Eagle County Open Space Plan

EAGLE COUNTY OPEN SPACE & NATURAL RESOURCES | 2025

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Eagle County, Colorado, boasts some of the nation's most scenic and important natural landscapes that deserve a thoughtful approach to their long-term conservation and stewardship. The purpose of this plan is to provide Eagle County Open Space (ECOS), its partners, constituents and the community with a long-term, strategic vision for the program. ECOS has been successful in conserving open space since 2003 and there is a now a need for a plan to provide a consistent approach for acquiring, managing and preserving open space that meets the needs of current and future Eagle County residents.

Although most of Eagle County is state and federal public lands, many of the critical areas for wildlife habitat, agricultural preservation, scenic views, and public access are privately owned. At the same time, real estate costs continue to rise along with the need for housing and community services which puts additional pressure on the remaining undeveloped lands in the county. This presents a moment for ECOS to rise to the challenge and embrace the opportunity to protect critical habitats and landscapes while also supporting other community needs and services. This strategic plan aims to equip ECOS with the tools and strategies necessary to address current challenges, enhance capacity for open space conservation, exemplify responsible stewardship, and effectively meet the evolving needs of the Eagle County community.

Plan Organization

The Plan provides strategic guidance for open space conservation in Eagle County over the next decade. This introduction provides background on the program, while future guidance is presented in three sections:

- Section I: Foundation of the Plan, which describes findings from community engagement, habitat analysis, and financial analysis
- Section II: Conservation Framework, which outlines a long-term strategy for open space conservation
- Section III: Open Space Management and Implementation, which includes guidelines for various management topics and direction on open space operations

The overall strategies and guidance for ECOS are summarized in this document. Additional information on specific topics is available in Volume II: Open Space Plan Appendices.

TIMELINE

2002
First Ballot Initiative Passed

2003
Open Space Fund and ECOS Program Established

2004
Conservation Criteria Established

2005
Bair Ranch Conserved
Eagle River Preserve Purchased and Conserved

2007
Gates Ranch Conservation Easement

2010 - 2014
River Accesses Along Upper Colorado Established in Partnership with Bureau of Land Management

2016
Resolution to Amend and Consolidate Various Open Space Resolutions

2017
Brush Creek Valley Ranch and Open Space Purchased and Conserved

2018
Second Ballot Initiative Passed Extending Open Space Program and Open Space Fund to 2040

2022
Open Space and Natural Resources Department Created

2025
First Ever Eagle County Open Space Plan Published

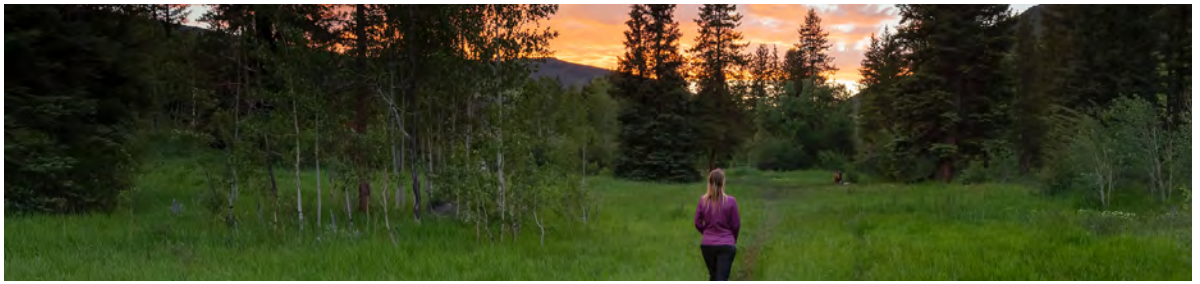
VISION
An Eagle County with thriving landscapes and healthy ecosystems.

MISSION
To conserve landscapes and promote the sound management of our natural resources to support Eagle County's way of life.

OPEN SPACE PURPOSE
We acquire and maintain open space to create a conservation legacy for our community.

Open Space Identity
What do we do for our community

- We conserve and manage large landscapes for agricultural, wildlife, scenic and historic values.
- We preserve river corridors to ensure public access and protect critical habitat and scenic qualities.
- We protect open space near communities to create opportunities for inclusive outdoor access and instilling a stewardship ethic for County residents
- We are committed to improving access and engagement with traditionally underserved, less vocal, and rural residents.
- We seek to balance meaningful habitat conservation with appropriate outdoor recreation access and will land on the side of conservation when those values are in conflict.
- We are a visible face of public land stewardship within the community, with infrastructure and improvements that are simple, rustic, and well managed.



Background of the ECOS Program

In 2002, voters approved up to a 1.5 mill levy on property values to fund the acquisition, maintenance, and preservation of open space in Eagle County. Since the program's inception in 2003, ECOS has acquired or helped to conserve over 19,000 acres of land for conservation, wildlife habitat, scenic quality, and heritage. It has also provided public access to the Eagle and Colorado Rivers and nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities such as hiking, mountain biking, dog walking, and wildlife viewing. In 2022, the Open Space program was incorporated with the existing Eagle County Vegetation Stewardship program and Natural Resources Planning staff to form the Open Space and Natural Resources Department in order to prioritize collaboration, engage with the natural resources of Eagle County on a landscape level, and to maximize staffing and organizational efficiencies. A complete history and background of ECOS is found in Volume II Appendix A.

Planning Process

In 2023, ECOS hired a consultant team to assist with the development of this plan. The planning process began with the consultants working with the ECOS staff to gather information on the program's history, assets, habitats, public access points, challenges, opportunities, and current usage.

The planning process took place in three general phases:

PHASE ONE
Assessment and Discovery
Fall 2023 - Spring 2024
Focus on fact finding and understanding the natural, social, and community resources that shape the plan.

PHASE TWO
Strategy Definition
Spring - Summer 2024
Focus on identifying key issues, opportunities, themes and priorities for the open space program.

PHASE THREE
Framework for the Future
Fall 2024 - Winter 2025
Focus on defining forward-looking strategies and recommendations to empower the program for the future.

Public and stakeholder engagement has occurred in all phases of the process to inform the development of the plan.

What this Plan Includes

This plan *includes* the following:

- Stakeholder and community input on ECOS priorities, strategies, and direction
- Analysis of habitat values, ECOS finances, conservation tools, and strategies
- Strategies for resource management, conservation, public access, and stewardship
- Recommendations for improved partnerships, operations, and implementation

This plan does *not include*:

- Property, or site-specific acquisition recommendations
- New trail or outdoor recreation concepts or locations
- Specific trail or outdoor recreation management changes
- Direction for state or federal land management
- Private land use or management stipulations

This plan will be a key reference for identifying and implementing conservation projects as well as annual work planning for ECOS and partners.

