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FEATURED

New conservation easement breaks county record

Partnership will preserve working ranches, open space

By Suzanne Cheavens, Associate Editor

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A view of the Bray family's newly finalized conservation easement, which not only protects the land's use as an agricultural operation, also but ensures protection of open space and wildlife habitat on its 9,257.09 acres, 80 of which stretch into Montrose County. (Photo courtesy of the Bray Family)

It seems cliché to say, but a newly finalized conservation easement in western San Miguel County is truly a win-win for not only open space and wildlife habitat, but also for five working ranches owned by the Bray family. The 9,257.09 acres, 80 of which stretch into Montrose County, make the conservation easement the largest in county history. County officials

announced the deal last week, which is a partnership with Parks & Open Space Department, through the County's Land Heritage Program, working with the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT). The county contributed \$65,000 to the conservation easement, negotiations for which were initiated in 2020.

In a news release, District 3 County Commissioner, Kris Holstrom, said she is thrilled with the approval of the land conservation deal.

"(I'm) pleased San Miguel County was able to assist with this incredibly important conservation easement," she said. "We applaud the actions of the Bray family using innovative and caring approaches to stewarding their land. The model of conservation easements and agricultural trusts helps address some of the many challenges our farmers and ranchers face. Our deep appreciation to the Brays and CCALT for making this a reality."



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The Bray ranches are owned and operated by Robert Bray, his three sons and grandchildren. The property manages large hunting, cattle and hay operations and includes five ranches — the Taylor Ranch, the Basin Ranch, the Epperson Ranch, the Hamilton Point Ranch, and the Cone Ranch. The easement, according to the news release, protects various qualities of the ranches including Gunnison sage grouse habitat, scenic vistas, wildlife corridors to other threatened species, riparian and wetland areas and more.

Ranchers across the West have long faced challenges such as drought, market instability and inflation. The Brays were no different and sought out conservation through CCALT. Conservation will allow the family to continue agricultural operations, pay down debt and keep the ranches in the family, thereby sustaining a 110-year legacy.

"San Miguel County has a strong history of preserving working ranches, wildlife habitat, scenic vistas, and historic locations and structures," said San Miguel County Parks & Open Space Director Janet Kask. "We are proud to partner with CCALT to continue that tradition and assist the Bray family in continuing their family's ranching legacy."

That legacy carries weight in the Bray family.

"Transitioning a ranch to the next generation is one the most challenging and most rewarding things facing family ranches. With each additional family member comes shared visions and circumstances but also different ideas and hopes and dreams," said Robert Bray in a CCALT news release. "We are trying to blend old proven ways with more modern, technological ways in the face of drought and other challenges. Leaving the land intact is the one constant. I take great pride that my sons have been raised in an environment that led them to love and appreciate the lands as much as I do and dedicate their lives to working with it. While I don't think I can ever say the ranch is out of the woods, I feel that I have now done my part to provide the chance for the next generation."



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Landowners such as the Brays that have unused development rights are eligible to participate in the county's Land Heritage Program (LHP). The property must either be at least 100 acres of agricultural or reside in mapped wildlife habitat or contain riparian areas. The LHP provides landowners with financial incentives to maintain ownership of their land and to protect open space, wildlife habitat and agricultural land. Through an application process, granted funds can be used to pay for either retired development rights or any transaction costs associated with the conservation easement. Participating landowners will place a conservation easement on their land, held by a qualified tax-exempt, charitable land trust. The program is funded by San

Miguel County and sometimes also includes funding from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), the Telluride Foundation, as well as by various voluntary county open space fundraising programs.

CCALT focuses on agricultural easements, so that the land can remain with ranching families. The nonprofit's mission, according to its website, "is to conserve Colorado's western heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations." Since 1995, CCALT has worked with 400 Colorado families to conserve 705,000 acres of ranchland.

Funding for the Bray conservation easement was provided by the San Miguel County Parks & Open Space Department, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Transaction cost assistance was provided by the Muley Fanatic Foundation.

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For more information about CCALT, visit ccalt.org.