

## Preserving our ag land

CHIEFTAIN EDITORIAL

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A CONSERVATION success story that is emerging in Southeastern Colorado gives us hope for the future protection of our own agricultural heritage in the Lower Arkansas Valley.

The Nature Conservancy recently purchased the JE Canyon Ranch near Branson, a 50,000-acre ranch that includes 55 miles of picturesque canyons, 9 miles of the Purgatoire River and many other important wetlands. More than 865 plant and flower species are found on the land, along with plenty of wildlife. The ranch also is home to several early Hispanic settlements, prehistoric rock art and abandoned pioneer homesteads.

Prior to the \$21 million purchase by The Nature Conservancy, the ranch's availability on the open real estate market was a big concern for agricultural interests in Southeastern Colorado. Many worried that a developer might buy the property, build homes on prime ag land and move water out of the watershed.

But The Nature Conservancy's purchase nips that worry in the bud.

The nonprofit organization, in cooperation with the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, is now developing a conservation easement that will be permanently affixed to the land so that it can never be developed or used for any other purpose than agriculture or nature preservation.

Once the easement language is finalized, The Nature Conservancy's goal is to sell the land back to a private party for the purpose of farming and ranching.

We applaud the efforts of The Nature Conservancy and their focus on maintaining Colorado's valuable ag lands for the purpose of farming and ranching. And we hope the JE Canyon Ranch story is an inspiration to farmers up and down the Lower Arkansas Valley.

The threat of losing farms and our water to outside interests is real, and it's up to this generation to ensure that protections are in place to keep the agricultural economy strong in Southern Colorado. We cannot undo the harmful sales and decisions of the past, but we can pledge to do all that we can now to leave a prosperous, agriculture-friendly and beautiful Southern Colorado to the generations that follow us.