Doing what is easy is rarely the same as doing what is right. At The Nature Conservancy, we are here to do what is right for our planet and the incredible species, wild places, cities and communities that share it—no matter how difficult that may be.

Our work here in Colorado is aligned with a global mission—a north star—shared by every person at TNC. It centers around the idea that the problems our world faces are solvable. If we can make significant changes in the ways we manage our lives—everything from our health to our economic systems and our governing policies—we can create a world where people and nature thrive.

I’m proud to say that in Colorado, our work is having a lasting impact. We’re addressing some of the largest environmental problems facing our state. These problems can seem overwhelming, but we can match them with innovative solutions to make meaningful and even transformational change. This is what inspires me—and all our dedicated staff—to come to work every day to make a difference for our future.

Our challenges are clear. Climate change is leading to more extreme droughts and wildfires. Our rivers and streams are already feeling its effects. More and more people are moving to Colorado, intensifying the need for sustainable solutions to meet our growing needs for food, water and energy. Open lands and wild spaces are increasingly threatened. We are committed to finding collaborative, science-based solutions to these challenges.

In this report you’ll find examples of how we’re tackling these challenges. See our largest land acquisition this year and read why Crazy French Ranch is spreading hope for southern Colorado. Get a glimpse at the 50-state strategy we’ve joined that’s moving the needle on climate change. Check out our latest accomplishments to keep our rivers healthy and flowing and see our year in photos.

As I said, this work isn’t easy. And we can’t do it alone. We can only do it with the support of people like you. Thank you for fighting for the future generations of Coloradans. Your generosity makes our work possible.

Sincerely,

Carlos E. Fernández
State Director
For more than 50 years, The Nature Conservancy has been working in Colorado. We helped to protect more than 1.3 million acres of land and 1,000 river miles throughout the state, transform the way we manage our natural resources, and inspire more people to value nature.

Learn more about our work at nature.org/Colorado.

**PROTECT—E LAZY S RANCH**
Sandwiched among three already conserved ranches, the E Lazy S Ranch was a key unprotected property on the White River. A new easement in partnership with the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust permanently protects all 562 acres of the ranch, tying together a 4,492-acre block of conserved land in northwest Colorado.

**TRANSFORM—NATURE FOR CITIES**
The Downtown Denver Partnership and TNC kicked off an initiative to plant 500 trees in downtown Denver with funding from ballot measure 2A (see page 14). Also, TNC started a Regional Conservation Assessment with the Metro Denver Nature Alliance to identify important areas for protection, restoration and enhancement in the metro Denver area.

**INSPIRE—FUTURE GENERATIONS**
We’re proud to partner with Catamount Institute as they bring students to learn about nature at our Aiken Canyon Preserve. This partnership helps inspire the next generation of Coloradans through science in an outdoor classroom.

Colorado’s natural resources by conserving our most threatened lands, forests, and rivers; using nature to make our cities healthier; and tackling climate change.

how nature is managed through science-based, innovative strategies that inform business practices and public policies.

Coloradans to value nature every day and to act on their concern for the environment through individual choices and collective action.
In southern Colorado, just north of the New Mexico border, Fisher’s Peak towers above the line where mountains and plains meet. While the iconic peak has long been loved by the residents of Trinidad and other nearby communities, it has never been accessible to the public. But that is about to change: It is slated to become Colorado’s next state park.

The Nature Conservancy, along with partners at the Trust for Public Land, the City of Trinidad, Great Outdoors Colorado, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, is charting a future for both nature and people. In February 2019, TNC and the Trust for Public Land purchased the 19,200-acre property. In September, Governor Polis announced it will become Colorado’s 42nd state park.

“This is going to be one of the crown gems of our state park system—an iconic landmark in southern Colorado,” said Polis.

