

# County Identity:

## Chapter 4:

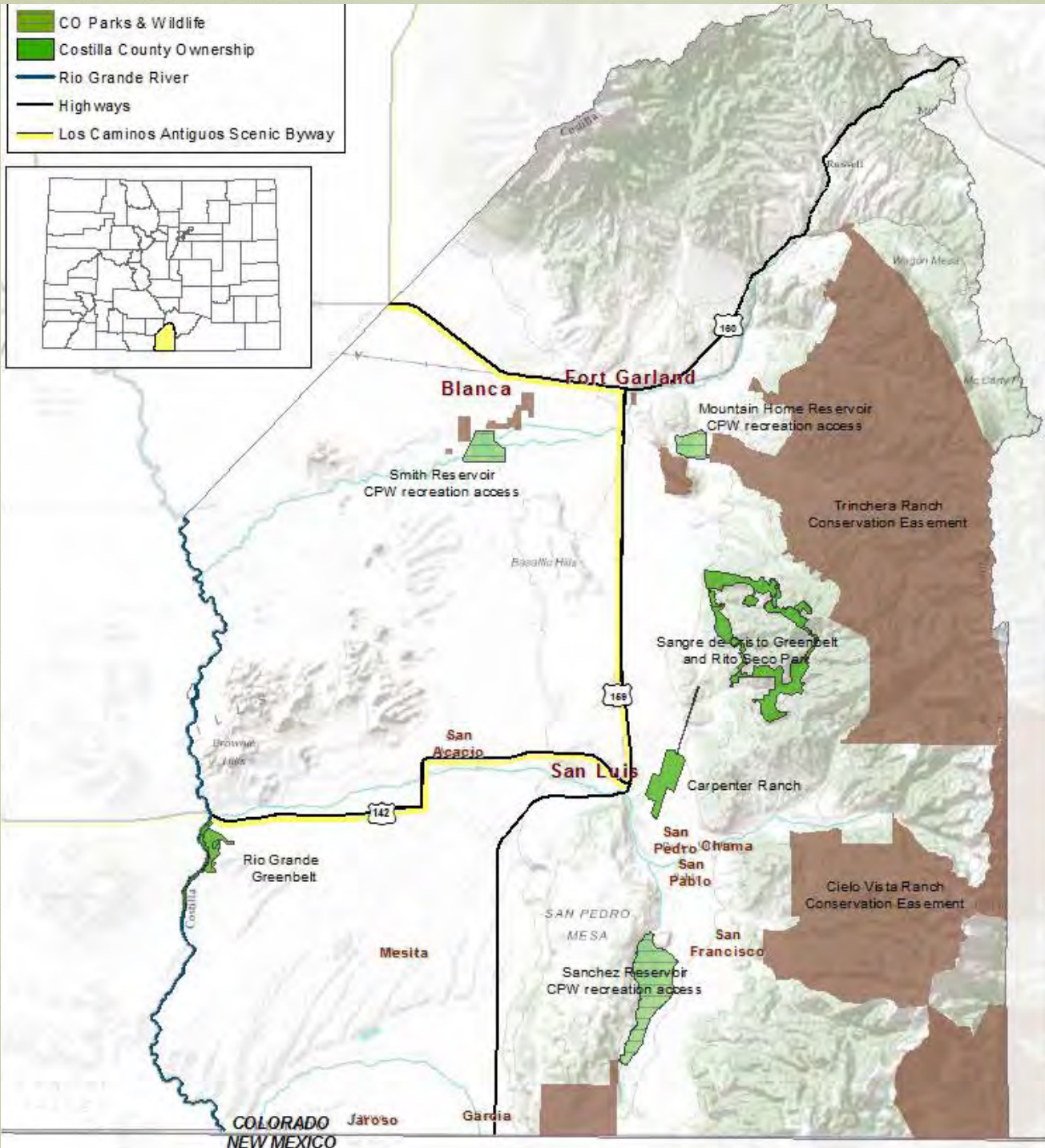
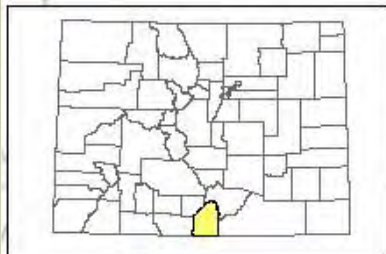
# Unique Qualities

## County Identity: Unique Qualities & Conditions



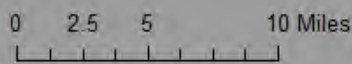
*Petroglyph Rock Art (© Ken Frye)*

-  CO Parks & Wildlife
-  Costilla County Ownership
-  Rio Grande River
-  Highways
-  Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic Byway



**Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan**  
**County Overview Map**

Data Sources: Colorado Ownership Management and Protection (COMaPv8), San Luis Valley GIS Authority, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Open Lands (COL)



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## **COSTILLA COUNTY OVERVIEW**

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### ***PHYSICAL CONTEXT***

Costilla County encompasses approximately 1,230 square miles (787,200 acres) of land located in south central Colorado, in a geographic area known as the San Luis Valley. The San Luis Valley is the broad, generally flat, valley at the headwaters of the Rio Grande River including six counties in Colorado and a portion of northern New Mexico. The San Luis Valley is bounded by the San Juan Mountains on the west and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east. The Culebra Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains roughly forms the eastern boundary of Costilla County, with the Rio Grande River serving as its western boundary. Blanca Peak, one of Colorado's 14,000 ft. peaks, serves as the county's prominent northern point. As illustrated in the County Overview Map, Costilla County has seven existing conserved easements and three county-owned open spaces. There are three reservoirs in the County, each of which has a recreational access easement held by Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Costilla County was the first area of the state of Colorado to be colonized with recorded history dating back to 1540, the year Coronado explored the Southwest. The well documented account of Don Diego de Vargas' 1694 expedition and crossing of the Rio Grande includes numerous accounts of their travels through what is now Costilla County. Costilla County was one of the original 17 counties created by the Territory of Colorado on November 1, 1861. The county was named for the Costilla River; its county seat, San Luis, is the oldest town in Colorado. San Luis and the town of Blanca are the county's two incorporated towns. There are several unincorporated towns, the largest of which is Fort Garland; smaller unincorporated communities include: Chama, San Pedro, Los Fuertes, Garcia, Jaroso, San Francisco, San Acacio, and Mesita. Major access routes in Costilla County are Highway 160 which runs east west and enters into Costilla County from La Veta Pass over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east. In the town of Fort Garland Highway 159 cuts south to San Luis through the center of the county to New Mexico. At the town of San Luis, Highway 142 runs west through the Valley through the town of Manassa and ending at the town of Romeo. A portion of Highways 142, 159, and 160 comprise the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway.