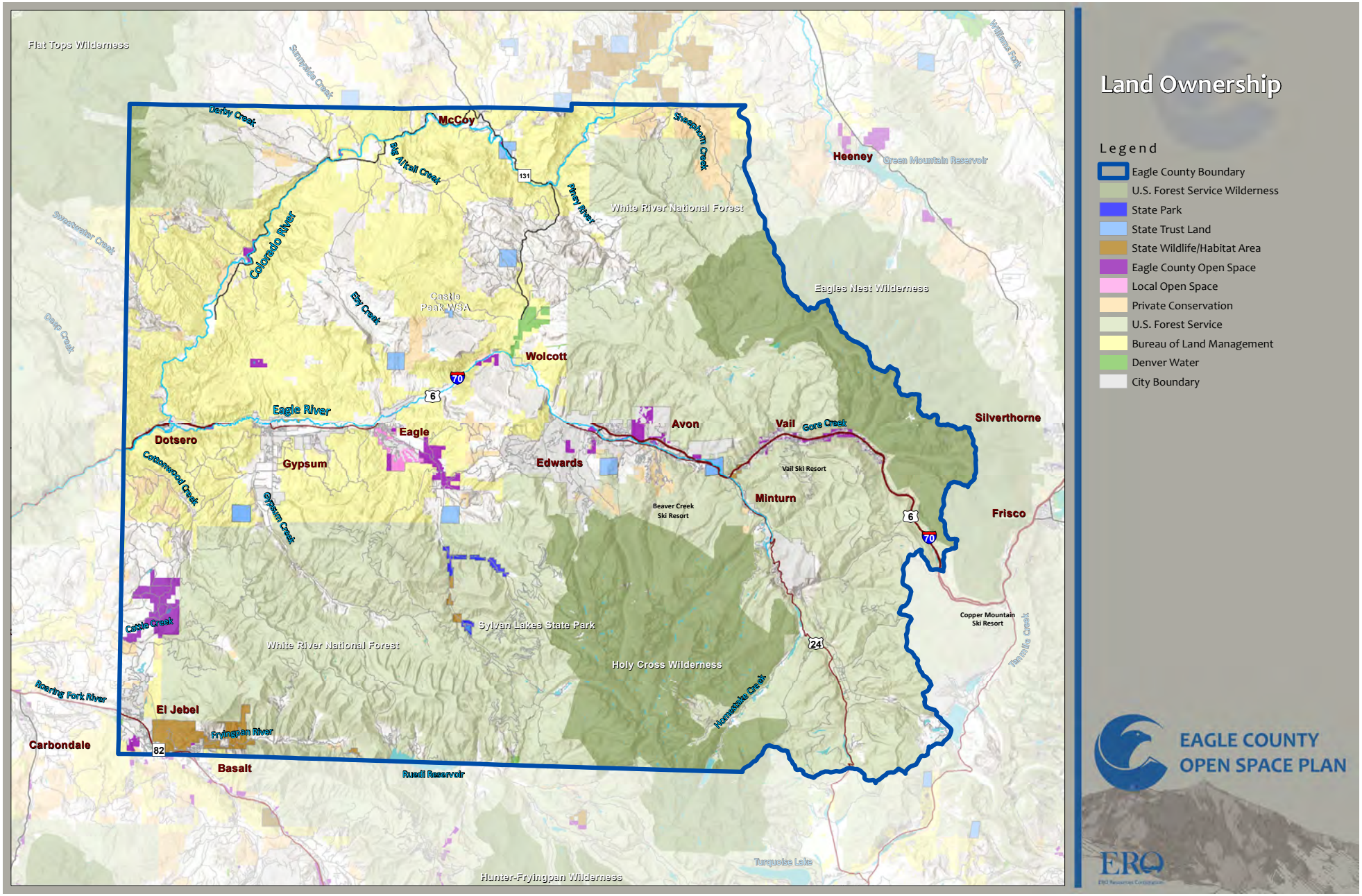


Figure 1. Eagle County Land Ownership and Open Space Properties

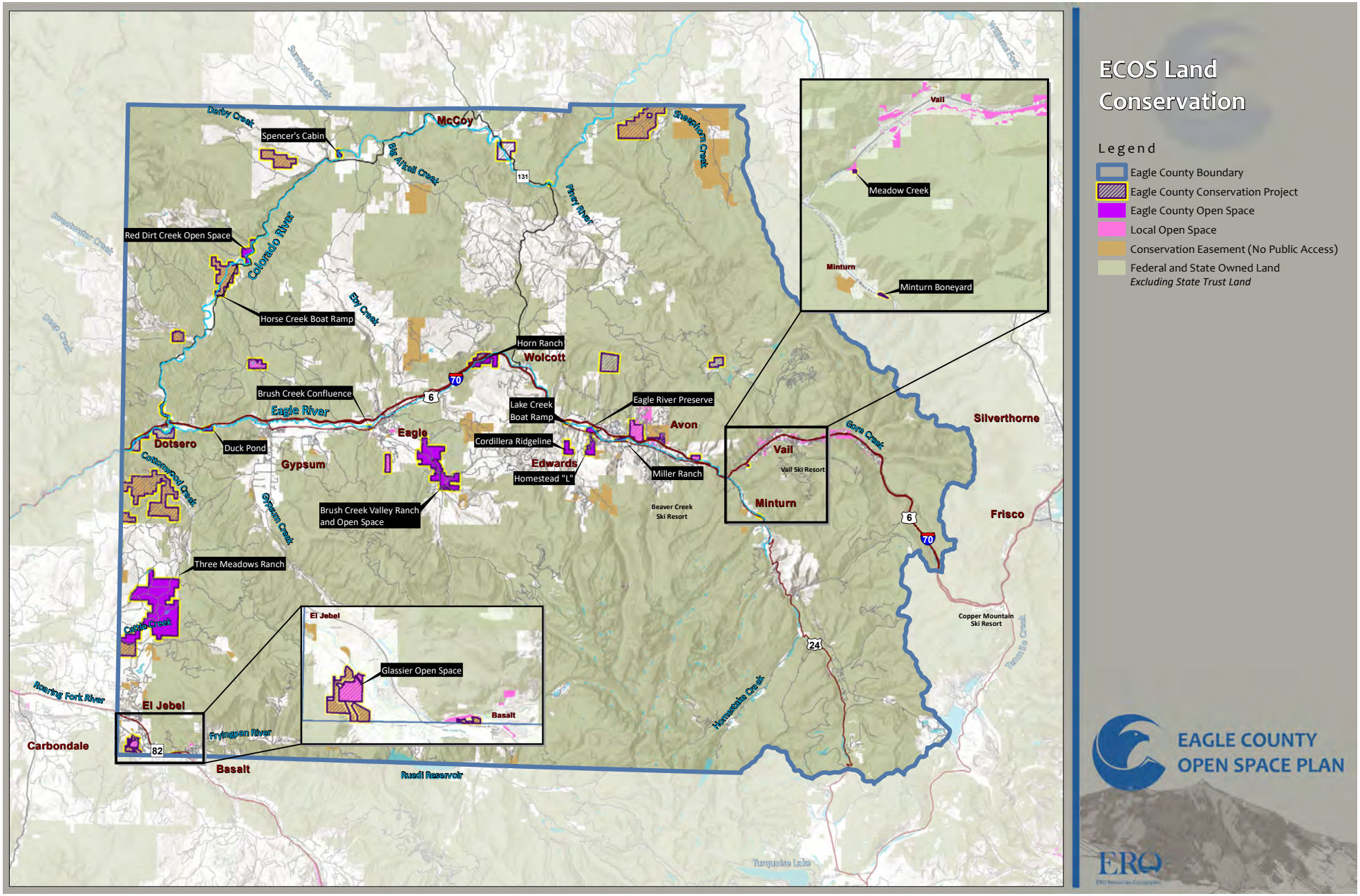


Figure 2. Eagle County Open Space Land Conservation

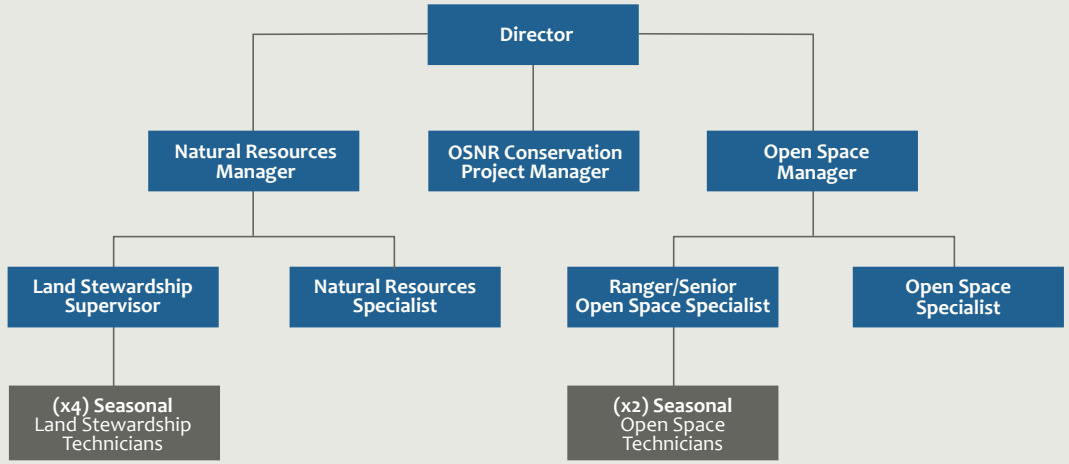
Organizational Structure and Funding

Open Space Fund

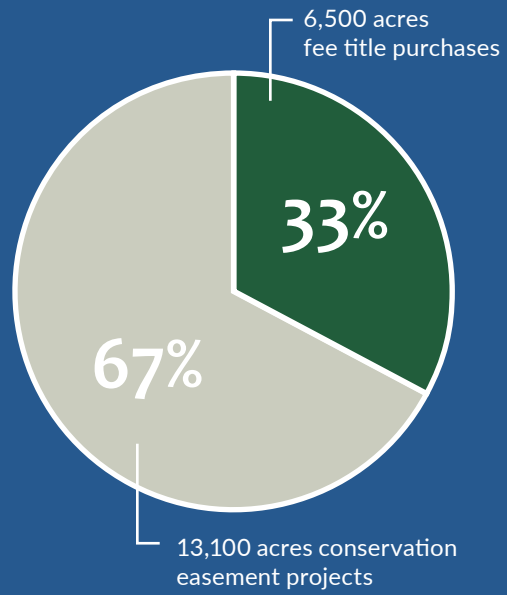
The Eagle County Open Space Fund was first authorized through a county-wide ballot initiative in 2002 and reauthorized and extended in 2018. The program is funded by up to a 1.5 mill levy on property values through 2040. The Open Space Fund had a balance of $22.7 million in 2023, and gains $6 million to $7 million per year. Property tax revenues are capped at $7 million annually.

Since 2004, ECOS has participated in the conservation of over 35 properties, totaling more than 19,000 acres. About 6,500 acres (33 percent) has been in fee title purchases, while about 13,100 (67 percent) has been towards conservation easement projects. In addition, ECOS has contributed funding to conservation projects led by other partner entities. The total cost of open space conservation since 2004 has been $121.3 million (in dollars). $71.3 million (59 percent) has come from the Open Space Fund while the remainder has been contributed by partners.