Now, we’re working closely with experts, partners and local community members to evaluate the plant and animal life and plan for a future that protects them while providing access for outdoor recreation, education and scientific research. Fisher’s Peak is on the Crazy French Ranch, a name embraced by the French couple who owned it for decades. At 9,633 feet tall, the mountain is a sentinel overlooking communities that are deeply connected to their historic roots in the surrounding area. The ranch’s location makes it a critical link for wildlife moving from the Rocky Mountains to the mesa and prairie habitats of southeast Colorado, northern New Mexico and Oklahoma.

“The ranch rises over 3,000 feet to a flat mesa of ancient volcanic rock,” says Chris Pague, TNC’s senior conservation ecologist in Colorado, “so the ecological zones here are compressed. From dry woodlands to aspen and fir forests, the diversity of life is extraordinarily rich.”

As a new state park, the ranch will support historic preservation, outdoor recreation and economic opportunities for the local community. The city of Trinidad, once a mining and ranching hub, has long been affected by boom–bust economic cycles. Outdoor recreation promises to strengthen and add diversity to the community’s economic future. Whether it’s hiking, mountain biking or wildlife viewing, the area has a lot of potential for outdoor sports.

To make sure the goals of both conservation and outdoor recreation are being met, we’re taking a deliberate look at how people and nature will interact in the future state park. The aim is to find ways to welcome adventure, exploration and education for visitors without disturbing the wildlife and natural systems.

The state is aiming to open the park to the public in 2021. In the meantime, the innovative ways we’re bringing together different groups and seeking funding will have positive repercussions around the state.

“This project represents a whole new way of funding conservation,” says Matt Moorhead, TNC’s business development and partnership advisor. “We’re stirring up the status quo and coming up with innovative approaches that could affect how land protection happens across Colorado and the West.”

The project gained momentum from unexpected allies: farmers and ranchers, business interests, conservationists and politicians. With that kind of broad support, it’s clear this mountain will be part of the fabric of Colorado’s identity for generations to come.
“The ranch embodies the amazing history of this area, and we look forward to conserving that for future generations. We are also excited about the economic opportunities that public lands and recreation can bring to our community.”

- Trinidad Mayor Phil Rico
KEEPING OUR RIVERS FLOWING

Even in a year with plenty of rain and snow, Coloradans know that our water is scarce. As our population grows, the demand for water is increasing and straining our rivers and reservoirs. Meanwhile, climate change is making droughts more frequent and severe. The future of our water is uncertain at best.

The challenge with water is that there’s no silver-bullet solution that addresses all of the state’s needs. To improve Colorado’s water future, we need many different approaches to water sharing and management, coordination among a wide range of partners, and innovation in policy and funding. Water funds are one of our big ideas to address water issues, and the launch of the Yampa River Fund is one of our proudest accomplishments this year. In addition, we’re working on several other tangible solutions to keep Colorado’s rivers flowing and our cities and communities thriving.

Yampa River

September saw the official launch of the Yampa River Fund! This community-based initiative will identify and fund ways to protect the water supply, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities on the Yampa River. The Fund will invest in projects to ensure that a healthy, flowing Yampa River remains the center of the community for generations to come. It will provide funding for (1) water leases from reservoirs to enhance river flows; (2) restoration to improve streamside and aquatic habitat; and (3) irrigation improvements that will benefit ranchers, recreationists and river health. Supported by local partners like Friends of the Yampa, businesses, ranchers, municipalities and others, this Fund ushers in a new era of conservation for the Yampa River.

San Miguel River

The San Miguel flows from the mountains above Telluride into the canyons of the Dolores River. It is one of the most ecologically intact rivers in the state. To keep enough water flowing in the river for the fish and wildlife that rely on it, we need to use flexible water management. This year, we negotiated our first water transaction on this river. This means that a large ranch will strategically fallow its land in exchange for compensation, using less water and allowing more to remain in the river. This is a way to increase river flows and build relationships in this region for future water conservation projects.

