

TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

NEWS

SMC open space program protects scenic ranchland

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Published: Tuesday, January 11, 2011 6:08 AM CST

Eight hundred and eighty acres of ranchland near North Mountain and McKenna Peak where San Miguel County meets Dolores County will forever be protected after last month's purchase of a conservation easement funded primarily by the San Miguel County Open Space Program.

The county's open space program provided 97 percent of the purchase of a conservation easement for Charlene and Bobby Starks' North Mountain Ranch with the Telluride Foundation providing the remaining 3 percent.

The Starks donated approximately \$100,000 in value.

Bobby Starks said the ranch is amazing and they approached the county to protect the land.

"There's so much land that was at one time good ranch and farmland that has ended up sold for development," he said.

The conservation values protected by the easement include productive agricultural ranchland, relatively natural habitat and open space. The open space includes agriculturally productive ranchland including meadows, shrublands and forest that are ideal for livestock grazing and shelter.

The ranch site is teeming with sagebrush, grassland meadows, mountain shrubland, oak-juniper woodland, pinion-juniper woodland and forested areas with aspen and Douglas fir.

The ranch is also home to two seasonal drainages: one mile of Knights Canyon and a half mile of Dawson Draw, which offer habitat for elk, mule deer, black bear and other wildlife.

The scenic open space with both a natural and ranchland character is also visible to the public from nearby public lands.

North Mountain Ranch straddles two different watersheds and includes multiple ecological transition areas with distinct co-evolved plant communities. The property is adjacent to the McKenna Peak proposed wilderness area and is also bordered on the north and east by BLM lands. It provides migration corridors from Disappointment Valley and associated climates to higher elevation ecosystems. Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust holds the easement, and 22 development rights were retired.

"We'll stay on the land," Starks said. "The only thing we can't do is develop it."

To date, the county's open space program has participated financially in the protection of 11,400 acres of productive agricultural ranchland, relatively natural habitat and open space in the west central part of the county and another 690 acres of open space in the east end. Total county open space expenditures since 1999 have reached approximately \$2 million, which leveraged \$3.78 million from Great Outdoors Colorado and \$1.33 million in private sector/non-profit fundraising. Total value donated by all the landowners exceeds \$11.15 million.

The County Open Space Commission wishes to acknowledge the vision and generosity of Bobby and Charlene Starks and all landowners in the program. Because of their actions, some of San Miguel County's iconic landscapes will be protected for generations to come. We also thank the Telluride Foundation for local matching funds and the residents of San Miguel County who provided a dedicated funding source when they passed measure 1A in November of 2001.