

Groups preserve ranchers' water source

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SAGUACHE, Colo. (AP) — The creek that drops out of La Garita Mountains and snakes its way toward the north end of the San Luis Valley floor has sustained ranching for 140 years.

The ranchers who live in the narrow drainage and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust want to ensure that doesn't change.

"They really believe in that lifestyle and the importance of that lifestyle to the rest of us that live in urban areas," Erik Glenn, the land trust's deputy director, said.

In October, the land trust finalized a conservation easement on the Werner Ranch east of town, pushing the amount of voluntarily protected acreage along the Saguache Creek to 13,000 acres, The Pueblo Chieftain reported (<http://tinyurl.com/lrvvmfoe>).

The push to protect the drainage started nearly two decades ago when the Nature Conservancy began reaching out to landowners about protecting their land.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust has protected surface water rights along Saguache Creek with conservation easements on 21 ranches.

But that initial push, which encompassed much of the north end of the San Luis Valley, was slow to take.

"At that time, conservation easements and the Nature Conservancy in the traditional ag community were probably viewed with some hesitation," Glenn said.

The Nature Conservancy's efforts coincided roughly with the formation in 1995 of the cattlemen's land trust, which was put together by the membership of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association.

The link to the association, which has been protecting and promoting the interests of the industry since 1867, helped ease some of the locals' apprehensions, Glenn said.

By the late 1990s, a few ranchers in the area led by the Coleman family went ahead with easements. That example made a difference with their neighbors.

"The landowners down there are very connected to each other," he said. "It's a lot of the same families that have been there for years and years."

Some of the families along the creek have had their ranches as far back as the 1870s.

Today, there are 26 easements on parts or all of 21 ranches.

The conservation easements share some traits, Glenn said.

They include keeping water rights tied to the property in perpetuity.

The easements also restrict the right landowners would otherwise have to subdivide the property and often limit the construction of outbuildings or a new home to small sections of the property.

The landowners retain ownership of the land and, in turn, can gain access to federal tax deductions, state tax credits and estate and local property tax benefits, among other potential incentives.

Glenn said the land trust has gotten financial help from Natural Resources Conservation Service programs in the farm bill that aim to preserve irrigated agriculture. Great Outdoors Colorado also has made grants toward the group's work. The land trust, which also has done extensive work along Tomichi Creek near Gunnison and the Elk River near Steamboat Springs, will keep working along Saguache Creek.

Glenn said he hopes the recent conservation of the Werner Ranch will influence others at the eastern end of the drainage.

"We think that one will probably catalyze additional efforts along the creek east of town," he said.
