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For Immediate Release

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Pankey Ranch Receives Colorado Leopold Conservation Award

Keith and Shelley Pankey and their children raise beef cattle and hay in Moffat and Routt counties. The conservation practices that the Pankeys have implemented are improving wildlife habitat, water quality, and soil health.

The award, given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, recognizes ranchers, farmers, and forestland owners who inspire others with their voluntary conservation efforts on private, working lands.

The Pankeys will be presented with the award on June 13 at the Colorado Cattlemen's Association's Annual Convention in Colorado Springs.

In Colorado the award is presented annually by Sand County Foundation, American Farmland Trust, Colorado Cattlemen's Association, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Gates Family Foundation, American AgCredit, CoBank, Farm Credit of Southern Colorado, and Premier Farm Credit.

"CCALT is proud to announce the Pankey Ranch and Pankey family as the 2022 Leopold Conservation Award recipients. The Pankey family are tremendous land stewards and fully embody Aldo Leopold's land ethic," said Erik Glenn, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust Executive Director. "This year's nominees showcased the true diversity of agriculture in Colorado and the immense dedication farming and ranching families have to the lands they steward, their communities, and their families."

"Colorado farming and ranching families provide invaluable benefits to their communities and the environment, while feeding a growing society. These contributions, in addition to commitments to conservation and stewardship on working lands, are exemplified by all the Leopold Conservation Award applicants," said Steve Wooten, Colorado Cattlemen's Association (CCA) President. "CCA warmly extends its congratulations to the Pankey family on their well-deserved recognition, and being leaders in Colorado's conservation and ranching industry."

“The recipients of this award are examples of how Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is alive and well today. Their dedication to conservation shows how individuals can improve the health of the land while producing food and fiber,” said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation President and CEO.

“As the national sponsor for Sand County Foundation’s Leopold Conservation Award, American Farmland Trust celebrates the hard work and dedication of the Colorado recipient,” said John Piotti, AFT president and CEO. “At AFT we believe that conservation in agriculture requires a focus on the land, the practices and the people and this award recognizes the integral role of all three.”

Among the many outstanding landowners nominated for the award was finalist: Round River Resource Management LLC of Rush, Colorado.

The Leopold Conservation Award in Colorado is made possible by generous contributions from the American Farmland Trust, Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, Sand County Foundation, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, American AgCredit, CoBank, Farm Credit of Southern Colorado, Premier Farm Credit, Gates Family Foundation, Stanko Ranch, Colorado Department of Agriculture, The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, The Nature Conservancy in Colorado, and McDonald’s.

Sand County Foundation presents the Leopold Conservation Award to landowners in 24 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation.

For more information on the award, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.

ABOUT PANKEY RANCH

The Pankey family’s resilience was put to a test when a wildfire burned nearly half of their ranch in 2018. Among the devastating impacts of the fire was livestock and wildlife could no longer drink from ponds because they were covered in ashes.

Keith and Shelley Pankey raise beef cattle with their sons, Kevin and Justin and their families, in Moffat and Routt counties. They have a history of doing right by their land. Following the fire, they cleaned the ponds and aerially reseeded native grasses on 900 acres in the fire’s path. It’s not the first time investing in conservation practices has paid off for this family and the landscape they share with livestock and wildlife.

Keith’s great grandfather homesteaded an area of high desert known as Great Divide. The Pankeys are still able to graze cattle in the drought-prone region from spring through fall thanks to improved water distribution and rotational grazing systems.

They replaced windmill-powered wells with solar pumps. New water storage tanks and nearly three miles of natural flow pipelines were also added. By expanding the number of watering stations (from six to 12) the Pankeys increased their ability to properly graze cattle while creating wildlife habitat across the ranch.

Precipitation, range conditions, and animal performance all impact how the Pankeys plan pasture rotations and stocking rates. They analyze pasture rotations to determine which areas benefit from early, middle or late season grazing. They’ve also found that some areas benefit from longer or shorter periods of grazing, while others benefit from being grazed twice in the same season.

When cattle widely disburse themselves, the Pankeys find that grass recovers at a faster rate, and taller grass is left behind when the cattle are rotated to another pasture. The ranch's wildlife populations have greatly increased thanks to rotational grazing and the improved water system. By working with neighbors to control noxious weeds, desirable grasses have become dominant across the ranch.