OPEN SPACE AND NATURAL RESOURCE ORGANIZATION CHART 2025

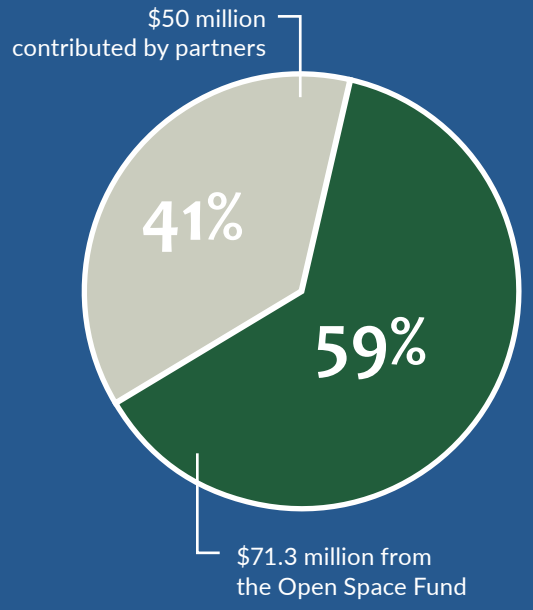


Conservation of Over 35 Properties



Total Cost of Open Space Conservation

SINCE 2004



Open Space Definition and Program Guidance

Eagle County Open Space relies on ballot language, resolutions, and guidance to inform program operations. This guidance has evolved since 2002 and provides a foundation for this plan and future priorities. Key definitions and guidance from the 2002 ballot language and the 2018 reauthorization and extension are summarized as follows:

Open Space: An area of land that is partially or wholly undeveloped, natural or pastoral in character. Characteristics include fish and wildlife habitat, working farms or ranches, scenic landscapes and visits, wetlands floodplains or other riparian habitat, public access to rivers and streams, dispersed recreation, geographic or topographic formations, rare or significant flora or fauna, cultural historic values, or other natural or conservation values.