### ***DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL CONTEXT***

According to the 2010 census, the population of Costilla County is 3,524, with approximately 1,500 households. Nearly 90% of residents were identified as being white; however, 64% of those residents identify as Hispano or Hispanic. Many in Costilla County still practice traditions first brought to the area by the original Spanish settlers. The Catholic religion and the fraternal order of Los Hermanos Penitentes have both played a central role in Costilla County's communities since approximately 1850 and remain important. Not only are the churches and religious structures important to residents, they also draw visitors to the County. It is the County's living history that gained Costilla County recognition as part of the federally designated Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. And it is the combination of its rich historic, cultural, and natural resources that made it one of the initial focus areas of the Department of the Interior's Great Outdoors America Initiative.

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### **SETTLEMENT PATTERNS: LAND GRANT AND WATER USE**

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#### ***HISTORY OF THE SANGRE DE CRISTO LAND GRANT***

The history behind the settlement of Colorado's oldest town, San Luis, founded on April 5, 1851 is a unique story among Colorado's communities.

Prior to 1821 Southern Colorado including Costilla County was part of Spain's New Mexico Territory. To foster the development of its colonial frontier, Spain awarded its officials with large land grants which permitted settlement and awarded grazing and timber rights. The Republic of Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821 and inherited Spain's New Mexico Territory. Mexico continued promoting the settlement of its unoccupied northern territories with land grants. These grants were often intended not just for the initial individuals for whom they are now named, but were also designed to foster communities which had communal resources and to create self-sustaining farming settlements.

From 1841-1844 Manuel Armijo, the last New Mexican Governor of the Mexican Republic, eager to secure his northern frontier from encroachment awarded 9,700,000 acres as land grants. All the land recipients had to do to

receive the grant was to pledge to defend Mexico against American westward expansion and encourage settlement. Governor Armijo awarded the million-acre Sangre de Cristo land grant to Narciso Beaubien and Stephen Luis Lee of Taos in 1844.

In May 1846 the Mexican-American War began and in August 1846 Governor Armijo chose not to resist General Stephen Kearny's American military forces and Kearney captured the city of Santa Fe without a shot being fired. After declaring the territory for the United States, Kearney appointed Narciso's father, Carlos Beaubien, to be a judge on the new territory's superior court in January 1847. However resentment of the American occupation was a constant source of friction and it became violent in January 1847 in the Taos Revolt, an insurrection against American occupation of northern New Mexico during the Mexican-American War. Both Narciso Beaubien and Lee were killed in the Taos Revolt. The Sangre de Cristo land grant then went to Narciso's father, Carlos, who also purchased Lee's share for \$100. As a Superior Court judge, Carlos Beaubien presided over the murder trials that resulted from the Taos Revolt, despite an obvious conflict of interest, and he sentenced many men to their death.

In 1851 Beaubien retired from public office and focused more of his attention on the settlement of his land grants. To entice settlers, Beaubien offered small tracts of land while setting aside certain common areas for grazing, wood-gathering and other uses. Beaubien's title to the Sangre de Cristo grant was confirmed by U.S. Congress in 1860. In 1861 Costilla County became one of the first seventeen territorial counties in Colorado. In 1863, Beaubien signed a Spanish language document setting aside commons lands for the use of new settlers who were at the same time given title to small farm plots, or varas, on the grant in specific areas around San Luis. Communal lands were the foundation of the subsistence economy that evolved in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. That document, now known as the Beaubien Document, guaranteed that all inhabitants of the grant would have the enjoyment of benefits of pastures, water, firewood and timber, always taking care that one does not injure another.

A year after the document was executed and recorded, Beaubien died. The grant was sold by his heirs to William Gilpin, Colorado's first territorial governor and a syndicate of foreign investors. The agreement transferring the land to Gilpin specified that Gilpin would provide deeds to vara strips to settlers that had not yet received them, respect



*San Luis People's Ditch*



*Aerial view of vara strips*

the settlement rights to the residents and confirm those rights. Gilpin and his partners soon divided the grant into the Trinchera Estate (at the north) and the Costilla Estate (at the south). Despite his promises Gilpin's syndicate often treated the settlers as trespassing squatters. Although many settlers were able to maintain control of their property, the new landowners began acquiring water rights, as well as timber and grazing rights in the area. Over the next several decades title to the land changed hands many times, portions of the grant were sold and the settlers' rights to their land were often contested. Although villagers continued to use the common lands, their rights were under constant threat. Many subsequent owners of the land grant, however, had no interest in the land other than reselling it someday.

### **SETTLEMENT PATTERNS**

The settlement patterns for the county's thirteen towns occurred chronologically as follows:

- San Luis, Viejo San Acacio and San Francisco
- San Pablo, San Pedro, Chama and Los Fuertes
- Fort Garland

- Garcia
- Blanca, New San Acacio, Mesita and Jaroso

Several communities such as Eastdale, Garland City, Russell and Sierra no longer exist.

San Luis was established in 1851 by farmers migrating north from Taos, New Mexico. Located west of San Luis and south of Highway 142, Viejo San Acacio was established in 1852. Located about 10 miles south and east of San Luis, San Francisco was established in 1854.

San Pablo, San Pedro, Chama and Los Fuertes were also established as farming communities during the 1850s in an area known as Vallejos located between San Luis and San Francisco.

