent support the national goal of 30x30; 87 percent believe in protecting the land from climate change and ensuring that future generations can continue enjoying it as they have; and more than half say that actions related to conserving the land are extremely important land trust responsibilities.

What's refreshing is the government's affirmation of that critical work, and its recognition that private lands conservation is vital to creating such public benefits as clean air and water, locally grown food and abundant wildlife.

The report also notes, "Every community has its own relationship with nearby lands and waters." That sentiment should resonate with Coloradans, who prioritize land use differently from region to region and culture to culture – from rural, family farmers and ranchers; to anglers and hunters; to Indigenous peoples; to recreation enthusiasts. The emphasis on locally led, locally designed restoration and conservation is an approach that I feel aligns well with Colorado values.

I embrace this new momentum. It opens the door to new conversations about conservation's ecological, economic and quality-of-life benefits. It enables us to support more private landowners and promote the work of land trusts and open space agencies. And it validates initiatives that prioritize and map Colorado's most critical areas for protection.

There is space for every Coloradan in this movement. My wish is that Coloradans will take action to protect the lands and waters that make their corner of the state special.

Protecting what we love: A coordinated plan for Colorado

By Linda Lidov, Director of Membership and Communications, Keep It Colorado

When I think about landscape connectivity, my mind's eye turns to what *disconnected* landscapes would look like. The wide-open valleys, prairies and farmlands that define Colorado today are missing. Wildlife are homeless or injured; rivers and lakes have limited waterflow. And Coloradans are wondering: Could more planning and thought have gone into protecting these landscapes and our way of life?

As dystopian as these images may seem, they bring to mind the important idea that Colorado's lands and waters are necessarily connected. They work together. But they are at risk of being disconnected – some say disappearing – if we don't protect them from threats such as climate change and population growth. In addition to endangering the natural resources Coloradans depend on, these threats make it financially harder for rural families to stay on working lands, and harm communities that rely on thriving agriculture, recreation and tourism economies.

There are many interests to balance. And a few different conservation plans are currently in the works. But ultimately (and thankfully) the goals overlap. At Keep It Colorado, our planning centers on conserving private lands. Coordinating – connecting – with other groups working toward similar goals will help all these plans succeed.

Filling a gap for a connected future

"Land conservation" often conjures up images of public lands in national and state parks, forested areas, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas. But private lands account for a huge portion of the state that needs protection: nearly 60 percent of Colorado's land is privately owned. Communities count on land trusts to protect these natural resources for the long term and benefit all of us.

Since 1965, nonprofit land trusts have helped conserve over 3.2 million acres, permanently keeping working farms and ranches in production; restoring critical wildlife habitat; and protecting open space and Colorado's iconic vistas. In addition to making agreements with landowners to voluntarily conserve their properties, many land trusts have expanded their portfolios – from involving local communities in setting conservation priorities to grooming the next generation of land stewards.

As a statewide coalition, we support our members in this work. We bring them together to explore conservation challenges and opportunities and to problem-solve. One gap we've observed is the lack of a unified, coordinated statewide plan that prioritizes the protection and connectivity of private lands.

To fill that gap we're developing the [Statewide Private Lands Conservation Plan](#) (with generous funding from Great Outdoors Colorado and the Colorado Water Conservation Board). The plan will identify concrete private lands conservation goals, identify urgent areas for protection and create a roadmap of on-the-ground projects. And it will set common conservation values that reflect the economic, ecological and social needs of local communities.

Meanwhile, calls to meet 30x30 – a goal to conserve 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030 – are growing. And many of our partners are creating or updating statewide plans around water, wildlife and recreation. For example, the Colorado Water Conservation Board is updating the [Colorado Water Plan](#). Colorado Parks and Wildlife is identifying wildlife protection priorities and recreation opportunities to develop a comprehensive statewide recreation and conservation plan.

There are many converging interests at play, and our intention is that our plan will advise and support all of these broader initiatives – contributing a valuable piece to the whole conservation puzzle.

Broad goals, unified vision

Our goals are wide-ranging, but they all point to the vision of a more sustainable future. The plan will unify the work of Colorado's land trusts with a call to action to conserve and connect critical wildlife habitats, working landscapes at risk of being converted or developed, and vital waterways. Through partnerships, we'll be able to understand local community needs and balance those with larger statewide objectives.

As an example, consider the Arkansas Basin, a diverse region ecologically, economically and culturally. In the southeastern part of the basin, the shortgrass prairies are essential wildlife corridors and are among the country's most endangered habitat. Here, development pressure is low compared to the upper basin, where people flock to build homes and commercial infrastructure, and

where tourism and outdoor recreation are central economic drivers. Region-wide, there's an urgency to preserve a critical mass of irrigated farmland and to address water scarcity. Land trusts are exploring ways to collaborate and tackle these challenges, which are common and unique at the same time; their regional work will serve as a blueprint for our statewide plan.

Our plan will also map vital landscapes that need to be protected from the effects of climate change. We know that conservation alone can't end climate threats, but it plays a role in mitigating the impacts. Using scientific data and [The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Networks tool](#), the plan will identify the landscapes and the number of acres to conserve over the next 10 years. It will look at type and quality of habitat to be conserved. And it will outline the use of natural climate solutions, including land protection and management strategies to, for instance, avoid conversion of forests, wetlands and grasslands to other uses; improve soil health; maintain natural working lands; and mitigate flood and fire risks.

Finally, our plan will help increase community-driven conservation. We define this as conservation that communities engage in, initiate or support – from Indigenous peoples with ancestral ties to these lands and multi-generation farming and ranching families, to newcomers and people who have grown up playing in Colorado's natural landscapes.

In a brighter picture of the future, Colorado's land and water landscapes are connected, and the wildlife and people that rely on them have plentiful and sustainable food to eat, water to drink and a way of life that's connected to nature. Communities are resilient and can adapt to change.

We look forward to working with our partners to coordinate conservation strategies and make connectivity happen. Because if our collective efforts are fragmented, the results will be, too.