

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Conservation efforts get financial boost

**Dennis Webb**

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Efforts to save two major ranches and protect other local open lands and waterways received a boost of nearly a quarter of a million dollars from the Colorado Conservation Trust Wednesday.

The foundation announced \$245,000 in grants it is making toward the purchase of conservation easements on Bair Ranch in Glenwood Canyon and the John Nieslanik property near Carbondale, as well as toward other local preservation projects.

Some of the funds will be used to try to boost awareness of open space and agricultural conservation funding needs and options in Garfield County, and to conduct water studies of the Roaring Fork and Crystal River watersheds.

The \$245,000 in grants will support efforts by the Aspen Valley Land Trust, the Colorado Water Trust, the Eagle Valley Land Trust, the Roaring Fork Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund.

Last piece of puzzle

The \$50,000 the trust is contributing toward the Nieslanik easement will seal the deal on a million-dollar effort to protect that 200-acre property on East Mesa near Carbondale.

Already, \$950,000 had been obtained from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) and a federal grant aimed at protecting prime agricultural land.

The Aspen Valley Land Trust is buying the conservation easement on the property, the first time the trust will have made such a purchase. Its executive director, Martha Cochran, said AVLT plans to close on the purchase in May or June.

The easement will protect the property from future development.

She said the Nieslanik property is one of the most important in the valley in terms of conservation value. It's part of a 3,000-acre block of prime, irrigated agricultural land on East Mesa that serves as important wildlife habitat, connecting winter and summer range for deer and elk.

Will Shafroth, executive director of the Colorado Conservation Trust, said the organization wanted to make it possible to close out the purchase of the Nieslanik easement, and show that AVLT is now in the business of buying easements where that's the best option.

Cochran said completing the Nieslanik Ranch deal sends a message to other landowners that conservation groups are capable of making easement deals happen smoothly and quickly.



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The Colorado Conservation Trust on Wednesday also awarded \$100,000 toward a \$5 million purchase of a conservation easement on the 4,800-acre Bair Ranch in Glenwood Canyon.

Conservationists hope to preserve the property by helping Craig Bair to buy out the share of land owned by his brother, Le Grande, and keep it a working ranch, instead of it being sold and subdivided.

Under the project, the public also would gain access to almost three miles of river frontage near the confluence of the Eagle and Colorado rivers.

#### Sowing seeds in Garfield County

The CCT also is granting \$15,000 to allow for investigation into funding needs and sources for open space and agricultural conservation in Garfield County.

Voters in the lower Roaring Fork Valley rejected an open space tax in 2000. But Cochran said with increased oil and gas drilling, there could be an interest in western Garfield County these days in open space protection.

Shafroth said there are few places in Colorado with Garfield County's mix of population base, demographics, growth rate and need that don't already have a dedicated revenue stream to secure open space.

His trust's role will be to offer education and analysis of funding options, rather than advocating any specific course of action.

"Our role is not to come in and say this is what you should do and how you should do it," he said.

That's ultimately up to a community to decide, he said. But he said many communities often lack the financing to get through the first investigative stages, which the CCT grant will fund.

The CCT also is contributing \$10,000 to expand the programs of the Eagle Valley Land Trust. In addition, it is granting \$35,000 for a water study of the Roaring Fork watershed, and an equal amount toward efforts to protect and enhance in-stream flows on the Crystal River.

The Nature Conservancy and Roaring Fork Conservancy will look at water quality and quantity issues that affect the Roaring Fork River watershed, and what is needed to maintain and improve water conditions.

On the Crystal, the Colorado Water Trust will be involved in seeking means to get water users to voluntarily protect and enhance water flows, which drop dramatically due to diversions on its lower end, near its confluence with the Roaring Fork River at Carbondale.

Over its three years of existence, the Colorado Conservation Trust has worked to increase the funding, pace and effectiveness of land and water conservation by working through existing conservation organizations.

It has offices in Grand Junction and Boulder, and has awarded more than \$1 million in grants for 25 projects that have helped protect more than 15,000 acres of land.

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