The United States established Fort Massachusetts in 1852 to assist travel and settlement in the San Luis Valley by leasing land from Carlos Beaubien for the military post near Blanca Peak. The Utes had actively resisted the first attempts of settlement in the San Luis Valley. In 1858 it was abandoned and replaced by Fort Garland named for Brigadier General John Garland. The Fort is a compound of buildings representing Territorial Adobe architecture. For 25 years, the adobe fort served to protect settlers and travelers in the area. In 1883 the Fort was abandoned following the confinement of Utes to reservations. Civilians continued to settle the area that would become the unincorporated town of Fort Garland.

Settlers started moving to the area around the community of Garcia on the Colorado-New Mexico border, formerly named Los Plazas Manzanares in 1849, but the first few attempts were driven out by the Utes. Permanent settlements by missionaries were established by 1860.

The now defunct 32 mile San Luis Southern Railroad is responsible for the initial development of the communities of Blanca, New San Acacio, Mesita and Jaroso. Located 4 miles west of Fort Garland on Highway 160, Blanca was established in 1908 by the San Luis Valley Land Company and it was incorporated in 1910. New San Acacio and Mesita were both developed by the Costilla Estates Development Company in the early 1900s. Located south of Mesita on the Colorado-New Mexico border, Jaroso was established in 1914 after a railroad depot was built there in 1910.

When the first communities of Costilla County were being settled, property was laid out in long rectangular parcels called vara strips, extensiones, or long lots as opposed to the nominal square grid parcels that most of the United States has today. This long-lot or extension design came

with the settlers from northern New Mexico, which came from Spain which in turn came from the Moors that had occupied Spain for several hundred years. This design was created for fairness so that the occupants of the land can all have equal access to waterways, and to the same types of terrain.

The San Luis Vega, or La Vega is the only Mexican-Era land grant commons in Colorado. Although land grants in New Mexico include commons lands utilized in a traditional manner, those tracts were established during the period of Mexican jurisdiction. By contrast La Vega was established after the US took possession of the area from Mexico. Continuing to serve its original purpose of communal grazing, La Vega was designated by an 1863 covenant for villagers living in the Culebra Basin. Allocated for use by residents of seven villages, the commons includes 633-acres and is maintained and managed by local descendants that still use the pasture for grazing.

### **Acequias**

The San Luis People's Ditch is the first adjudicated water right in Colorado established in 1852 and fourteen other acequias were established in the Culebra watershed by the end of 1861 when this area became part of the Colorado Territory. The waterways or ditches that irrigate the local farms and ranches are called acequias, an Arabic term meaning "the water conduit." There are currently 64 acequias in the local area. This Spanish/Mexican tradition

originated during the Moors' occupation of parts of Spain which occurred between 710-1490. Acequias are man-made earthen channels, or concrete lined ditches, which carry snow runoff and river water to distant agricultural fields. Acequias follow the contours of the land and utilize gravity to aid in irrigation. A system of acequias was built to distribute water to agricultural land using hand-dug earthen ditches, with water flowing by gravity from streams. The acequias irrigated extensiones, or narrow, long-lot fields, whose linear expanses sometimes extended several miles, providing settlers with lands of differing character suitable for varying agricultural uses, such as grazing, crop production, and timber.

Acequias mean much more to local residents than simply an irrigation ditch. Acequias support the culture and livelihood for hundreds of people living in Costilla County. The establishment of acequias was so important to the success of a new settlement that they were often dug before houses, churches and other buildings were finished. Survival is absolutely dependent on irrigation water in this region. Settlers had to come together to work in cooperation to establish rules and procedures through elections, governing and maintaining the use of water.

Each landowner along an acequia is called a *parciante* and the allocation and distribution of irrigated water among the *parciantes* is governed by an acequia commission including one person who is selected as steward, or *mayordomo*, of



*Town of San Luis from San Pedro Mesa*



the ditch. The mayordomo is in charge of water allocation and distribution and directs all work performed on the ditch and its structures. Everyone who irrigates with the system has an obligation to help maintain the ditch. The annual spring *limpeza* or ditch cleaning is when all the *parciantes* gather to clear accumulated silt and other debris from the temporarily dried ditch to prepare the ditch for the upcoming irrigation season.

### ***THE STRUGGLE FOR HISTORIC USE RIGHTS***

The most significant piece of commons land to the heirs of the land grant in the Culebra settlement area is a 77,000-acre mountain tract locally known as La Sierra. This part of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains is the watershed for the Culebra Creek. In 1960 Jack Taylor, a lumberman from North Carolina, purchased the mountain tract from Gilpin's successor in interest. The deed transferring the land indicated that Taylor's purchase was subject to "claims of the local people by prescription or otherwise to right to pasture, wood and lumber and so-called settlement rights in, to, and upon said land." The land was sold for \$7 an acre, a low price reflecting the "cloud" on the

title attributed to the use rights of the heirs. Despite the language in Taylor's deed, he denied the local landowners access to the mountain tract and he began to fence the property. Taylor then filed a Torrens title action in U. S. District Court to remove the cloud on the title. In 1964 the district court found that the local landowners did not have any rights to the mountain tract; the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the extinguishment of these rights.

In 1973, Taylor purchased an adjoining 2,500 acre parcel that was also part of the Sangre de Cristo grant (Salazar estate). Taylor's predecessor in title to the Salazar estate had also filed a Torrens title action in 1960 which determined that local landowners had no rights in the estate. Together, the mountain tract and the Salazar estate became known as the Taylor Ranch.

### **Lobato v. Taylor**

In 1981 a number of local landowners filed suit in Costilla County District Court and asserted that they had settlement rights to the Taylor Ranch and that Taylor had impermissibly denied those rights. The court held that the doctrine of *res judicata* (a matter already judged) barred the suit because the previous court decisions were binding upon the plaintiffs. The court of appeals affirmed this decision.

In 1991 a superior court reversed and remanded previous decisions, questioning the constitutional adequacy of the publication notice in the Torrens action that Taylor undertook in 1960. The higher court directed the trial court to determine which of the plaintiffs received adequate notice in the Torrens action and to hold a trial on the merits for those who did not have proper notice.

During the due process phase, the court dismissed most of the plaintiffs. The court determined that seven of the plaintiffs could pursue their claims regarding the mountain tract and that three of the plaintiffs could proceed with their claims regarding the Salazar estate. Without further hearing, the court denied class certification. The court then held a trial on the merits.