Allowed Uses of Open Space: As determined appropriate for an individual parcel, and in accordance with property documents (e.g., conservation easement), open space lands may be used for the following:

- Dispersed motorized or non-motorized recreation including hiking, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, Nordic skiing, mountain biking, snowmobiling or other vehicle use of a low impact and dispersed nature that is consistent with conservation values
- Construction or installation of trails, boat ramps, parking, signage and informational kiosks and other recreational improvements or amenities for the purposes of public access, enjoyment, and low impact dispersed recreation.
- Construction of rustic camping or other rustic facilities (e.g., huts or shelters) in conjunction with low-impact dispersed recreational uses.

Prohibited Uses of Open Space: Open space lands shall not be used for the developed recreational facilities such as golf courses, athletic fields, motorized vehicle tracks, equestrian facilities or other developed facilities for non-dispersed types of recreation. However, such uses on a property shall not preclude the use of open space funds in collaboration with other funding sources, if the property also contains open space values and characteristics.

Previous ballot measures, county commissioner resolutions, and other guidance defining the Open Space Program and its operations are included in Volume II, Appendix A.

Community Planning Context

This Open Space Plan and its implementation should consider the goals, recommendations, and documented conditions of several related planning efforts. These are summarized as follows.

- **Eagle County Land Use Regulation and Comprehensive Plan** – Land use regulations and recorded planning documents, like the Eagle County Comprehensive Plan and other adopted long range plans, are foundational elements of the framework for making land use decisions in Eagle County. Land use regulations are regulatory whereas planning documents are advisory, however both reflect the current vision of land use in Eagle County. Conservation priorities in this plan and conservation actions by ECOS should be compatible with that vision.

- **Eagle County Public Health** – Seeks to improve public health outcomes, with opportunities to connect community members with open space, and with each other through nature-based access and programming.

- **Eagle County Housing and Development Authority** – Working with developers, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations to support new affordable housing opportunities. Compatibility with these programs and land use regulations is important to ensure that open space projects do not unnecessarily "compete" with affordable housing needs in the community

- **Eagle County Resiliency** – Themes related to housing, economic recovery, and climate action. Open space conservation and nature-based access are integral to the quality of life of residents, while ECOS conservation and stewardship efforts promote ecological resiliency.

- **Wildfire Protection** - ECOS is an important partner in wildfire protection, both through the thoughtful implementation of mitigation projects, and through the conservation of land that may serve as a buffer to existing communities.

SECTION I
Foundation of the Plan

FOUNDATION OF THE PLAN

The strategic guidance in this plan is based on a foundation of three key areas of research and evaluation. These inputs are the ***community engagement process, an analysis of critical and sensitive habitat areas, and an analysis of ECOS's finances.***

Community Engagement Process

Following initial information gathering efforts, the team developed a community engagement plan to understand perspectives and opinions about the ECOS identity, opportunities, and management considerations. The full Engagement Process Summary and Results Report including a list of key contacts is found in Volume II Appendix B.

Specific engagement activities included:

- Developing a contact list of stakeholders and others interested in the planning process.
- Conducting virtual meetings and interviews with key stakeholders.
- Conducting an online questionnaire in English and Spanish.
- Identifying community connectors to initiate engagement with underrepresented communities (i.e., Spanish-speaking community members and youth/students) and attending community events focused on reaching under-represented community members.
- Hosting a virtual public meeting on August 20, 2024.
- Hosting an in-person public meeting on October 28, 2024.
- Providing information and updates throughout the process via email, social media, Story Map, Eagle County website, partner organizations, and local press media.

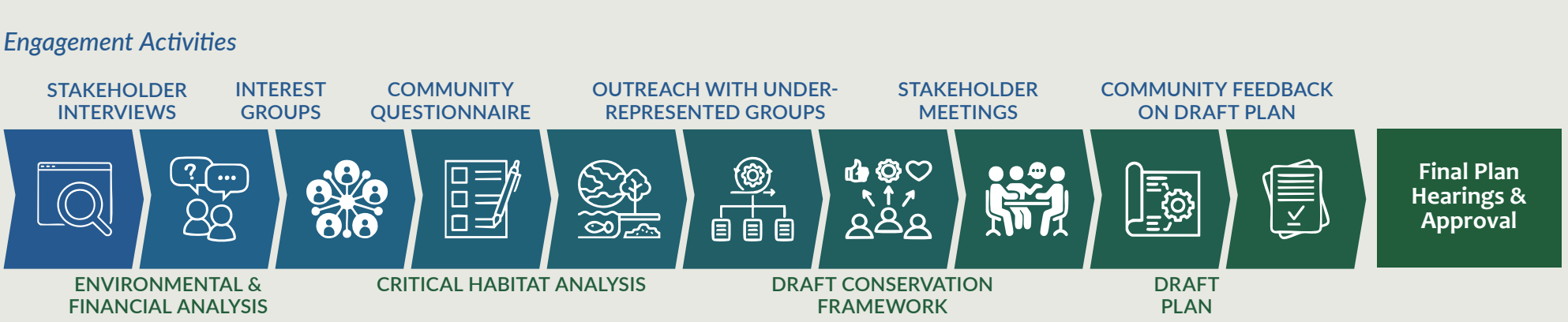


Figure 3. Open Space Plan Engagement Process

Eagle County Open Space Plan Engagement Activities

November 2023 to October 2024

ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

500 people completed an online questionnaire to tell us about their values and expectations of the Eagle County Open Space Program.

KEY STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

14 Key Stakeholder Meetings were organized to hear the priorities of stakeholders, partner organizations, and underrepresented target groups.

ARCGIS STORY MAP

StoryMaps were created in English and Spanish to share information about the Planning Process and to publicize engagement opportunities.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

Engaged with underrepresented community members at seven events to gather input via >50 feedback forms (e.g. Pride in the Park, Fiestas Americas, etc.).

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Two public meetings (one virtual and one in-person) were hosted to update community members about the Plan, its progress, and how input had been used.

OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

Information about the Plan was shared via Mailchimp emails, press releases, radio, social media, etc.

