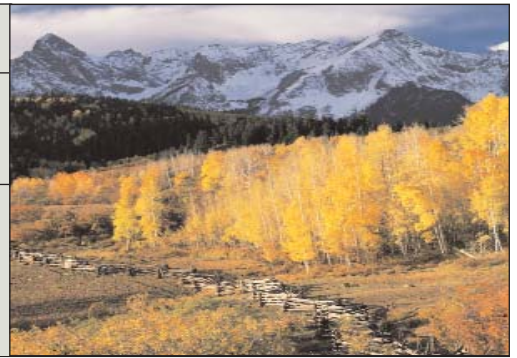




COLORADO CONSERVATION TRUST
SUMMARY OF LAND CONSERVATION
NEEDS AND PRIORITIES



NORTHERN SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS

San Miguel and Ouray Counties, Colorado

Demographic Overview

- San Miguel County's current population is estimated to be 7,165 people. The population grew 8.7% from 2000 to 2002. San Miguel County's median per capita income in 1999 was \$48,000, with 10.4% of the population living below the poverty line. The median value of owner-occupied residences is \$358,000.
- Ouray County's population grew by 4.8% from 2000 through 2002 to approximately 3,800 residents. The median Ouray County family income in 1999 was \$42,000 and the median home price was \$245,000.
- The Telluride area in San Miguel County alone may house up to 8,500 year-round residents by the year 2020, compared to approximately 3,700 today.

• 51 percent of all of the land in Ouray County is publicly owned.

• 62 percent of land in San Miguel County is public.

Background

Both San Miguel and Ouray Counties recognize the importance of preserving important lands in their communities, and have created an atmosphere conducive to land conservation. Although both counties have used their land use codes and master plans to guide growth and preserve important natural resources, open space and productive agricultural lands, only San Miguel County and the Town of Telluride have been successful in securing approval from citizens to create public finance measures to protect open space. Ouray County attempted twice to secure such a measure, most recently in 2002, but

both efforts failed by slim margins at the polls.

Conservation Objectives

The three most important conservation objectives identified by those interviewed in San Miguel and Ouray Counties are:

- Preserving productive agricultural lands, particularly those located in important view corridors or containing threatened or endangered species;
- Protecting high alpine mining claims from development and for scenic beauty, historic resources and recreational purposes; and
- Supporting the San Juan Skyway Land Conservation and Recreation Initiative.

Colorado Conservation Trust conducted an assessment of land conservation needs and priorities in the Northern San Juan Mountains region. The goals of the assessment were to:

- Identify the main organizations and institutions involved in conservation and summarize their existing capacities and plans;
- Evaluate the current state of local land use planning and discuss to what extent the plans are incentives or disincentives for land conservation;
- Inventory the current capacity of government agencies, non-profit groups and universities who provide technical support in advancing land conservation;
- Develop resource maps describing current levels of protection; and
- Recommend public policy, planning, land acquisition and organizational capacity building opportunities.

