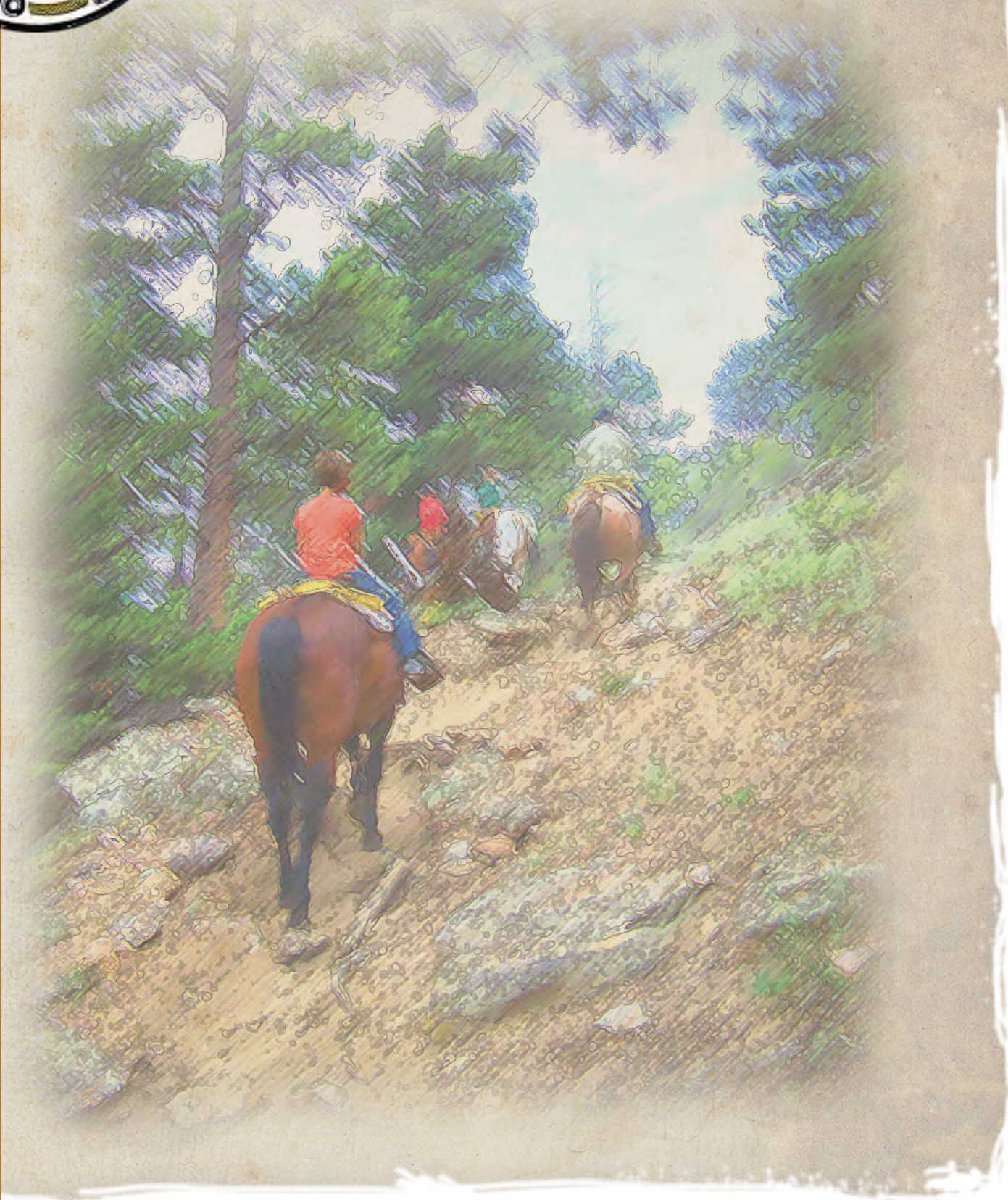




# Costilla County

Trails, Recreation, & Open Space Plan  
September 2012





**Costilla County:  
Trails, Recreation, & Open Space Plan**

*Prepared For:*

**Costilla County, Colorado**

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## Chapter I:

# Introduction

## Introduction



*Adobe and Blanca Peak*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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The partnership between the National Park Service, Great Outdoors Colorado, Colorado Open Lands, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, Southwest Conservation Corps, Costilla County Public Health Agency and Costilla County has created the opportunity for state and federal agencies, community organizations, and county residents to meet, share data, provide input, and most importantly develop an understanding for the need for this project. The county would like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of partners who helped with this important project. Without their support, the county would not have recognized opportunities to develop, connect, and promote valuable natural, cultural, scenic, and recreational resources.

