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Protecting prairie views

Arapahoe County purchases conservation easement on Middle Bijou Creek Ranch, a 12,578-acre multigenerational working farm/ranch in Arapahoe/Elbert counties

ARAPAHOE COUNTY --- On any given day, you can see the splendor of Middle Bijou Creek Ranch in eastern Arapahoe County. The Swainson Hawk soars above. The Leopard Frog nests along the creek and antelope graze its grasslands.

This month, Arapahoe County took steps to preserving their habitat and the sweeping vistas and views when the Board of County Commissioners approved the purchase of a conservation easement on the Middle Bijou Creek Ranch, a 12,578-acre multi-generational working farm and ranch straddling the Arapahoe County and Elbert County border.

“What a jewel, what a wonderful piece of land,” said Commissioner Susan Beckman, who serves as Board Chair. “When you see something that has been nurtured you realize how important it is to protect it forever. Congratulations to all those who helped make it happen, especially the taxpayers of Arapahoe County who approved the Open Space sales tax in 2003.”

Middle Bijou Creek Ranch, located just south of Deer Trail and 40 miles east of Denver, occupies an important role in a growing network of public and privately conserved agricultural and wildlife properties that serves to protect the western heritage of Arapahoe and Elbert counties.

Encompassing more than 20 square miles of land, the conservation easement is unique in its size and will serve to protect four distinct stream systems, 93 native plant species, and the breeding habitat for the western burrowing owl, a state threatened species. Purchase of the conservation easement will allow the property owner to continue the working farm and ranch operation while protecting the conservation values of the property.

The property was a high priority conservation site identified by Arapahoe County, and the purchase of the conservation easement is a result of a partnership between Trust for Public Land, Great Outdoors Colorado, the Colorado Cattleman’s Agricultural Trust and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

It also is the largest conservation easement in Arapahoe or Elbert County and is the largest easement ever funded by the National Resource Conservation Service through their Farm and Ranchland Protection Program in the United States.

Funding for the project came from Arapahoe County, Trust for Public Land, the Natural Resource Conservation Service Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, and an \$800,000 Great Outdoors Colorado grant awarded to Arapahoe County last December.

In addition to the GOCO grant, Arapahoe County set aside \$1.062 million in Open Space Sale and Use Tax funds toward the purchase. The landowners will donate \$827,500 of the appraised value of the property, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service will commit \$527,200 for a total cost of \$3.176 million.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust will hold the conservation easement.

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