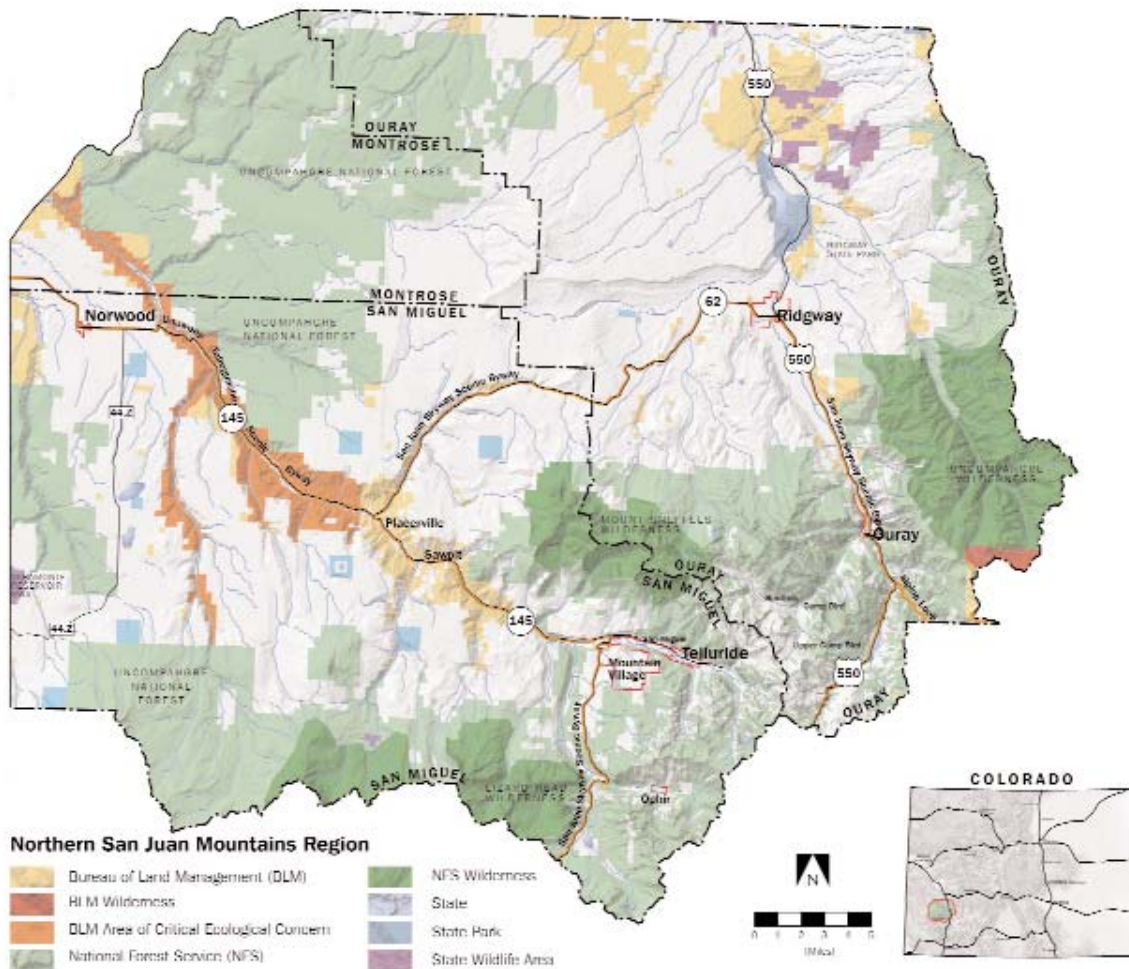
Threats to the Preservation of Open Space in the Region

- The rapid pace of residential development in all of Ouray County and along the San Juan Skyway area of San Miguel County is resulting in high land costs, which in turn is an incentive for additional development, leading to fragmentation of wildlife habitat, development of open space and view corridors, conversion of productive agricultural lands, and negative impacts to water resources.
- The uncertain future of an agricultural economy in the two counties, due to a lack of agriculture profitability, increases pressures on farmers and ranchers that may induce

them to sell their land for development.

- The market for retirement and vacation homes has heightened demand for larger lots in more remote locations. Although this development pattern is constrained by existing planning tools, including zoning that requires minimum 35-acre lots, development of this type continues due to Colorado state laws that prevent counties from regulating, to any great degree, 35-acre subdivisions. Such subdivisions tend to fragment sensitive habitat, disrupt migration corridors and adversely impact agricultural lands.

- The marketing and potential development of high alpine patented mining claims for residential development threatens to strain the Counties' scarce resources, adversely impact sensitive alpine ecological values, harm historic resources and reduce or eliminate public recreation.
- The lack of adequate public funding in San Miguel County and the lack of any funding in Ouray County for the purchase of conservation easements or development rights from willing landowners.



Organizations and Institutions Involved in Land Conservation

The region is not served by one dominant land trust but rather by a variety of local, state and national conservation organizations. The San Miguel Conservation Foundation (SMCF) is located in Telluride and is served by a part-time Director. SMCF, founded in 1993, utilizes donated and purchased conservation easements and fee acquisitions and holds easements on approximately 6,000 acres of ranch lands, mining claims, river habitat and the Bear Creek Preserve in Telluride. The Trust for Land Restoration (TLR), located in Ridgway and served by a part-time Director, focuses extensively on protecting mining claims that contain important habitat. TLR holds conservation easements on 4 properties in the region. The Black Canyon Land Trust, located in Montrose, has worked in the region for nearly a decade, holds over a dozen easements in the region and is served by a part-time Director.

The Trust for Public Land has been active in the region, especially in acquiring 9,500 acres of their 11,000 priority acres of high country mining claims through the Red Mountain Project.

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Southwest program is staffed by a full-time director working from Montrose and a full-time field person working from TNC's Telluride office. TNC's work in the area has focused on the San Miguel River, and TNC is interested in working with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the San Miguel County Purchase of Development Rights program to conserve habitat for Gunnison sage grouse. TNC holds conservation easements on several parcels on the mesas around Telluride, and owns three preserves on the San Miguel River.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust also hold several conservation easements in the region.