After the trial, the court made a finding of fact that the landowners or their predecessors in title had “grazed cattle and sheep, harvested timber, gathered firewood, fished, hunted and recreated on the land of the defendant from the 1800s to the date the land was acquired by the defendant, in 1960.” The trial court further found that the community referred to the Taylor Ranch as “open range,” and that prior to 1960, the landowners “were never denied access to the land.” The court also stated that it did “not dispute” that the settlers could not have survived without use of the mountain area of the grant.

Despite these findings, the court determined that the landowners had not proved prescriptive rights because their use was not adverse. The court further held that the Beaubien Document was not an effective express grant of rights because it did not identify the parties to the rights or the locations where the rights should be exercised. Regarding an implied grant by Beaubien, the court concluded that Colorado law did not recognize the implied rights the landowners claimed. The landowners appealed both the due process determination and the rulings on their claim of rights. The court of appeals affirmed the lower court’s decision and the case was brought before the Colorado Supreme Court.

### **RECOGNITION OF COMMONS LAND**

Between 2002 and 2003, in a significant series of three decisions, the Colorado Supreme Court partially restored the historic use rights of the plaintiffs in the Lobato v. Taylor land rights case.

On June 24, 2002 the Colorado Supreme Court held that landowners who are successors in title to the original settlers of what is now Costilla County have reasonable access rights for grazing, firewood, and timber to the property commonly known as the “Taylor Ranch.” Although some

landowners were personally served in the Torrens action, most were served by publication only. The Supreme Court concluded that reasonable access rights to the Taylor Ranch will be available for those Costilla County landowners who are successors in title to the original settlers of the Sangre de Cristo grant and who can trace the settlement of their properties to at least the time when William Gilpin owned the Taylor Ranch. The Court held that the publication notice given by Taylor when he initiated his Torrens action violated due process.

The Colorado Supreme Court decisions re-authorized 150 years of the exercise of rights of commons lands by heirs of the original Mexican land grant settlers. The highest state Court legitimized the relationship between land grant settlers and their commons. Families that could verify they were still living and working on properties that were privy to the original 1863 document issued by Carlos Beaubien, and who had been denied due process in the wake of Jack Taylor’s 1960s Torrens quiet title action, were to be designated as beneficiaries of these rights to the commons that is known as La Sierra.

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### **CURRENT LAND USE**

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Costilla County is located in south central Colorado’s San Luis Valley and is bordered by Las Animas County to the southeast, Huerfano County to the northeast, Alamosa County to the northwest, Conejos County to the southwest and the state of New Mexico, Taos County, to the south. The total land area of the county covers 786,130-acres, or approximately 1,230 square miles. The population of the county according to the 2010 census is 3,524.

Costilla County has over 70,000 acres of irrigated and prime agricultural farmland. The majority of land in Costilla County is rangeland, either vacant, or used for dry grazing. Rangeland comprises 47%, or approximately 372,000 acres of Costilla County. Another 39% of Costilla County is covered by forest. High elevation tundra is found in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains within Costilla County accounting for over 30,000 acres of land, almost all of which are located on private land.

Costilla is the 12th most subdivided county in Colorado. Currently 40 major subdivisions with close to 39,500 lots are platted on more than 181,760 acres, or approximately 25% of the land in Costilla County. Costilla County ranks number one in the state in vacant parcels with 39,707 vacant lots in 2007. By contrast the number two county in vacant parcels is Pueblo County with 29,863 vacant



lots, but with a population of over 159,000. Considering town lots, agriculture properties, etc., Costilla County has more than 49,405 platted lots. Absentee landowners living out-of-state, own a total of 34,283 parcels in the county. In 1998 Costilla County adopted a Land Use Code and zoned its unincorporated areas.

Twenty-five of the forty subdivisions in the county are zoned Estate Residential, allowing minimum lot sizes of less than 35 acres in size. Fifteen of the forty subdivisions are zoned Rural Residential intended for parcels larger than 35 acres in size.

The majority of these subdivisions would allow for minimum lot sizes of less than 35 acres. Assuming an average density of one unit per five acres for subdivisions in the Estate Residential and one unit per 35 acres for subdivisions in the Rural Residential district, build out of currently approved subdivisions could potentially add over 50,000 housing units and 125,000 people to Costilla County. In addition, non-subdivided land zoned Agricultural can also potentially be developed into lots at a density of one unit per 35 acres, adding another potential 15,000 units and 39,000 people to the county.

Due to the lack of infrastructure and lack of services available in the majority of subdivisions in the county, such as availability to water, power and sewer, this level of build out is extremely unlikely. While the majority of these subdivisions were carved with roads several decades ago, the market has shown very little demand for development of parcels within the subdivisions.

Today Costilla County has two incorporated towns, San Luis and Blanca and eleven other non-incorporated communities.

As a direct result of the private ownership of the land grant since its formal recognition in 1860 is the existence of large privately owned mountain tracts in the county. In 1999 Taylor sold his property to Lou Pai a former Enron executive. In 2004 Lou Pai sold the property to landowners Bobby Hill and Richard Welch and it was renamed Cielo Vista Ranch. Due to land purchases made since 1999 the ranch currently encompasses 82,000 acres and includes Culebra Peak, which is the only Colorado 14er to occur entirely on private lands. Heirs to the land grant continue grazing and wood gathering practices on the Cielo Vista Ranch.



*Elk crossing the field*

When William Gilpin and his partners divided the Sangre de Cristo land grant into the Trinchera Estate (at the north) and the Costilla Estate (at the south) in the 1860s, small parcels of the Trinchera Estate were slowly sold off in the following decades until the largest tract of unbroken land was about 243,000 acres, or roughly 400 square miles. It represented the northeast fourth of the original Sangre de Cristo Land Grant.

David Bryant Turner of Denver bought the Trinchera Ranch in 1913 but lost it in the stock market crash of 1929. Turner tried to sell it to the U.S. government but was rejected and lost the land. It was sold by receivers to lumber baron E.D. Wetmore of Warren, Pa. In 1938, Ruth and Albert Simms, former members of Congress from Albuquerque, bought what The Denver Post called then "Colorado's largest remaining ranch empire."

