

LOCAL & REGION

Keeping tabs on conserved land

With summer in full swing, your local land trust is in the middle of our annual monitoring and stewardship duties of land in conservation easement throughout the county.

Conservation easements are a legal mechanism to limit land development and preserve the conservation values of land without purchasing the property outright. When a landowner signs a conservation easement, the owner has either sold or donated the development rights to a conservation organization, like the Eagle Valley Land Trust, which then ensures that development does not occur on the property and the conservation values are protected. The property itself does not change ownership, only the development rights are now owned by an entity other than the property owner.

Every year, your local land trust schedules a visit with each of our conservation easement landowners. At these annual visits, we walk and inspect the land to ensure it is free from violations or encroachments.

You might be wondering how we account for potential disagreements on how the land “should” look. The IRS mandates that a conservation easement must be dedicated to at least one of the following conservation values:

- Preservation of land for outdoor recreation by, or for the education of, the general public.
- Protection of relatively natural

habitat or ecosystem.

- Preservation of open space, where there is significant public benefit, and the preservation is for the scenic enjoyment of the general public, or pursuant to a clearly delineated federal, state or local governmental conservation policy.
- Preservation of historically important land area or a certified historical structure.

These conservation values are described in a Baseline Documentation Report. This baseline is created by a certified biologist and describes the characteristics of the land.

Using the baseline, we compare each year’s field notes to the conditions outlined in the document. If we determine that a new road has been installed, or trees were improperly removed, we draft a letter to the landowner directing them to correct the violation. We have great relationships with our landowners and take care to educate new owners about the conservation easement on their land, which means we see few violations. Our most common violation is the presence of noxious weeds; an issue that is relatively easy to correct.

In fact, we are proud to say that we have four new conservation easements to add to our monitoring list as of last week. The Homestead Conservation and Public Recreation project located south of the Homestead neighborhood and stretching into Lake Creek is now

complete — 322 more acres in the center of our community that will not be developed and are open for public recreation. This project protects both public and private lands from development so you can now walk south from U.S. Highway 6 onto these beautiful and rugged conserved lands.

A big thank-you to all the Land Trust partners in this project — Eagle County, Edwards Metro District, Creamery Ranch Homeowners Association, Homestead Homeowners Association and numerous individual investors from the surrounding neighborhoods. These 322 newly conserved acres will join the 1,015 acres already protected as wilderness buffers and wildlife habitat in the Lake Creek area.

I think monitoring and stewardship may be one of the most enjoyable aspects of our work at the land trust. We have the responsibility and privilege to visit beautiful, special places to ensure their continued protection and existence. I’m hard pressed to think of a more rewarding experience. Thank you to our past, current and future landowners for protecting and conserving our county’s precious places.

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