Partnering with Tribes

In southwest Colorado, we are supporting water management and conservation activities initiated by the local tribes. We are contributing our science and project management expertise in partnership with a tribe that owns water rights on a tributary of the San Juan River. This collaboration is part of a larger effort in the Colorado River Basin to support the voice, choice and action of indigenous peoples. Collaborating with the tribe, we developed a return flow study to support decisions on water transactions and produced an ecological benefits analysis. With these tools, tribal staff and leadership can compare the ecological benefits of different water transactions and projects and make an informed decision about how to manage their water resources for the future.
“At Smartwool, we believe in protecting the places where we play and fostering a love of the outdoors for future generations. The Yampa River Fund helps us do just that by protecting one of our free-flowing rivers in the western United States and a critical asset to our local communities and outdoor recreation economy.”

– Jen McLaren, President and CEO, Smartwool
Residents help plant trees in Denver neighborhoods with low tree coverage. Planting trees helps clean the air and provide a bit of cool shade on hot days. © Christopher Hawkins/TNC

Nick Trainor and his daughter check out cattle at Lowry Ranch. © Raquel Wertsbaugh

See the latest Colorado photos! Follow us at instagram.com/co_nature

Investing in our interns is an investment in the future of conservation. These interns worked alongside our staff on projects around the state, including building a shed at Fox Ranch. © Elizabeth Dowling/TNC

A bobcat triggers a camera set up at Phantom Canyon. © Kevin Grunewald/TNC

OUR YEAR IN PHOTOS

2019
TNC’s office in Mongolia was founded by Colorado staff more than a decade ago. Here, state director Carlos Fernández visits the country with a group of supporters. © Tuguldur Enkhtsetseg

Smartwool created a TNC limited-edition sock, available at smartwool.com. The sock portrays a river starting in the mountains, running through forests and into communities.

Elk on the valley floor in Telluride. © Lauryn Wachs/TNC

Members of our forest and fire team participate in the 2019 Girls and Science event at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. © Lauryn Wachs/TNC

Fly agaric mushroom at Lake Irwin. © Tara Watkins/TNC
FORESTS AND FIRE
Drones for Reforestation

Sixteen years after the Hayman Fire, the biggest wildfire in Colorado’s history, the forest has not recovered. “I remember coming out here in 2002 after it burned...it looked like hills of gravel, there was just nothing. I went down to the South Platte River and it was full of dead fish. The smell was terrible,” says Parker Titus, planning and partnership coordinator for The Nature Conservancy’s Colorado Program.

Evergreen trees haven’t grown back since then, although new grasses, flowers and underbrush have sprouted up.

It turns out that nature may need some help reforesting these severely burned areas. That’s why TNC scientists are using drones, bicycle power and a lot of ingenuity to test methods of distributing seeds in badly burned landscapes.

Wildfire in Colorado

Our Forest and Fire team works to restore and protect healthy forests and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. We used prescribed fire, paired with thinning of trees and brush, to directly restore more than 10,000 acres in the last five years, alongside partners we’ve trained. We’ve also used science, policy and collaboration support to advance restoration on many more acres in priority landscapes.

But many places in Colorado, like the Hayman burn scar, have already been ravaged by severe wildfires, and the trees aren’t growing back. In the past 30 years, new trees have grown in only 2 percent of the burned areas along Colorado’s Front Range. It can take 500 to 1,000 years for these patches to recover naturally.

Forest health depends on a natural cycle of growth, fire and regeneration.

To help these areas recover, TNC’s GIS manager Teresa Chapman and watershed forest manager Catherine Schloegel are partnering with regional scientists to study better ways to reforest burned areas. Most planting projects use seedlings, because they often have a higher rate of survival. The problem is that interior areas in fire scars are not recovering, and we need a way to establish trees there, far from roads. One innovative approach is to use drones to deposit seeds at optimal locations based on soil moisture and surface composition.

TNC is comparing three methods of planting seeds by drone: seed balls, seed squares, and naked seeds.

