

# 'It's a true success story'

The Eagle Valley Land Trust is helping preserve land in a tough economy

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**EAGLE COUNTY** — This is a good time to be in the open space business. As the local, state and national economies continue to struggle, land trusts throughout the state are enjoying a good bit of success. A national survey of open space preservation between 2005 and 2010 shows that Colorado was third in the nation in preserving land — mostly agricultural property — from future development.

The state's land trusts — nonprofit groups dedicated to land preservation — helped broker deals to keep more than 1.2 million acres of land open during that period. The Eagle Valley Land Trust had a hand in keeping development away from 1,300 acres in the county and another 800 acres in Pitkin and Garfield counties — since a pair of the ranches preserved crossed county lines.

The local share of the state's total doesn't sound like a lot of land. But Eagle Valley Land Trust Director Kara Heide said much of the survey period covered a period when land prices were skyrocketing in the county.

"You still need a willing seller to do these deals," Heide said. "Sale" isn't exactly the right word for much of what land trusts do. In some cases, land owners accept money in exchange for a contract, or "easement," that the land will never be developed. Other owners exchange the rights for future development for tax deductions. In either case, owners reap some financial benefit, if not the full amount that could come from developing property.

Local land trusts help broker those deals, bringing together property owners with some combination of local governments and nonprofit groups. In Colorado, Great Outdoors Colorado, a state group funded by people buying

## By the numbers

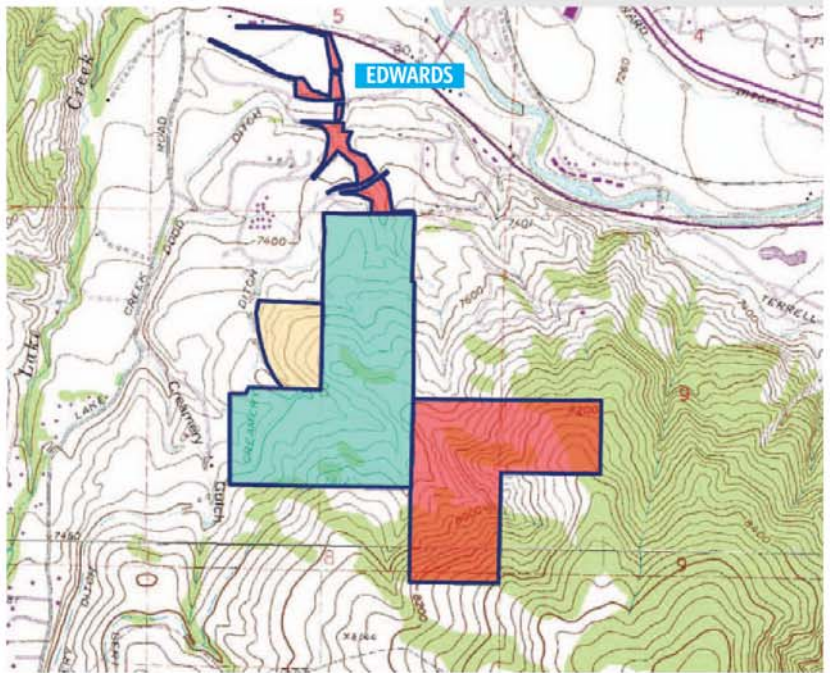
**1.225 million:** Acres preserved as open space in Colorado between 2005 and 2010.

**53 percent:** Increase in the state's preserved open space.

**38:** Land trusts now operating in the state.

**1,300:** Acres preserved in Eagle County open space between 2005 and 2010.

**350:** Acres ready to be preserved locally in the next several weeks.



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

The three colored parcels on this map add up to about 325 acres, adjacent to the Homestead neighborhood in Edwards. The Eagle Valley Land Trust will enforce contracts, or "conservation easements," on the parcels, meaning the land can never be developed.



The view from a gate in the Homestead neighborhood in Edwards out toward part of a parcel that will be preserved as open space. The Eagle Valley Land Trust will hold the contract, or "easement," that ensures the property will never be developed.

DOMINIQUE TAYLOR  
Daily file photo

## Two kinds of preservation

• **Outright purchase:** Eagle County and nonprofit groups over the years have bought several parcels, such as the Eagle River Preserve in Edwards and a parcel along the Eagle River near Dotsero. That property is generally open to the public.

• **Conservation easements:** These are essentially contracts with landowners that they won't develop their agricultural land in the future. Those easements are sometimes purchased. Other times, the easements provide tax benefits to families.

lottery tickets is also part of the mix when it comes to land preservation.

The Eagle Valley Land Trust has been involved in several of those deals and has four working right now, all in Edwards.

The first is 32.5 acres in the Miller Ranch area. A conservation easement there will put a more permanent layer of protection on the parcel, which is already classified as open space.

The other three are adjacent pieces of land just south of the Homestead neighborhood and add up to about 325 acres. Two of the three — about 300 acres' worth — were deals negotiated with private owners. The third was purchased by Eagle County with money from a property tax that can only be spent on open space.

The easements will all be held by the local land trust.

Jason Denhart, of the land trust, said that together, the three parcels will create a new "front door" to National Forest land for Edwards residents.

The fourth parcel includes access to the Eagle River.

Heide said land preservation can help the local economy, whether the public has access to open land or not. Local ranches are often important parts of wildlife habitat, she said, and state officials estimate that hunting and fishing bring more than \$28 million in revenue to Eagle County every year.

"And those seasonal jobs don't go away," Heide said. "If you build a house, the people who built it don't have work until the next project comes along. These jobs are there year after year."

Those easements are expected to be finalized early next year.

The land trust also is working with a combination of federal, state and local land owners on a complex land exchange that, if eventually completed, will preserve land that includes the open area between Single-tree in Edwards and Avon's Wildridge neighborhood. Years in the making, that exchange could be complete by the end of next year.

Between the land already preserved and other projects on the horizon, Denhart said it's an exciting time to be part of the local land trust.

"There are really positive things happening," Denhart said. "It's a real success story."

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