Figure 4. Open Space Plan Engagement Activities

Community Engagement Findings

Based on the community engagement process and input, the following findings inform this Open Space Plan:

- **Conservation Balance:** Balancing conservation of sensitive wildlife habitat with opportunities for outdoor recreation in less-sensitive areas; this balance should occur across the system, not necessarily within every property.
- **Conservation Strategy:** Use funds in the near term for opportunistic and targeted acquisitions near communities, while tracking opportunities for large, "heritage" acquisitions.
- **Community Values:** Key values identified by participants included trail-based recreation access, ecological conservation, agricultural heritage, and alignment with other county priorities (e.g., land use and housing).
- **Open Space Management:** Public-facing management should focus on education and stewardship, providing a consistent and inclusive visitor experience.
- **Partnerships:** ECOS is seen as an important partner, working with other land management agencies and nonprofits to achieve conservation goals.
- **Agricultural Heritage:** Recognition of the contribution of ranching and agriculture in conservation, and the importance of ongoing awareness and coordination with large acreage producers.
- **Inclusive Opportunities:** Under-represented communities are less aware of and require increased access to information about open space opportunities.

Habitat Analysis

A key element of the Open Space Plan process is an evaluation of current habitat values and conditions in Eagle County. Because wildlife habitat conservation is a central purpose of the ECOS program, it is important to understand the habitat areas, movement corridors, and seasonal dynamics that are critical for wildlife populations and are the most vulnerable to human disturbance. This analysis identifies five primary elements:

1. **Existing Disturbance** – Areas that are already affected by human development and disturbance.

2. **Wildlife Corridors** – Habitat corridors and linkages necessary to support large mammals, and safe highway crossings.

3. **Critical Big Game Habitat** – Sensitive winter ranges, production habitat, and movement corridors for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep.

4. **Habitat Sensitivity** – Most sensitive areas, based on the documented habitat for vulnerable wildlife species.

5. **Sensitive Lands** – Unique or vulnerable habitat types or habitat areas that are important for ecological function and biodiversity.

These elements are illustrated in habitat maps for the plan, and GIS mapping data. This information, including the sensitivity analysis, is intended to be used as a planning tool to help identify conservation priorities and evaluate conservation project opportunities as they come up.

Note on Mapping Scale *- The habitat analyses for this plan utilized broad scale data that are useful identifying patterns and hotspots across the landscape. They do not, however, identify small, localized habitat values that are important to the ecological function of an area (such as a small or locally important corridor or enclave for wildlife). That level of detail should be identified and documented on the ground by staff or partners with local knowledge and presence.*

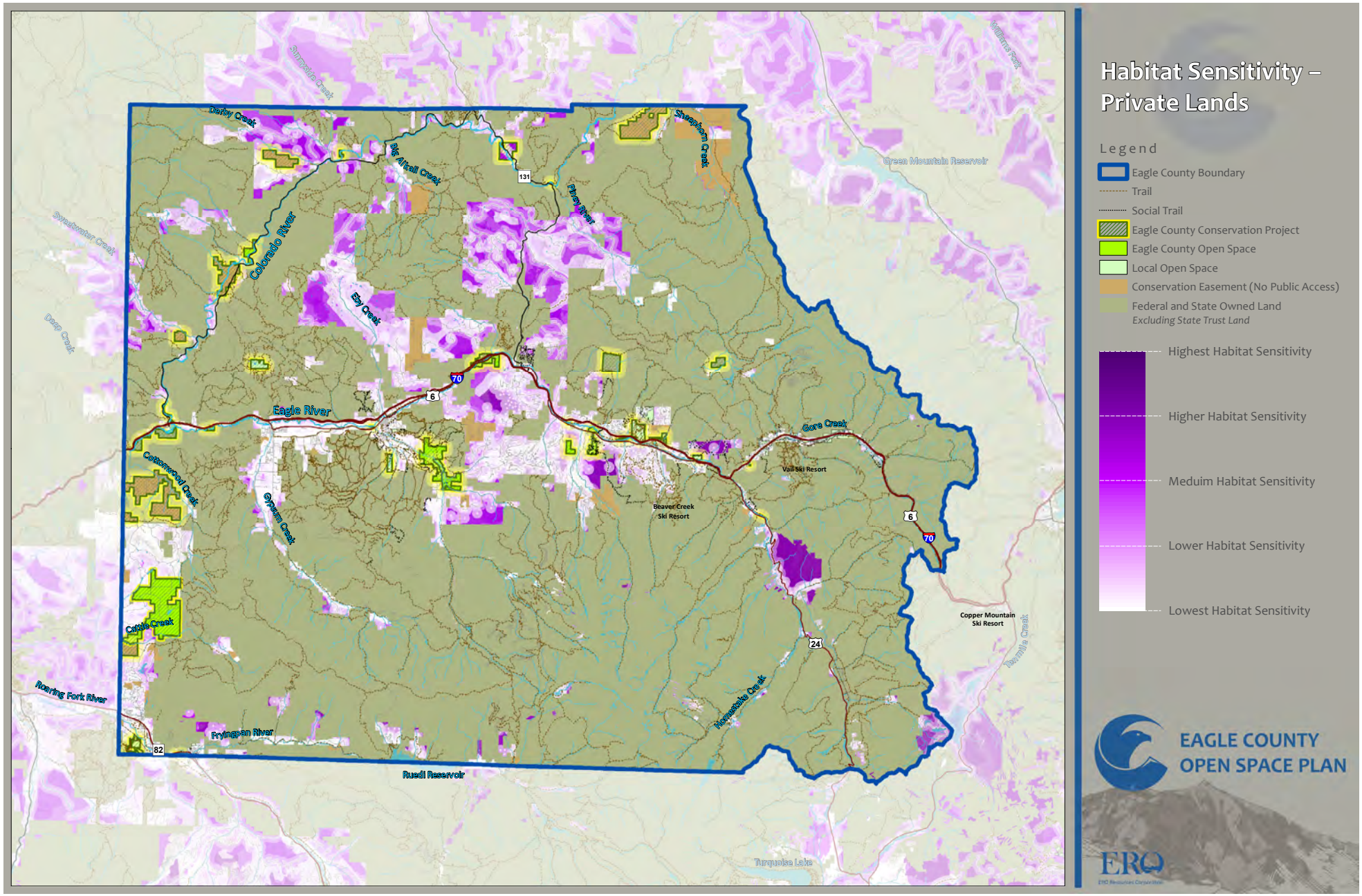


Figure 5. Habitat Sensitivity, Private Lands

Habitat Conservation Strategies

Based on the analysis of habitat and resource values in Eagle County, the following strategies should be considered in developing and prioritizing conservation efforts:

- Conservation projects should focus on conserving habitat values, along with community-based values, as expressed in the Conservation Criteria.
- Conservation projects should protect interconnected blocks of habitat and corridors to buffer against habitat fragmentation.
- Large conservation projects should focus on key areas that contain combinations of high habitat sensitivity, critical land, and overall resource values.
- Small conservation projects should focus on preserving areas that are locally important for wildlife or habitat, such as sensitive wetlands or constrained migration corridors.