Pankey Ranch borders Colorado's largest Greater sage-grouse lek, a breeding ground for this declining species. The Pankeys hosted Colorado State University students to study grasses, insects, and Greater sage-grouse habitat in the Great Divide range. Their study was helpful in determining which conservation practices to adopt. The Pankeys fenced off a large area around a natural spring to provide cover. They also equipped water storage tanks with overflows that provide water and prolonged green vegetation to encourage production of insects that grouse chicks consume.

The Pankeys are involved with a large-scale conservation effort led by Trout Unlimited to stabilize Elk Head Creek's riparian corridor. They have installed rock toe and erosion control mats, and reseeded stream banks to prevent erosion. Hundreds of willow trees have been planted in corridors to preserve wetlands and fish habitat. Less erosion in the creek means cleaner water downstream in the Elk Head Reservoir and Yampa River. This family's leadership in raising awareness of the creek's impaired health, and commitment to on-the-ground conservation practices, is inspiring other landowners to follow suit.

The Pankeys also provide public hunting opportunities on their land. In 2011, they obtained a conservation easement on their Routt County property through the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust to ensure future agricultural uses on the land. As a longtime volunteer with the Moffat County Fair, Keith shares his land ethic and conservation practices with youth, neighbors and the general public.

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LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD PROGRAM

The Leopold Conservation Award is a competitive award that recognizes landowner achievement in voluntary conservation. Sand County Foundation presents the award in California, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont). www.leopoldconservationaward.org

SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

Sand County Foundation inspires and empowers a growing number of private landowners to ethically manage natural resources in their care, so future generations have clean and abundant water, healthy soil to support agriculture and forestry, plentiful habitat for wildlife and opportunities for outdoor recreation. www.sandcountyfoundation.org

AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

American Farmland Trust is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT launched the conservation agriculture movement and continues to raise public awareness through its No Farms, No Food message. Since its founding in 1980, AFT has helped permanently protect over 6.5 million acres of agricultural lands, advanced environmentally sound

farming practices on millions of additional acres, and supported thousands of farm families.

www.farmland.org

COLORADO CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Colorado Cattlemen's Association (CCA) is the state's only nonprofit trade organization exclusively representing Colorado's beef producers. Founded in 1867, CCA is the nation's oldest state cattlemen's association. www.coloradocattle.org

COLORADO CATTLEMEN'S AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST

The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) was founded in 1995 by the membership of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association to conserve Colorado's western heritage and working landscapes for the benefit of future generations. To date, CCALT has partnered with hundreds of ranching families in the protection of more than 705,000 acres. www.ccalt.org

TRI-STATE GENERATION & TRANSMISSION ASSOCIATION

Tri-State Generation & Transmission Assoc. is a wholesale electric power supplier owned by the 43-member electric cooperatives and public power districts it serves. Tri-State generates and delivers electricity to its member systems that serve more than one million people across nearly 200,000 square miles of Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico and Wyoming. www.tristate.coop.

USDA NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

NRCS is a federal agency committed to helping private landowners care and make healthy choices for the land and water, while using them productively. Through voluntary incentive-based programs, the NRCS works directly with farmers, ranchers, forest owners and other land stewards to provide technical expertise and financial assistance to make conservation work on private lands.

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/co/home/>

AMERICAN AGCREDIT, COBANK, FARM CREDIT of SOUTHERN COLORADO and PREMIER FARM CREDIT are associated with the nationwide Farm Credit cooperative structure that supports more than 500,000 customer-owners across all 50 states. Farm Credit supports rural communities and agriculture with reliable, consistent credit and financial services since 1916.

THE GATES FAMILY FOUNDATION invests in projects and organizations which make a meaningful, positive impact in Colorado and enhance the quality of life for those living in, working in, and visiting the state. The Foundation promotes excellence, innovation, and self-sufficiency in public education, healthy lifestyles, community enrichment, connection to nature, and stewardship of the state's natural inheritance. The Foundation's actions will remain consistent with the founders' intentions and the principles of citizenship, entrepreneurship, and free enterprise. www.gatesfamilyfoundation.org