In 1950, after his wife had died, Albert Simms sold 90,000 acres of the ranch north of U.S. 160, known as the Blanca/Trinchera Ranch, now known as the Blanca Parcel, to Richard Heckendorf of Littleton, Colorado. Heckendorf sold it to a Texas oilman named Baker in 1962. Baker later sold it to R. Lacy Corp. of Texas, and so on, until Santa Feans Patsy and Billy Griffith bought it.

When Albert Simms died in 1964, his Colorado ranch and other significant holdings were left to nieces and nephews and their families. They sold the Trinchera parcel to pay estate taxes. Malcolm S. Forbes bought the Simms' southern portion of more than 150,000 acres for just over \$3 million in 1969. This would be known as the Trinchera Ranch. Forbes began subdividing in the late 1970s. Close to 70,000 acres were sold as homesites and real estate investments.

In the early 1980s, the Forbes family acquired the Blanca/Trinchera, or the northern 90,000-acre parcel, from the Griffiths.

In November 2007, Louis Moore Bacon an American hedge fund manager purchased both the Blanca Parcel and the Trinchera Ranch from the Forbes family. The 171,400-acre property is reported to have sold for \$175 million. The Trinchera Ranch is Colorado's largest donated conservation easement, which is held by Colorado Open Lands. In June 2012 Mr. Bacon along with the Department of the Interior announced plans that a conservation easement would be donated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for nearly 90,000-acres on the Blanca Parcel.

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## KEY FEATURES

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### AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Agriculture is the oldest and strongest industry in Costilla County. Costilla County has over 70,000 acres of irrigated and prime agricultural farmland. The larger farms in the county utilize center-pivot sprinkler irrigation. Center pivot irrigation generally relies on ground water pumped by wells to supply the water to the crops, although some center pivot sprinklers utilize small ponds and reservoirs to store water that is then pumped through the sprinkler system. The major crops produced under center pivot irrigation include potatoes, barley, oats, wheat, radishes, canola, alfalfa and hay. During the heyday of the railroads in the San Luis Valley, Costilla County produced a greater diversity and greater volume of vegetable crops including lettuce, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli and carrots.

Costilla County is still home to nearly 300 small family farms and ranches, most of which utilize surface water irrigation through the acequia system. Many of these small family farms still produce heirloom crops originally brought to the area as immigrants came north from New Mexico. Since the 1850's the farmers of San Luis, Colorado have been growing heritage chico corn and haba and bolita beans on their farms and ranches in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Pumpkins, squash, peas, red potatoes as well as hay and alfalfa are other crops still being produced through acequia irrigation.

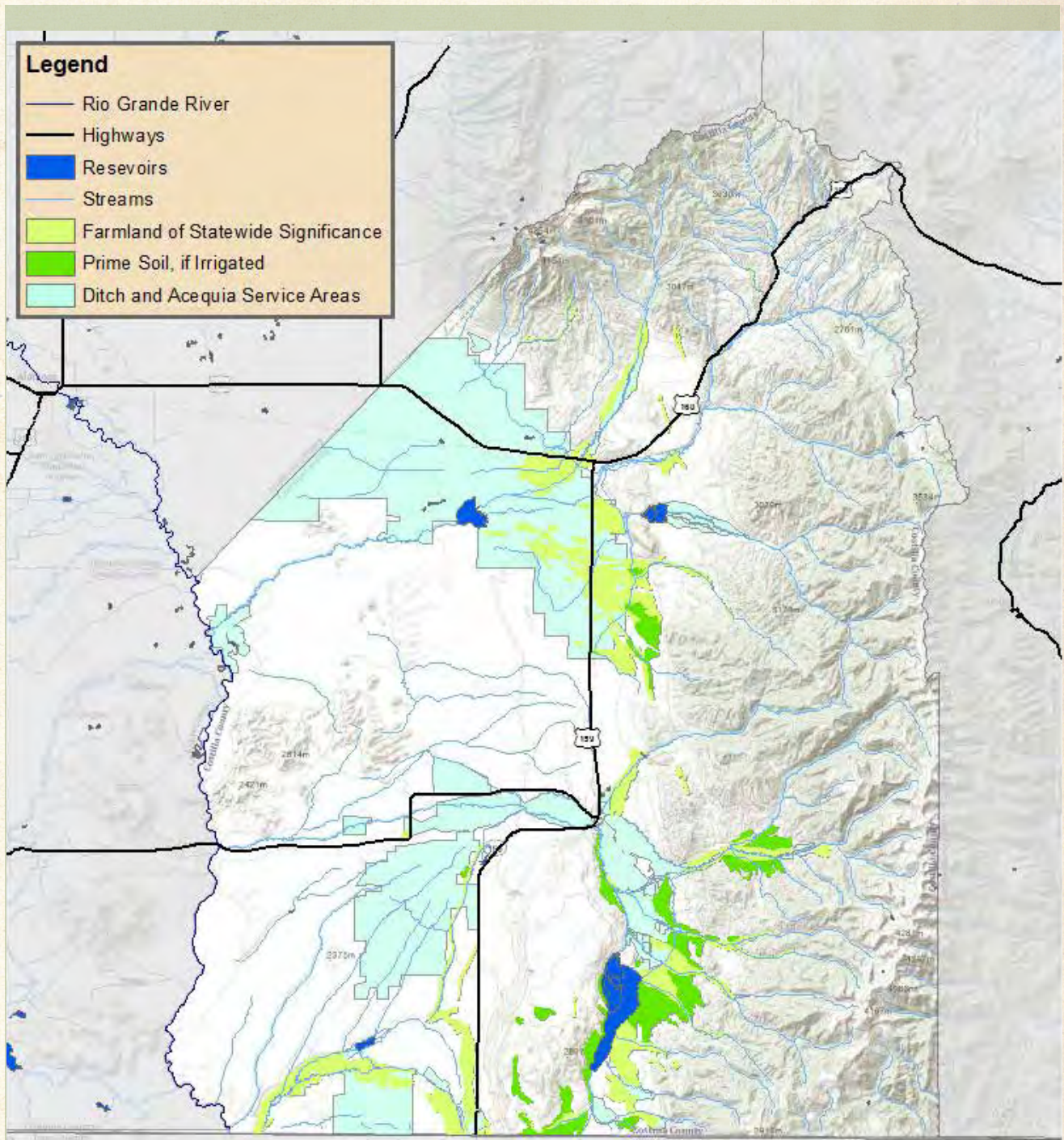
Hundreds of families in Costilla County still actively engage in ranching. Most pasture is still irrigated through the acequia system. Beef cattle, sheep, goats and horses are the primary livestock produced in the county.