Habitat Evaluation Findings

Based on the mapping and analysis, the following findings should be considered to inform this Open Space Plan and ongoing habitat conservation efforts by ECOS.

» **Habitat Fragmentation:** Eagle County is highly fragmented by existing roads, trails, and development; conservation efforts should focus on protecting large, interconnected tracts of undisturbed habitat.

» **Critical Big Game Habitat:** Most of the mountain valleys in Eagle County support critical big game habitat; since these are also focal points for community infrastructure, development, and recreation, it is important to conserve these habitats wherever possible.

» **Habitat Linkages:** Considerable work has been done to identify key wildlife corridors/linkages in the county; ECOS should work to support critical linkages with the habitat conservation that is necessary to keep those linkages functional for wildlife.

» **Sensitive Habitat Areas:** Habitat sensitivity mapping indicates several key parcels and areas where conservation efforts can make an impact and demonstrates the importance of large ranches in the northern part of the county.

» **Vulnerable Vegetation Communities:** There is a limited need to conserve alpine tundra habitats (primarily within USFS lands), but there is still a significant opportunity to protect riparian corridors and sagebrush habitat from further development and fragmentation.

Financial Analysis

The ECOS program is funded through its up to 1.5 mill levy on property values, which is set to remain in place until 2040. This levy generates revenue, capped at $7.0 million annually. The assessed value of real estate in Eagle County was approximately $5.2 billion in 2024, and this figure has likely increased since then, suggesting that program revenues will remain strong and may rise substantially if the revenue cap is removed in 2040. The complete Financial Analysis Report is available in Volume II Appendix D.

Fund Balances and Trends

The Open Space Fund balance represents the difference between accumulated revenues and to-date expenditures. The fund balance fluctuates over time due to changes in revenue and expenditure patterns. Figure 6 illustrates the variability in the fund balance from 2015 through 2019, followed by consistent growth during a period without significant land acquisitions. For example, while the fund balance was only $7,500 in 2017, it will have grown to be more than $25 million by the end of 2024. This variability reflects the fund's ability to both spend and accrue revenues in a fairly short period of time. On average, ECOS completes about 1.5 transactions per year although this number can vary depending on market conditions and the availability of suitable properties, and funding availability.

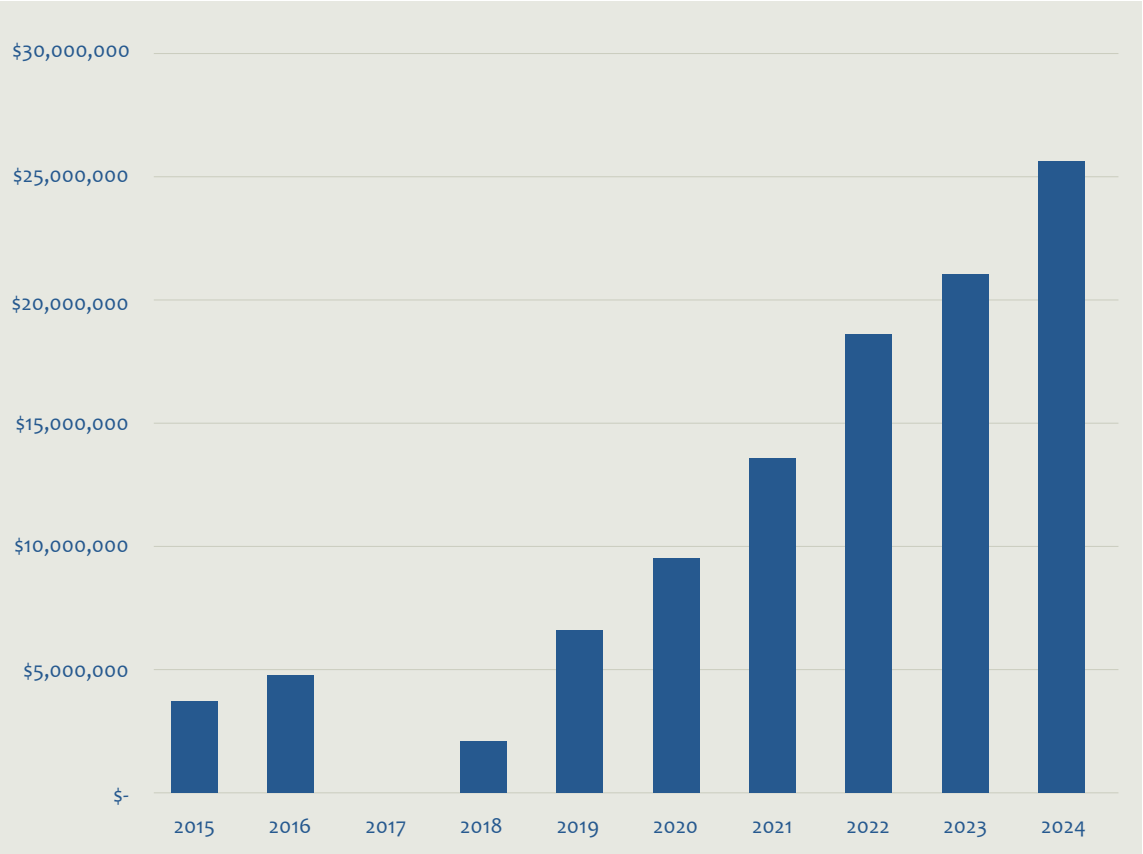


Figure 6. Open Space Fund Balance, 2015-2024

Revenues and Expenditures

Open Space Fund revenue has steadily increased over recent years (see Figure 7). Tax revenue, from the up to 1.5 mill levy, is consistently the largest revenue source for the Open Space Program and constitutes more than 90% of total fund revenues over a 10-year period. This growth is likely due to fewer large acquisitions coupled with an increase in property values, an increase in property development in Eagle County, or both. There are substantial fluctuations in total program expenditures from year to year. In nine out of the ten years from 2015 to 2024, revenues exceeded expenditures by a wide margin. In some years the fund's total expenditures are less than its total revenue representing savings for future projects.