1. Seed balls
In this technique, seeds are rolled into a ball with clay and nutrients such as manure, compost and coffee grounds. With support from the University of Arizona, Schloegel built a bicycle-powered machine to rotate a large barrel and quickly create hundreds of seed balls.

2. Seed squares
Working with a for-profit reforestation company, our team developed a way to encase seeds in a biodegradable carrier.

3. Naked seeds
Simply scattering the seeds is the cheapest method, but it leaves them vulnerable to predation by animals. Seeds could also get washed away by rain or fail to grow due to lack of nutrients.

To see which seed-planting method works best, researchers will monitor germination throughout next summer. We’re testing both spring and fall planting to mimic natural processes.

This project could have implications for many miles of burned forests in Colorado and beyond. “It might be the best investment we’ve ever made,” says Titus.
Drones for Reforestation

Forests and Fire
CLIMATE

Tackling the Climate Crisis

We’re at a turning point for our climate. Most people understand how crucial it is to act now to prevent a climate crisis. But even with unprecedented public concern and support for renewable energy, we’re not seeing change at the pace and scale we need. That’s why The Nature Conservancy is taking a deliberate approach in all 50 states to urge climate action.

As Washington, D.C. remains in gridlock, states like Colorado can lead the way and be laboratories for testing new climate solutions. By working at the state level, we can prove that the topic of climate change in the United States is not as polarized as headlines make it seem. We can work collaboratively and focus on our health, our economy and our future. Across the states, TNC is raising awareness, cutting greenhouse gas pollution and transitioning to a cleaner, healthier future.

In Colorado, we’re engaging leaders from various economic sectors on climate policy and action. With this targeted outreach, we’re aiming to make climate change a central concern in our state. So far, we’ve hosted six round table events with leaders from business, health and outdoor recreation industries. A partnership with the Center for the New Energy Economy, these events aim to:

- discuss climate science and local impacts
- educate people on the policy landscape in Colorado
- talk about options for Colorado to tackle the crisis head-on, and
- encourage participants to get engaged in policy action.

At the same time, we’re using our natural resources to help make our state more resilient to the impacts of climate change. We’re restoring and replanting forests to increase carbon storage, and we’re working with ranchers to study how to make grazing lands resilient to a changing climate. In Denver, we’re strategically planting trees to clean the air and cool the city on hot summer days. These natural climate solutions show real promise for helping sequester carbon and improve people’s lives.

We launched a climate-focused partnership with the Colorado Forum this year called the Healthy Colorado Initiative. The Forum—a nonpartisan organization made up of influential leaders from different industries and regions around the state—focuses on public policy issues that will make Colorado a better place to live. The Healthy Colorado Initiative aims to support “smart planning and creative, science-based solutions” for Colorado.

Another exciting partnership is with the Colorado Energy Office, where we’re helping fund a Transportation Climate Change Specialist to coordinate across state agencies and advise on policy strategies for transportation, the electric sector, air pollution and climate change. By fostering new and existing partnerships, supporting new state policies on climate (see page 14), and advancing natural solutions to store carbon, we’re working to create a positive future for the state we all love.
“The Colorado Forum sees the goal of achieving a Healthy Colorado, in all of its dimensions, as one of the great challenges of our time. Through our partnership with The Nature Conservancy we hope to bring our business, policy, scientific and environmental leaders together to make Colorado exemplary as a leader in the United States and globally.”

– Gail Klapper, president of the Colorado Forum
POLICY
Wins for Our Future

We’ve made headway at the city, state and federal levels by helping pass innovative policies for people and nature.

Climate action plan for Colorado
Colorado took a major step to fight climate change by passing House Bill 19-1261. This ambitious bill sets limits for greenhouse gas pollution to help keep our planet from warming to dangerous levels and to protect public health. The law aims to cut pollution 26 percent by 2025, 50 percent by 2030 and 90 percent by 2050, compared with 2005 levels. Our members sent more than 400 letters to state legislators to help pass this bill, and our staff supported the bill as it moved through the legislative process. By showing the country that our state can act at this scale, we can be a leader for the nation.