### RECREATIONAL RESOURCES

Though there are virtually no federal or state public lands in Costilla County, the county does have a few recreational resources that offer opportunities for fishing, hiking, camping, exercise, passive recreation, and outdoor sports.

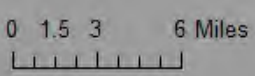
Three major reservoirs are located in Costilla County and have public access. These reservoirs have a unique management system that relies heavily on partnerships. The Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife leases the reservoirs from local water districts and helps maintain facilities.

Smith Reservoir is located a few miles south of the town of Blanca. It provides access to fishing, bird watching, picnicking and car camping. Mountain Home Reservoir



**Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan**  
**County Agricultural Resources Map**

Data Sources: US Department of Agriculture (USDA),  
 Colorado Decision Support Systems (CDSS)



is located a few miles east of Fort Garland within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision. This reservoir provides boating and fishing access, camping, picnicking, and the potential for hiking trails around the perimeter of the reservoir. The largest, Sanchez Reservoir, is located south of San Pablo and east of Wild Horse Mesa. Sanchez Reservoir provides boating and fishing access, camping, and picnicking. Because of its close access to San Luis, there is an opportunity to create a safe route from the Town to the Reservoir.

Several smaller reservoirs are located in the county, but only one, Stabilization Reservoir, located about 5 miles south and west of San Luis on Highway 159 also allows public access. Stabilization Reservoir offers picnic tables, fishing access and camping. Others, such as Eastdale reservoirs one and two are located on private property and do not allow public access.

The county has partnered with the Fort Garland Revitalization Committee in establishing a community park in Fort Garland with picnic tables, basketball courts, playgrounds, and picnic benches. The incorporated towns of Blanca and San Luis also have community parks that are maintained by the respective municipalities. The county has partnered with Ventero Open Press a local 501c3 coffee and art shop to develop and maintain a small park on Main Street in San Luis with a well maintained lawn, two picnic tables and a small water fountain.

Rito Seco Park is a county facility located in the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision and is available for day use and overnight camping. This popular park has good fishing access and picnic tables. Close by is the only established trail system in the county. The 3-mile multi-use trail was developed in the Greenbelt Recreation Area within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision. The main trailhead is located off of Balleroy Road. Though this trail is publicly accessible, it doesn't have the adequate signage to promote use.

The county owned Rio Grande Greenbelt Area located within the Rio Grande Ranchos Subdivision offers fishing, hiking, boating, camping and other day uses along the Rio Grande just south of State Highway 142. The county installed some fencing and cattle guards along the perimeter of the Greenbelt area, but there are no other developments, or amenities.

By obtaining a Great Outdoors Colorado Open Space grant, Costilla County purchased the 1227 acre Carpenter Ranch just east of the town of San Luis in 2005. The county has partnered with The Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust to protect the property with a

conservation easement and the property is managed as a working ranch. Grazing rights are offered in a lottery to local ranchers. Passive recreation such as hiking, bird watching and other day uses are allowed on the property.

The Blanca Fort Garland Community Center located just west of Fort Garland on State Highway 160 was created by a special recreation district ballot initiative in the northern half of Costilla County. Non-residents of the special district area can use the facility for a fee. The Center offers exercise classes, yoga, kick boxing, swimming, sauna, pool, weights, and personal training.

## **HERITAGE RESOURCES**

The Town of San Luis, the oldest town in Colorado, established in 1851, preserves its heritage through the continuation of time honored religious practices, Spanish language, agricultural techniques, and artistic expressions first brought to the area over 150 years ago by Spaniards, as well as influenced by contemporary artists and architecture. When you look across the vast stretches of private ranches or drive alongside roads that are adjacent to the state's first water rights, you notice the traditions and culture that are still preserved and celebrated. Sites such as the Sangre de Cristo Parish San Luis Church, La Capilla de Todos Los Santos, La Vega, San Luis People's Ditch, and Centennial Ranches are just a few examples of heritage resources within the County.

### **Spanish Language**

Few other places in the country will you find the continual use of 17th century Spanish, the language of early settlers. The language was brought to the San Luis Valley by the early conquistadores and pobladores (settlers). It is a dialect of Spanish that attributes to the county's geographic isolation, the proximity to indigenous languages, and the creativity of the language by Spanish speakers. The community's bilingualism and unique Spanish dialect are valuable components to the heritage of the county and serves as a source of pride.

### **Agricultural Techniques: Land and Water**

Ranching and farming as a result of land grant settlement characterize the county's unique cultural landscape and lend to its heritage resources. Land ownership was for the good of the family, the community and the church. Land was passed on from father to children and land division was based on the Spanish vara, long lot, system with each parcel of land having access to various terrains and water.



*Horno (© Devon Pena)*

These divisions are still visible today in the small villages of the region.

These practices depended on the acequia system of irrigation and communal pastures which function best when everyone participates. Acequia irrigation system, introduced by the Spanish, still sustains the small farms which dot the area. This communal irrigation system is dependent on the cooperation of all who live along the path of an irrigation canal. The farmers along each irrigation canal elect a mayordomo (ditch rider) to govern the allocation of water according to the legally deeded rights of landowners, all dependent on the mountain's drainage, ditch control and diversion. As an ancient but highly efficient method of farming, it contributes to the sustenance of the area's agricultural abundance. The San Luis People's Ditch is the first adjudicated water right in the state. There are currently approximately 64 acequias in the local area. Acequias follow the contours of the land and utilize gravity to aid in irrigation. Local acequia associations still exist today to serve as a regulatory body or government to maintain the use of water.