In 1999, San Miguel County initiated a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, and in November 2001 voters passed a mill levy increase, part of which is

dedicated to the PDR program. This tax yields approximately \$200,000 per year for the program, and is used primarily as matching funds to attract Great Outdoors Colorado dollars, something the County has been successful in doing each year since 2001. The County Commissioners unanimously support the program.

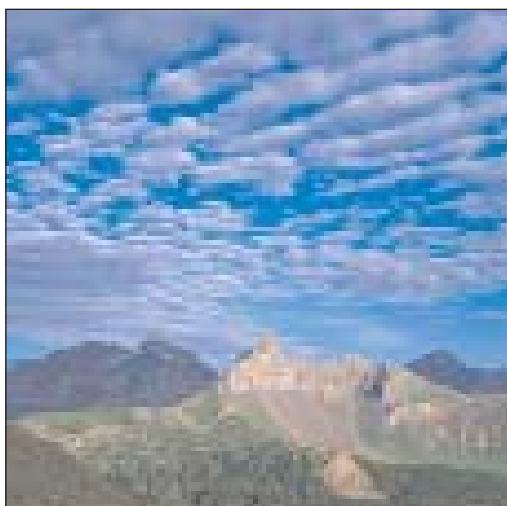
Ouray County realized the need to protect its natural resources 15 years ago and adopted planning tools to protect such resources knowing that it would be difficult to raise enough money in a county with a population of less than 4,000 people to start a viable PDR program. In addition to its commitment to good planning, the County participated in and contributed to the American Farmland Trust (AFT) Future Growth Study (which analyzed the costs of alternative development scenarios), and AFT's

Tri-River Agricultural Land Protection Project. The County has used building moratoriums and downzoning to accomplish its open space objectives. The entire county was downzoned in 2000, creating minimum 35-acre zone districts throughout most of the county.

The Town of Telluride requires that 20% of the town's unencumbered revenues be dedicated to the acquisition of open space. The "20% Solution" yields approximately \$1.3 million in revenue each year. Telluride

also has \$10 million in bonding authority that has not been used. The open space program is staffed by one part-time staff person and is overseen by an Open Space Commission. Town of Telluride funds can only be spent in the area that includes hillsides from Society Turn (the dramatic west turn in Highway 145 between Telluride and the Town of Mountain Village) east to the county line (not including the ski area). The Valley Floor Project is the town's current main focus.

The Towns of Ophir, Ridgway and Ouray have protected several key open space parcels and hope to do more in the future. Various federal and state agencies also play a role in private land conservation.



Lizard Head Peak
Photo courtesy of John Fielder.

CCT Recommendations

- Invest in building the capacity of local land trusts. That increased capacity would enhance abilities to be more proactive in negotiating and providing stewardship for conservation easements, performing additional outreach and education and partnering with the San Miguel County PDR program, The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Lands and other organizations.

- Support public interest polling, education and outreach to Ouray County landowners and residents to determine support for a public finance measure for open space.

- Create a private funding source for the region that could be used to support the Red Mountain Project's completion, the San Juan Skyway Initiative, as matching funds to attract grants from Great Outdoors Colorado and other sources, and to match funds from the San Miguel PDR program and a possible future Ouray County open space program.

- Provide funding to support local government efforts to create and update open lands plans, especially providing tools to strengthen the process and product that might

otherwise not be employed. The plans provide both strategic direction for protection efforts and increased public ownership of the protection process.

- Support current efforts to protect important agricultural lands, mining claims, riparian areas and critical habitat such as:



The Cimarrons

Photo courtesy of J. Pettengill

- Assist the Town of Ophir with the acquisition of privately held mining claims; and
- Assist the Town of Telluride with the acquisition of four patented mining claims located on Tomboy Road. They have been included in the new High Country Zone District, so their uses have been severely restricted.
- Assist TPL with the protection of the final phases of protection of mining claims in the Ophir

and Camp Bird areas.

Funds for these types of projects may count as match to the San Juan Skyway Land Conservation and Recreation Initiative. The Initiative hopes to successfully compete as a Large-Scale project in the current GOCO grant cycle.

Colorado Conservation Trust's On-going Role

1. In partnership with local organizations, raise private dollars.
2. Make grants to address the recommendations and monitor the effectiveness of grants in addressing threats.
3. Provide technical assistance to organizations and local governments.
4. Continue to advance statewide funding and programs:
 - Increase public funds for land conservation;
 - Enhance the use of conservation easement tax credits and provide no-interest loans to land trusts for transaction costs;
 - Increase the capacity of local land trusts through CCT's fellowship program; and
 - Increase public awareness of land conservation needs and opportunities through CCT's survey and State of the State report.