

THE ASPEN TIMES

ACES closes on Rock Bottom Ranch purchase

By **Jeremy Heiman**

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Though the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies closed on its purchase of 115 acres at Rock Bottom Ranch on Oct. 1, the group still has to raise \$450,000 to complete the deal.

The Rock Bottom property, on the Roaring Fork River downstream from Hooks bridge in Eagle County, is to be preserved as wildlife habitat and to be used for educational purposes. But some of the funding for the purchase is not yet secured, and some matching funds will not be forthcoming until the remaining funding is raised.

The property, which was appraised at \$2.55 million, was sold to ACES for \$2.5 million, with the seller, Charlie Cole, contributing \$500,000. Cole's daughter and son-in-law, Lisa and Dwight Chiles, contributed another \$5,000, bringing the total to be paid by ACES down to \$995,000, said Tom Cardamone, ACES director.

Aspen Valley Land Trust became a partner with ACES and secured a \$500,000 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) toward the purchase. ACES holds the deed to the ranch and AVLTT holds a conservation easement on the property.

Additional funding came from The Wetlands Initiative, the W.M.B. Berger Foundation, the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation and the Brown Foundation. Contributions from members of the Roaring Fork Valley community were also important.

A \$175,000 challenge grant from the Gates Foundation and the last \$50,000 of the GOCO grant have been counted toward the purchase, but will not be realized until the remaining funding is raised from contributions, Cardamone said.

"Those monies don't fall into place until we've raised \$450,000 more," Cardamone said. The buyers have until Oct. 1, 2000 to raise the rest of the money.

ACES has already hosted two teacher training sessions at the ranch in the last two weekends, for teachers from schools in the midvalley area, Cardamone said. ACES has been working with educators affiliated with the Roaring Fork Conservancy and with local teachers, developing teaching programs based on the biological assets of the property.

Though education will be an important aspect, the organization's primary focus will be on management of the ranch as a wildlife preserve, Cardamone said. Field studies and education are a secondary use.

"Our goal remains to preserve the quiet rural nature of the neighborhood," Cardamone said. He said ACES doesn't want to risk compromising the value of the land for wildlife habitat by allowing too many visitors to the property. He said those involved are working to develop ways to limit the number of visitors at one time.

Visits by school groups have already started at the ranch, and Cardamone said he hopes ACES will be able to



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open the ranch to the public in a matter of weeks.

"We'll open in the near future, as soon as we can provide parking, pathways and signage," Cardamone said.

For the benefit of wildlife, parts of the ranch will not be open to human visitors, he said.

Rock Bottom Ranch boasts a number of key ecological and open space attributes. Four distinct great blue heron rookeries, or nesting colonies, with a total of 30 active heron nests, make it the largest heron breeding area in the Roaring Fork Valley.

The ranch also contains important wetlands and habitat for numerous species of waterfowl as well as elk, deer, bald eagles and wild turkeys.

The Cole family has owned the property since 1972, and after recently selling half of the original ranch, they expressed a desire to see most of the other half preserved.

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