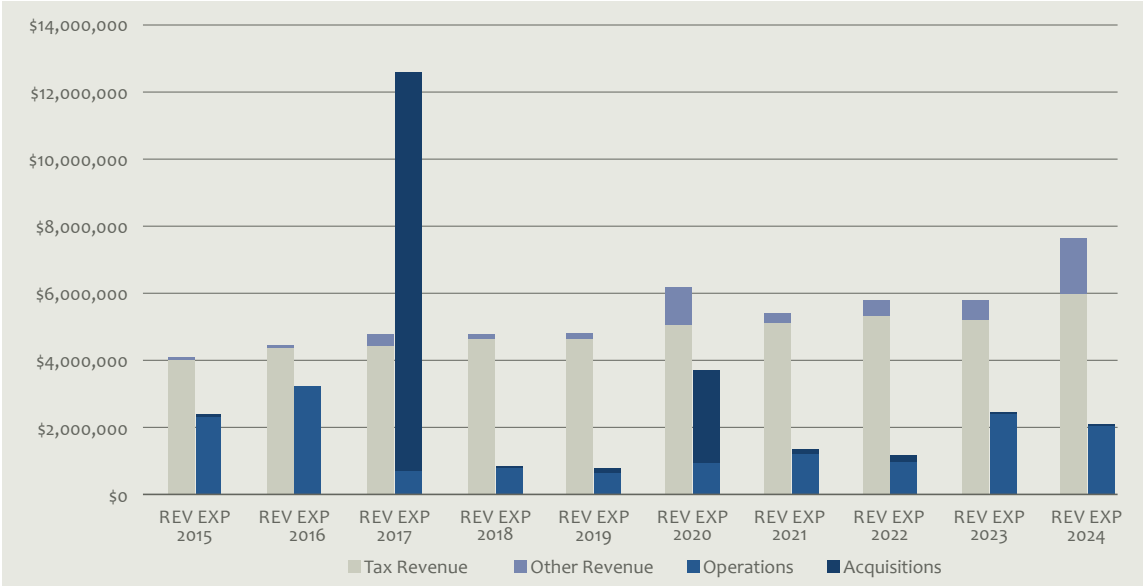


Figure 7. Open Space Fund Revenues and Expenditures, 2015-2024

Note: This analysis does not include 2025 data, including the Three Meadows Ranch acquisition which utilized $12.5 million from the Open Space fund.

Open Space Staffing

The Open Space Program is managed by five full-time staff and is further supported and directed by the Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC) and natural resources focused colleagues in the Open Space and Natural Resources department. Open space staff are critical to the successful operation of the program, with roles ranging from program management, partner and landowner engagement, public contact and engagement, resource management and stewardship, and other administrative and operational duties. Staffing expenses make up a small, but predictable portion of the Program's annual budget, with staffing expenses representing about 10 percent of annual Program expenditures.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS FINDINGS

- **Open Space Fund:** Fund has been at an all-time high and revenues are expected to increase at a consistent rate as property values rise.
- **Strategy:** A mixed strategy of both large and small conservation projects is recommended to respond to opportunities and protect open space.
- **Timing:** Acquire and conserve more open space, more frequently to make consistent progress and hedge against rising land values.
- **Staffing:** ECOS employs a conservative staffing approach compared to other open space programs in terms of FTE/acres managed.
- **Project Development:** Larger, more complex conservation projects will require more investment of time, staff, and resources.

Key Analysis Findings

Like a series of signposts pointing in the same direction, these findings mark a consistent path and strategy for open space conservation in Eagle County.

Table 1. Key Findings from Engagement and Analysis

Community Engagement Findings

- The community values both habitat conservation and recreation access.
- Use funds for smaller conservation projects near communities, while tracking large longer-term projects.
- Balance habitat conservation and recreation access across the system, not necessarily within every property.
- Support public facing management, partnerships, and agricultural heritage.
- Support under-represented communities with information about open space opportunities.

Habitat Analysis Findings

- Focus on protecting resource and community-based values in Conservation Criteria.
- Protect interconnected blocks of habitat and corridors for wildlife.
- Large projects should conserve key parcels to protect multiple habitat values.
- Small projects should protect locally important habitat areas.

Financial Analysis Findings

- Pursue a mixed strategy of large and small conservation projects.
- Acquire and conserve more properties, more frequently.
- ECOS has a conservative staffing approach, with lower staff capacity than other similar agencies.
- Invest in the development of large, more complex conservation projects.

SECTION II
Conservation Framework

CONSERVATION FRAMEWORK

Based on the foundational input from the engagement, habitat, and financial analysis Section II provides a strategic framework for open space conservation in Eagle County.

Overall Conservation Strategy

This plan sets forth a pragmatic strategy to conserve open space, protect key resources, improve stewardship, and provide a model for community engagement with nature.

Over the next 10 years, ECOS will prioritize more proactive land conservation and acquisition to protect habitat, heritage, scenery and access opportunities before they are lost. ECOS will also increase its focus on stewardship and visitor experience, where appropriate, to ensure that the open space lands that are already conserved are properly managed and maintained. Looking forward, Eagle County will pursue a spectrum of open space opportunities that protect resource values and community values outlined in the Open Space Criteria.

Key Conservation Recommendations

to OSAC for the next phase of ECOS's service to the community include:

- Acquire and conserve more open space properties, more frequently.
- Strategically leverage all conservation tools, matching the tools to the project.
- Remain opportunistic and be proactive in developing conservation projects.
- Invest in smaller conservation projects near communities.
- Support and expand relationships with partners.
- Balance recreation access with habitat conservation.
- Tailor conservation and stewardship strategies to regional geographic needs.

Open Space Values

The intrinsic values of open space in Eagle County are generally described below, considering their resource-oriented (ecological and scenic) and community-oriented (heritage, access, and land use) benefits. These support the specific Open Space Conservation Criteria for the open space program, described on the following page.

Resource Values

Wildlife Habitat – Conserve and protect sensitive habitat that is critical to the long-term health of a variety of native wildlife species. Priority habitats include riparian and wetland areas, migration routes, winter ranges and production habitat for big game, and remaining patches of undisturbed/ unfragmented habitat.

Sensitive Lands – Conserve vegetation and habitat types that are sensitive, unique, or critical to a functioning ecosystem. These include riparian areas and floodplains, alpine tundra, sagebrush steppe, and areas that are documented to contain assemblages of rare or sensitive plant communities. [*Figure 5. Habitat Sensitivity, Private Lands, p 15*]

Scenic Viewsheds – Conserve landscapes and vistas that contribute to the scenic beauty and charismatic viewsheds of Eagle County. While these are inherently subjective, they generally include ridgelines and backdrops from communities, the setting from key observation points (i.e., roadways, trails, and overlooks), and prominent visual features and landmarks.

