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DENVER AND THE WEST

Colorado land preservation: Racing to save nature amid growth

Three recent deals block development on nearly 86,000 acres east of Trinidad and on wildlife habitat in North Park

By Bruce Finley

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(portlet/article/html/imageDisplay.jsp?contentItemRelationshipId=7456523)
 In north-central Colorado, Sage Grouse raise their young in meadows. (Joe Amon, The Denver Post)

Colorado land groups recently locked up 86,000 acres, racing to save nature amid a boom
 (http://www.denverpost.com/environment/ci_24627331/patch-prairie-draws-people-metro-denvers-east-edge) in population growth and development.

The Nature Conservancy and Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust negotiated deals that include the 34,420-acre Bow and Arrow Ranch and 50,000-acre JE Ranch east of Trinidad in the Purgatoire River Valley.

The cattlemen's trust also negotiated protection for the 1,840-acre North Park Registered Herefords Ranch, near Walden, which has run for more than 100 years in an area where elk, deer and moose

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thrive.

Conservation easements placed on these parcels prevent subdivision and industrial or commercial development, helping ranchers keep land while improving habitat.

The easements let traditional agricultural activity continue, increasingly with help from scientists exploring how best to ensure economic and ecological health.

These deals bring total land protected using [easements](#) (http://www.denverpost.com/ci_20861904/90-000-colorado-acres-offered-national-protected-area) statewide to more than 2 million acres, roughly 3 percent of Colorado, Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts records show. The Nature Conservancy holds 196 easements on 25 preserves statewide.



Eastern Colorado prairie, in particular, holds promise as a huge, incredible and largely unknown area, said Matt Moorhead, southeast Colorado program director for the

conservancy, which has prioritized the region as some of the most ecologically significant land in the West.

"It is big. It is open. And it continues to be functional — both ecologically and for the local historic agricultural community. When you're working in dry climates, as in eastern Colorado, scale matters," Moorhead said. "This is a place where the conservation community can try to get ahead of the curve."

The Nature Conservancy is launching a five-year experiment — working with fifth-generation ranchers and using their cows and different methods of grazing in canyons and around pinion-juniper forest.

Altered wildfire patterns have favored pinion-juniper forest expansion onto grasslands, Moorhead said. "What we're experimenting with is: What are ecologically and economically appropriate ways to manage that pinion-juniper forest?"

In north-central Colorado, the North Park deal concluded four years of working with ranchers John and Donna Rich. Their land includes wetlands, irrigated hay meadows and sagebrush steppe.

They graze cattle and grow hay. Grizzly Creek cuts through the land, wet areas giving nesting habitat for ducks and other birds. [Sage grouse](#) (http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_28855352/grouse-not-endangered-feds-rely-state-led-rescue) raise their young in the meadows.

"Family ranches are the economic drivers of rural Colorado and are key to the continuation of the western tradition," said Erik Glenn, director of the cattlemen's trust and board member of state coalition.

"You get [open space](#) (http://www.denverpost.com/environment/ci_28369526/colorados-lottery-pays-15-6-m-goco-land), preservation of scenic views, and agricultural land that will still be worked in the future. It'll grow food we need, and water remaining in agriculture will recharge aquifers," Glenn said. "We get a lot of benefits from doing land conservation."

- [Logan County landowners sue state after conservation-easement ruling](#) (http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_28348870/logan-county-landowners-sue-state-after-conservation-easement?source=pkg)

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Mar 28:

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