The community of farmers with heirship rights near San Luis and the surrounding villages also share a commons

established in 1851 still used for its original purpose, communal grazing, called "La Vega".

La Vega is the only Mexican-era land grant commons in Colorado. Although land grants in New Mexico include commons lands utilized in a traditional manner, those tracts were established during the period of Mexican jurisdiction. By contrast La Vega was established after the US took possession of the area from Mexico. Continuing to serve its original purpose of communal grazing, La Vega was designated by an 1863 covenant for villagers living in the Culebra Basin. Allocated for use by residents of seven villages, the commons includes 633-acres and is maintained and managed by local descendants that still use the pasture for grazing.

Communities celebrate the rich traditions associated with managing land and water rights. Acequia cleaning days are organized to bring community members together to clean out acequias to prepare them for irrigation of agricultural lands. It is very common to honor saints that help protect agricultural lands and water sources. Fostering understanding and appreciation for the area's ranching heritage as well as its water and natural resources, will be a key tool in the ongoing effort to conserve land.

## **Architecture**

Buildings through the county represent unique architectural styles that exemplify cross cultural influences. For example, the Costilla County courthouse built in 1883 in the Town of San Luis is a rare example of Territorial Style architecture and it is one of only two intact adobe courthouses in Colorado. Territorial architecture can generally be described as a mix between Pueblo and Victorian building styles. The methods and materials to build the courthouse are a blend of Anglo-European masonry and the traditional adobe materials used by the area's Hispano Settlers.

## **Religious Expressions**

Religious influences have a direct impact on artistic expressions, celebrations, and places of worship. Integral to Hispano culture is their Catholic faith. Every village built a church in honor of its patron saint as well as gathering places, moradas, of the Penitente brotherhood. This centuries-old lay religious order was integral to Hispano communities. They served to keep communities together spiritually, economically, and socially. Local festivals and events are a deep expression of the area's Hispano traditions that take place throughout the year in this area. Ceremonies, pilgrimages and festivals such as the Santa Ana and Santiago Festival are more than 150 years old and are still active today. Like the festivals, much of the art in the area is based on religious traditions. For example, artisans create religious icons such as Santero carvings.

San Luis, Colorado's oldest continuously inhabited community was established by Hispano settlers in 1851 and stands as an excellent demonstration of Hispano culture. The town's architecture, food, layout and religious structures all reflect the traditions of the early settlers.

## **SCENIC RESOURCES**

The Sangre de Cristo Mountains are the longest fault block range in North America and it is the unique way that the valley floor seems to drop away from the peaks that makes them so visually stunning. Driving along the primary highways in Costilla County, you are traveling along the flat valley floor, with a clear unfettered view of the Culebra Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east, low dark sage hills to the west, Blanca Peak to the north, and the Latir Peak Wilderness to the south in New Mexico.

Consequently, the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway was designated in recognition of the unique visual resources in this area. The byway consists of Alamosa County Lane 6, US Hwy. 150, US Hwy. 160, Colorado Hwy. 17, Colorado Hwy. 159, and Colorado Hwy. 142.

The byway also includes city streets in Antonito, Romeo, Manassa, San Luis, and Fort Garland. Within Costilla County, the segments include a portion of Highway 160 from Fort Garland west to the county boundary; Highway 159, connecting Fort Garland to San Luis; some of the city streets in San Luis, and finally, Highway 142 from San Luis heading west to the Rio Grande River. Protecting the view shed along not only the scenic byway, but along the entire length of the county's major highways will be critical for maintaining the visual character of the county and for continuing to attract visitors.

## **ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES**

An "eco-region" is a description of physical characteristics including climate, physiography, soils and vegetation. Costilla County is divided into two major eco-regions and several sub-eco-regions. The two major eco-regions are the Southern Rockies and the Arizona-New Mexico Plateau. The seven sub-eco-regions within Costilla County are:

### **High Elevation Tundra**

High elevation tundra is located in the highest points of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the eastern edge of Costilla County, and on the top of Mount Blanca. The high elevation tundra is characterized by a cold climate and above-treeline vegetation and accounts for over 30,000 acres of land in the county.

### **Cool Moist Forest of Mid-High elevation**

The dense forest vegetation of this sub-eco-region consists of Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir and aspen trees.

### **Warm Dry Forest of Mid-Low Elevation**







Located at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains the forests of this sub-eco-region consist of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine and white fir.