Land and Water Conservation Fund
After a long fight, Congress voted in March to permanently reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). LWCF is a key funding source for our nation’s natural areas, open spaces, and cultural and historic sites. Rather than using tax dollars, LWCF is funded by royalties that oil companies pay to the government for offshore drilling. Since LWCF began in 1965, it has provided more than $61 million to support projects in Colorado, including the creation of Great Sand Dunes National Park and the building of a new nature education center in Denver’s Montbello neighborhood.

Advocacy Day
In June, 11 of our trustees and staff joined more than 170 volunteer leaders from across the country in Washington, D.C. We met with a bipartisan mix of Congressional members from Colorado and asked them to (1) invest in nature through strong conservation funding and policies, including LWCF, and (2) tackle climate change through practical solutions to create a clean energy future.
To the outside eye, Lowry Ranch seems full of contradictions. It’s a 26,000-acre working ranch that borders the city of Aurora. Activities ranging from oil and gas development to hunting to model airplane club meetings all happen on the property. Yet, despite the busy landscape, the ranch is home to a thriving prairie of native plants and animals.

Lowry Ranch is one of our four sustainable grazing pilot projects in eastern Colorado, where The Nature Conservancy researches and develops grazing practices and other management tools. Adaptive land management and monitoring of grazing operations at Lowry are creating a win-win-win scenario for economic production, the rancher and his family, and native plants and wildlife.

The Colorado State Land Board owns Lowry, and TNC has been involved since 2005 in helping manage and learn from the ranch. In 2014, we supported the selection of Nick Trainor and his ranching company, Trainor Cattle Company, to lease the grazing operation and live on the property.

“We’ve always been adaptive managers,” says Trainor. But climate change means that ranchers need to be even more flexible. “If we start building resiliency into the land now, those radical, extreme weather events [brought on by climate change] are going to be a lot easier to weather.”

Trainor has been running his cattle operation on the ranch for only five years, but the property is already showing positive changes due to the adaptive management happening on the ground. Riparian areas (along the banks) of Box Elder Creek are flourishing. Native tallgrass plants are returning to places that until recently were covered by non-native grass.

“This is great progress, not just for the plant community but also for the wildlife that rely on it and the cattle that forage here,” says William Burnidge, director of the sustainable grazing lands program for TNC in Colorado.

Wildlife like the long-billed curlew, burrowing owl, pronghorn antelope and a rare subspecies of pocket gopher are thriving as native plants come back. On top of that, Trainor is supporting his family and providing beef to local consumers. Lowry has become a key learning and demonstration site for our sustainable grazing program—and this is only the beginning.
There’s something peaceful about being by a river, as Kristin McKissick knows well. Growing up in Los Angeles, Kristin always looked forward to family trips to the Sierras. Now she calls Colorado home, and she loves that our state has so many places to explore and so many people who value those places.

As a mother of three boys, Kristin cares about the planet her sons will inherit and makes an effort to give back to nature. She is a member of The Nature Conservancy’s Legacy Club and our Colorado Board of Trustees. “As part of my husband’s and my legacy, we think it’s very important that nature continue to be protected past our lifetimes,” she says.

She especially appreciates how TNC’s global approach makes our work more effective. “You can act locally or support a project in one area, and that work is informing projects all over the world.”

Her memories of California’s Kaweah River—catching frogs, following dragonflies and watching it change each season—shape the way she is raising her children to connect with nature. “We spend a lot of time outside, and I’ve tried to involve them in conservation as much as possible.”

Through our Legacy Club, more than 27,000 supporters around the world, like Kristin, have named TNC as a beneficiary of their estate plans or made other long-term gifts to TNC.

“I want to leave our planet in a better place for our children, and for them to breathe clean air, experience natural places and drink clean water,” Kristin says.

To plan your conservation legacy, please contact Cynthia Weir at cynthia.weir@tnc.org or 720-974-7029.