### ***GREAT OUTDOORS COLORADO (GOCO)***

GOCO dedicates a portion of state lottery proceeds to projects that preserve, protect, and enhance Colorado's wildlife, parks, rivers, trails, and open spaces. Since it began awarding grants in 1994, GOCO has awarded nearly \$690 million for more than 3,000 projects throughout the state. The county received a grant from GOCO to complete this planning document. GOCO provided financial assistance to help the county organize monthly stakeholder meetings and two community events, as well as the costs for production and printing costs for the document. A separate GOCO grant received by the county in July 2011, provided funding to improve a 1-mile trail segment within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision Greenbelt Area, one of the few multi-use trails within the county's open space. Without funding support from GOCO, the county would not have been able to coordinate the planning efforts with partners listed or completed a much needed trail maintenance project.

### ***NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RIVERS, TRAILS, AND CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM***

Since 1916, the American people have entrusted the National Park Service with the care of their national parks. With the help of volunteers and park partners, they proudly safeguard nearly 400 places and share their stories with more than 275 million visitors every year. But their work doesn't stop there. They have developed the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA), the community assistance arm of the National Park Service. RTCA supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects. RTCA staff provides technical assistance to communities so they can conserve rivers,

preserve open space, and develop trails and greenways. The RTCA Program provided assistance with planning and organizing stakeholder meetings and community events, advising county officials and administrators on specific strategies for stakeholder identification and outreach efforts, designing public surveys, concept plans and maps, drafting and reviewing the document and facilitating conversations between key stakeholders. The expertise and organization of Community Planners and Outdoor Recreation Planners, and commitment to a community-driven planning process allowed the project to fully engage county residents and visitors.

### ***COSTILLA COUNTY***

Bounded to the west by the Rio Grande River, originally settled as part of a Mexican land grant and claiming Colorado's oldest town, Costilla County possesses a unique natural and cultural heritage. The goal of the county in developing this comprehensive plan is to identify and protect those resources while at the same time linking opportunities for tourist recreation with community priorities for recreation, particularly health and youth involvement. Costilla County helped to develop and guide the overall planning process, particularly stakeholder identification, outreach, and engagement, development of public surveys, generating maps and the drafting of the document. Costilla County residents provided valuable input on their concerns, county resources they value and proposed projects and recommendations to expand existing opportunities or create new opportunities. Costilla County youth provided a fresh perspective on how to value county resources, how to reach the county's younger residents, and projects and events that would attract Costilla County youth to enjoy the county's natural and cultural resources.

Costilla County would like to thank community members for finding time to attend monthly meetings and providing valuable input for this important process.

### ***COLORADO OPEN LANDS***

Colorado Open Lands (COL) is a state-wide land trust that focuses on voluntary land and water protection, including conservation of agricultural lands and water rights, wildlife habitat, and scenic areas. Colorado Open Lands was an active partner in this project and assisted the County to secure funds for the planning process, provided GIS data and capacity, shared knowledge on conservation easements and resource protection, and assisted with drafting and reviewing the plan. Colorado Open Lands is committed to working with private landowners and other organizations to help advance the goals of the plan.



### **RIO GRANDE HEADWATERS LAND TRUST (RiGHT)**

The mission of the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT) is to conserve the land, water, and way of life in Colorado's San Luis Valley. RiGHT protects working ranches and farms, water resources, wildlife habitat, and scenic landscapes. The project benefited from a RiGHT representative providing staff time and resources for sharing data and knowledge on protecting working lands, wildlife habitat, and scenic views. The organization is also committed to pursuing conservation projects that the plan identifies. Their support and insight was a great asset to the goals and vision of the development of the plan.

### **SOUTHWEST CONSERVATION CORPS (SCC)**

The Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) engages and trains a diverse group of young women and men and completes conservation projects for the public benefit. The county has had a long standing relationship with SCC who has provided youth corps to assist the county with community conservation projects. With funding assistance from a GOCO grant received in July 2011, crew members and participants from the Southwest Conservation Corps Los Valles District completed a 1-mile trail restoration

project within the Sangre de Cristo Subdivision Greenbelt Area in October 2011. Their knowledge of trail construction and maintenance and their commitment to using outdoor resources as teaching tools about conservation for young adults is greatly appreciated.

### **THE COSTILLA COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY**

The Costilla County Public Health Agency is an active partner in this project and worked to identify potential trails and recreation projects and priorities from a health access and prevention perspective. The Public Health Agency provided staff time to the planning process and meeting space for monthly stakeholder meetings. Their perspective was invaluable to the process and understanding of the need for the plan.

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### **PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT**

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Costilla County is unique in that although the county is 39% forested and has substantial mountainous terrain, the county is 99% private land. This has created a tremendous lack of outdoor recreational resources and a lack of publicly accessible trails and open space.