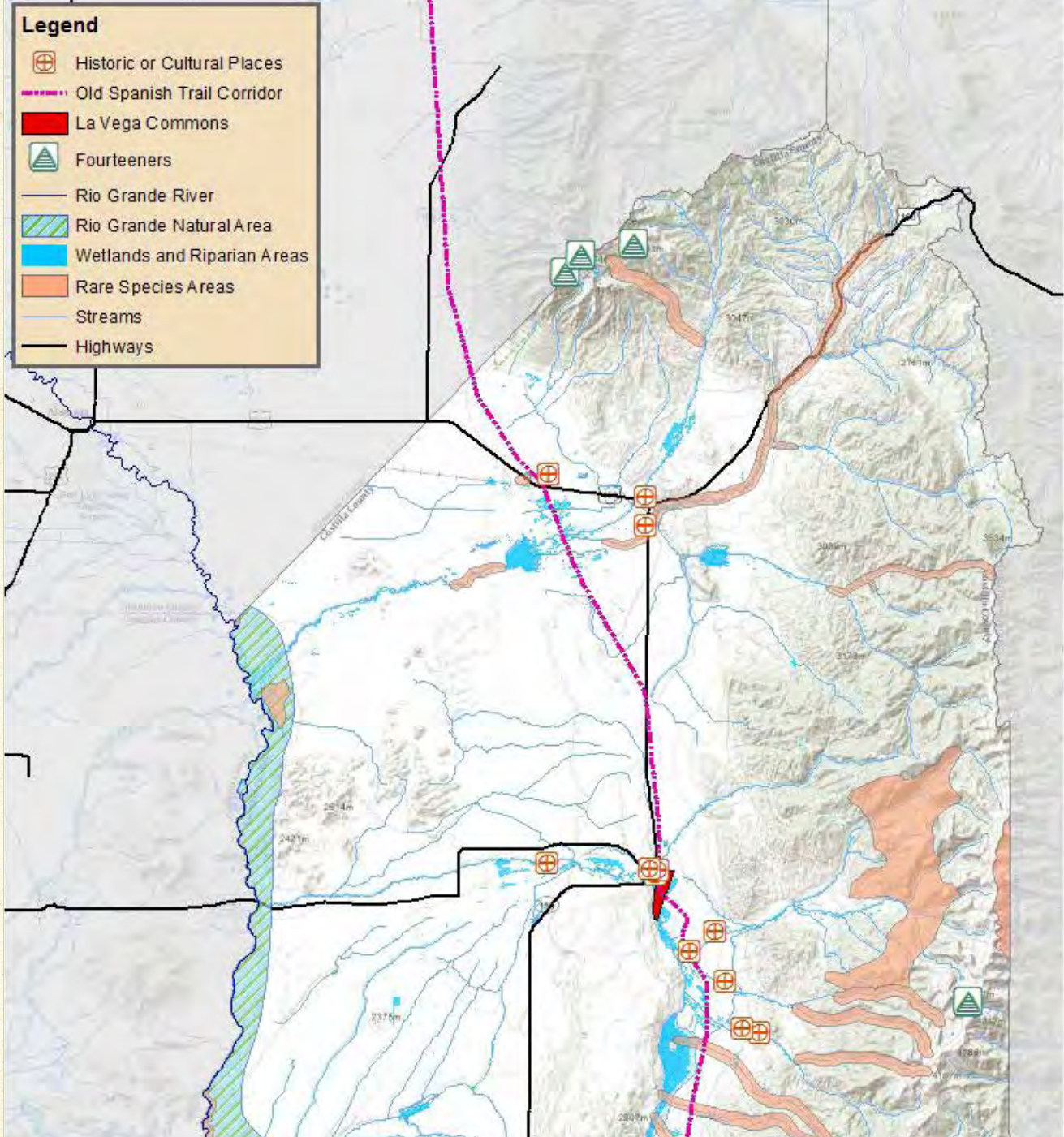
### **Southern Rockies Shrub land**

This sub-eco-region is characterized by low-mid elevation semi-desert wood, shrub and grass lands in a semi-arid climate. Vegetation in this zone is dominated by pinion and juniper woodlands and often intermingles with grasslands and shrub lands.

### **Arizona-New Mexico Plateau Shrub land**

The Arizona-New Mexico Plateau shrub lands is the largest sub-eco-region in Costilla County and is located at a lower elevation than the Southern Rockies shrub lands. The

- Legend**
-  Historic or Cultural Places
  -  Old Spanish Trail Corridor
  -  La Vega Commons
  -  Fourteeners
  -  Rio Grande River
  -  Rio Grande Natural Area
  -  Wetlands and Riparian Areas
  -  Rare Species Areas
  -  Streams
  -  Highways



**Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan**  
**County Natural and Cultural Resources Map**

Data Sources: US National Park Service (NPS),  
 Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP),  
 National Wetlands Inventory (NWI), Colorado Open Lands



vegetation is characterized by sagebrush and rabbitbrush, native grasses such as blue grama and western wheatgrass and cactus.

### **Irrigated Flatlands**

Irrigated flatlands are interspersed within the Arizona-New Mexico Plateau shrub lands sub-eco-region. Crops, cultivated grasslands and shrub lands provide the vegetation found in this zone.

### **Salt Desert**

The salt desert sub-eco-region is located along a small portion of the western edge of Costilla County and it is the lowest elevation sub-eco-region in Costilla County. Vegetation in this zone consists of salt grass, greasewood shrubs and cactus.

### **Rare and Imperiled Species and Plant Communities**

The Colorado Natural Heritage Program CNHP tracks and ranks Colorado's rare and imperiled species and plant communities. In 2003, CNHP inventoried Costilla County and identified Potential Conservation Areas within the county around wetland and riparian sites.

The following is an excerpt of the report:

High quality examples of wetlands and riparian areas and those supporting populations of rare wetland-dependent species were given highest priority. Such locations were identified by: (1) examining existing biological data for rare or imperiled plant and animal species and significant plant communities (collectively called elements) from the Colorado Natural Heritage Program's database, (2) accumulating additional existing information on these elements, (3) input from local citizens of Southern Alamosa and Costilla counties and more specifically, the San Luis Valley Wetland Focus Area Committee, and, (4) conducting extensive field surveys. Areas that were found to contain significant elements were delineated as Potential Conservation Areas (PCA). These areas were prioritized by their biological urgency (the most rare or imperiled) and their ability to maintain viable populations of the elements (degree of threat). A qualitative functional assessment was conducted at most of the wetland and riparian areas visited.

Costilla County contains portions of eighteen PCAs, four of which are rated as having very high biodiversity significance (globally). As illustrated on the Costilla County

Natural and Cultural Resources Map, the following PCAs are located in Costilla County:

- Culebra Creek Montane Complex
- Rio Grande at Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge
- Sangre de Cristo Creek
- Jaroso Creek
- Torcido Creek
- Cuates Creek
- Rio Grande at State Line
- South Vallejos Creek (Vallejos Creek No. 2)
- Little Ute Creek
- Alamosito Creek
- North Vallejos Creek
- North Fork Trinchera Creek
- Rio Grande at Trinchera Creek
- Teddys Peak
- Trinchera Creek below Smith Reservoir
- La Sauses
- Elk Meadows Fen
- Blanca Greasewood Flats

## **WATER RESOURCES**

Three drainage basins exist in Costilla County. In order of size these drainages are the Trinchera Creek, Culebra Creek and Costilla Creek. The Trinchera Creek Basin covers the northern half of Costilla County. The Culebra Creek Basin covers the majority of the southern half of the county with Costilla Creek draining the areas in the vicinity of Mesita, Garcia and Jaroso communities.

Costilla County is bordered on its western edge by the Rio Grande River, the second largest river in the United States.