

Glenwood Springs

Post Independent

Land trusts find common ground with merger

By Lynn Burton
Post Independent Staff
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Aspen Valley Land Trust executive director Martha Cochran, left, and Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund director Shannon Meyer will combine their talents when their organizations merge on Oct. 1.

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Open space advocates say there is a 10-year window of opportunity for protecting the valley's agricultural lands from development, because ranchers now in their

70s and 80s are selling their places.

By merging on Oct. 1, the Aspen Valley Land Trust and the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund will start working that window together.

"There will be a lot of agricultural transitions in the next five to 10 years," said Aspen Valley Land Trust executive director Martha Cochran of Glenwood Springs. "This is a time of opportunity, for sure."

Much of that opportunity comes from state tax breaks that encourage ranchers to place conservation easements on their property, which keeps them from ever being developed.

Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund director Shannon Meyer of Carbondale knows all about those tax credits. With the merger, Meyer will shed some administrative duties and have more time to help ranchers take advantage of tax credits.

"Now, all my time can be dedicated to working with agricultural land owners to explore their conservation options," Meyer said.

The new nonprofit organization will still be called the Aspen Valley Land Trust, but the two boards will merge. The trust will still operate from its second floor office in the Ensign Building in downtown Carbondale, which it has shared with the Heritage Fund since 2001.

"When we were cubicle next to cubicle, it became apparent we were doing compatible work," Meyer said Friday, as she and Cochran planned their day at the office conference table.

A legacy of protecting open space

Over the years, the two organizations have protected thousands of acres from development.

The Aspen Valley Land Trust was founded in Aspen in 1967, and is Colorado's oldest land trust. It has helped to preserve 8,800 acres in the Roaring Fork Valley, including 380 acres at the Laurence Ranch southeast of Glenwood Springs in 2002.

The Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund was originally founded in 1996 as the Carbondale Agricultural Heritage Fund, and was primarily funded through a voluntary 0.25 percent real estate transaction fee at the River Valley Ranch subdivision.

The Heritage Fund provides financial support for the preservation of the 4,000-acre Jerome Park conservation easement near Carbondale, and was instrumental in placing a conservation easement on the Child Ranch at Snowmass in 2001.

Until the merger, the Aspen Valley Land Trust and the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund operated



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on slightly different tracks. The Trust actually bought and administered conservation easements, while the Heritage Fund offered land planning and estate planning advice.

"Aspen Valley Land Trust would get a call for an easement, but what that person really needed was our planning service," Meyer said. "And I'd get a call from someone who wanted an easement."

"Now, we have the ability to offer landowners more options," Cochran added. "Before, we didn't have that capability."

Expanded turf

Meyer said the merger also comes because the Land Trust is doing more and more work with ranchers downvalley from Aspen. At the same time, the Heritage Fund has been making contact with more landowners west of Glenwood Springs.

"So timing-wise, this merger made a lot of sense. Their client base changed to be more in line with our client base," Meyer said.

With that comment, Cochran rose from the conference table, walked to her office and retrieved a list of clients and prospective clients she is working with from Glenwood Springs to Rifle.

"This one in Glenwood will be an important one," Cochran said, running her finger down the list but keeping the property owners' names to herself. "We're working on one in Rifle, and two or three in the Divide Creek and Dry Hollow area."

Meyer said one property owner has contacted the Land Trust about a project that might use Garfield County's new cluster zoning, which preserves open space. "That one is exciting," she said.

Colorado's income tax code gives the Land Trust one of its biggest tools. Basically, it allows "land rich but cash poor" ranchers to sell up to \$260,000 in tax credits to buyers who can use them, if they place a conservation easement on their property.

"We're looking at this as a win-win situation for people who want to support conservation," Meyer said.

"People are going to pay taxes anyhow. Rather than going to the Department of Revenue, this money goes to someone who has created a conservation easement."

Cochran said the tax break, the aging of local ranchers, and subtle changes in the real estate market are making for a busy time for the new Aspen Valley Land Trust, and she predicted that 2004 will be even more busy.

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