*Culebra Creek*

The county has long recognized the need to comprehensively and strategically address these issues but prior to this planning effort this had yet to be completed. Prior planning efforts within the county, such as the 1999 Costilla County Comprehensive Plan (a policy tool for guiding decisions concerning land use and future growth), focused on creating policies for capital improvements, land use regulation, addressing growth and development issues, outlining recreational opportunities, and gauging general attitudes of the quality of life in Costilla County. Though the document developed policies and directives related to improving accessible recreational opportunities, such as directives that “protect the integrity of the historic district in San Luis”, “restore Rito Seco through San Luis through trail loop and river front revitalization”, or “provide recreational opportunities for all residents and visitors to diversify the economic base”, the document did not elaborate on projects and county priorities to implement these policies.

However, the county did successfully apply to Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) in 2004 to acquire the 1,225-acre Carpenter Ranch to be used as a county open space property. The acquisition motivated the county to pursue avenues for addressing more issues after they were advised that their chances for funding open space and trails projects would increase if a planning document to address Trails, Recreation and Open Space was developed.

The need still remains for a planning document that identifies important natural resources, cultural heritage sites, and outdoor recreation opportunities. A document that addresses lack of public land, trails and recreational resources while also increasing public and visitor enjoyment of natural and cultural resources. In addition, a document is needed to identify opportunities for youth to experience their natural environment and address the health and fitness needs of different segments of the county’s population, from youth to seniors as well as other groups that may be at risk for obesity and diabetes.

In January 2011, the County seized the opportunity and began developing a comprehensive plan that addresses the above mentioned needs by engaging county residents and partners in developing, connecting, and promoting county resources. Currently, the county has resources available that were not available previously including the recently designated Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, planning and technical assistance from the National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program, commitment from both statewide and local conservation organizations (Colorado Open Lands and the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust), AND a grant from Great Outdoors Colorado. The county is fortunate to have



*Community knowledge of resources and potential trail connections was important to the master planning process*

a great opportunity to bring the necessary pieces together to complete the plan and actively pursue the projects it identifies.

The Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan was developed through a collaborative process, utilizing planning and technical assistance from the National Park Service, funding from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), support from community members and input from county residents.

The community has responded to public surveys on four separate occasions to address their concerns, identify county resources they value and propose project ideas and recommendations to expand existing opportunities or create new opportunities. Planning efforts have summarized priority projects proposed by the community and identified recommendations for increasing access to outdoor recreational resources, improving recreational amenities, providing a variety of recreational opportunities, and increasing protection of scenic viewsheds, agricultural lands, heritage, wildlife habitat, and water resources.

**As a result, the Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan identifies valuable projects that:**

- Connect community recreation areas and cultural sites with multi-use trails;
- Improve existing recreational resources; and
- Identify priorities for conservation easements and fee acquisition that provide view sheds along current and future trails alignments or provide opportunities for trail easements or public opportunities.

# Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan

## Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt: Potential Trail Improvements Map



- Contour Line (100 ft)
- State Highway
- Canals and Ditches
- County and Local Roads
- Rivers and Streams
- 4WD Trail

The Master Plan includes a series of maps for a proposed county-wide trail system within county-owned open spaces along with recommendations for future trail extensions and connections to other county resources. These recommendations also include activities, partnerships and funding to increase access and knowledge of these trails, design standards, implementation of trail projects, and recommendations for trail maintenance.

The plan also includes recommendations for park improvements for 7 parks located within the county as well as recommendations for maintenance, funding and partnerships for completing these improvements. Another major component of the master plan is a series of maps that outline proposals for open space conservation and recommendations for protection including key partnerships and funding sources to implement the recommendations. Among the many other details included in this comprehensive document is an inventory of county resources, a project planning spreadsheet, and benefits of trail systems and open space conservation.

Overall, this comprehensive document outlines valuable projects while also identifying partnerships and funding

sources to implement these projects so the community can begin to enjoy healthy recreational activities and protect valuable resources in their county. Utilizing a community-driven planning process to identify projects and propose recommendations ensures that the project will be more competitive in getting grants to make those projects a reality.

Once the plan is adopted, the County and partners will be better positioned to use their collective resources to implement specific projects. Specifically, the County will utilize this document in their annual budget development to allocate funding for identified projects with an opportunity to move forward.

Although advisory in nature, the plan may be the basis for regulatory measures inclusive of project review recommendations. The plan also serves as the foundation for intergovernmental agreements, capital improvement programming, and detailed studies and programs coordinated by public jurisdictions within Costilla County. The Plan should be consulted by Planning and Zoning Department staff, the Planning Commission, and the Board of County Commissioners. Our partners in private conservation, Colorado Open Lands and Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, will utilize this plan to direct their outreach efforts and internal project prioritization as well as to act on opportunities for public access on private lands.

The Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan is the result of hard work from federal, state, and local organizations as well as thoughtful suggestions from county residents. We hope you find this document useful and inspiring to get out into your community and enjoy the outdoors and protect significant resources.



*Fishing the beaver ponds in Batenburg Meadows (© Sarah Parmar)*