Community Values

Regional Heritage – Identify and protect sites that are important to Eagle County's human history and culture, including indigenous and historic sites, historic and prominent ranches, and overall agricultural land use.

Nature-based Recreation Access – Support recreational access to public lands and natural areas, improving opportunities and management of high-quality dispersed recreation, river access, and nature-based learning. The focus shall remain on nature-based and dispersed recreation (trail-based and river-based activities, education, and interpretation) rather than active recreation and infrastructure (such as ballfields and hardened facilities).

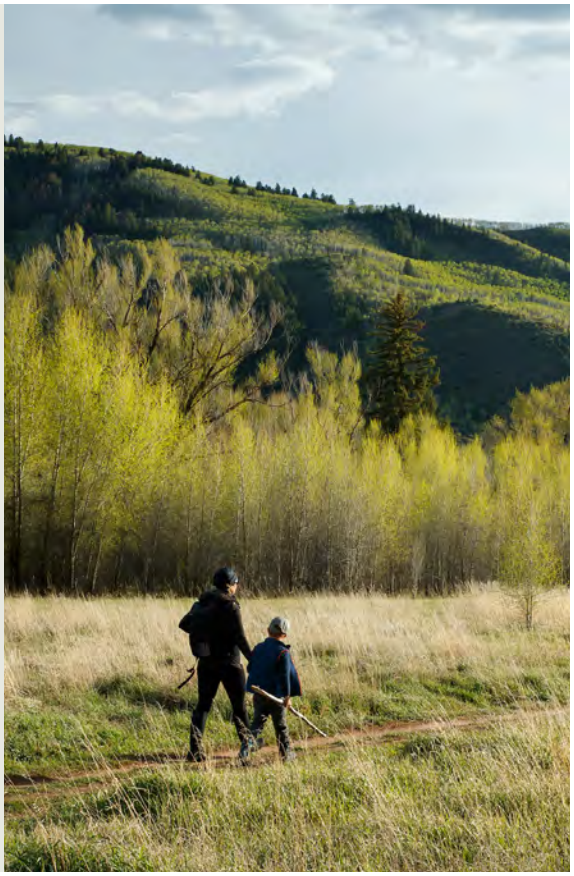
Land Use Compatibility – Work with other county departments and partners to ensure that open space conservation and management is compatible with other land use priorities, plans, and decisions. These plans may include, but are not limited to, land use plans, transportation and mobility, renewable energy, and affordable housing. Seek opportunities to protect open space values while partnering with other projects and initiatives.

Open Space Conservation Criteria

Since 2004, ECOS staff and the OSAC have used open space conservation criteria to evaluate suitability and prioritize conservation projects and potential acquisitions using Eagle County Open Space Funds. These criteria provide judicious guidance for the protection of resource and community values and are retained with some minor modifications. Updates to the criteria language were developed and evaluated in this planning process, to expand cultural and ecological considerations, strengthen conservation commitments, and align conservation with land use planning and education goals.

OPEN SPACE CONSERVATION CRITERIA

- **Scenic Landscapes and Vistas -** Preserve and protect Eagle County's outstanding natural beauty and visual quality.
- **Regional Heritage, Historic Sites, and Agriculture Land -** Protect and acknowledge Eagle County's human history and culture, including indigenous and historic sites, ranching heritage, and agricultural land use.
- **Wildlife, Wildlife Habitat and Migration Routes -** Protect sensitive habitat areas critical to the long term health and vitality of Colorado and Eagle County's wildlife resources.
- **Sensitive Lands and Environments -** Protect riparian areas, flood plains, alpine tundra, sagebrush steppe, and other sensitive, unique, or endangered ecosystems and environments.
- **Physical and Visual Integrity -** Promote and provide buffers or separation between developed areas and sensitive lands while considering consistency with land use priorities and plans.
- **Nature-Based Recreation and Access -** Support appropriate access to public lands and natural areas, and improve opportunities for dispersed recreation, river access, and nature-based learning.



Open Space Conservation Strategy

Implementation of this conservation strategy should be both strategic and proactive to maximize open space conservation opportunities. With the continued growth of residents and visitors, development pressure, land values and public expectations, open space conservation projects will likely become more complex, more expensive, and more difficult to secure. The following key themes outline a strategy for ECOS to rise to these challenges and continue to make a meaningful impact:

- Be opportunistic and proactive
- Retain and improve all conservation tools
- Embrace complex, long-term projects with partners
- Tailor strategies to meet regional geographic needs and context

Based on the financial analysis and forecasting, the current and projected open space fund will support a more aggressive open space conservation strategy. Conservation project goals for this type and scale of conservation project includes:

- **Conservation Support:** Frequent support of conservation easements by partners (3-6 per year)
- **Small Projects:** More frequent conservation of smaller properties (1-2 per year)
- **Large Projects:** Regular conservation of larger properties (every 4-5 years)

This approach is also supported by community input on this plan, with questionnaire respondents favoring "key parcels near communities" and a strategy to "use funds to protect smaller areas sooner." See Volume II Appendix E for more details on the Conservation Framework and Strategy.

***This cadence of conservation projects described above does NOT take into account staffing considerations or management implications inherent to some conservation projects.*

Conservation Tools

Open space conservation typically utilizes a diverse set of tools to purchase, protect, or otherwise secure land with open space values. Like most open space agencies, Eagle County has traditionally taken an opportunistic approach to land conservation, finding the right tool that works best for the situation – landowner needs, resource protection priorities, location, cost, etc.

Common Conservation Tools

The most commonly used conservation tools for ECOS have been, and will likely continue to be, fee simple acquisitions and participating in a variety of conservation easement transactions. These main tools are briefly described below:

FEE SIMPLE ACQUISITION

A fee simple acquisition is the purchase of the full value of a property from a willing seller, including all structures and interests, thus providing Eagle County full control and flexibility over management decisions. Fee acquisition is typically at fair market value, but sometimes a bargain sale can reduce the cost and provide tax advantages to the seller. Fee simple acquisitions are the most common tool to date (21 properties) for ECOS, conserving a total of 3,836 acres.

CONSERVATION EASEMENT

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement to restrict in perpetuity the development rights on a property to preserve conservation values in perpetuity. The easement is a real estate transaction to a third party (such as a land trust), which may provide financial or tax benefits to the landowner, who retains ownership and management responsibility for the property.

Eagle County does not hold conservation easements on private property but does use open space funds and staff capacity to facilitate easements to other conservation partners. Eagle County does hold conservation easements on municipal partners properties in Eagle County (e.g., Town of Avon, Gypsum). Typical and effective strategies for conservation easements are:

- **Conservation Easement Buyout** – Eagle County uses open space funds to purchase the full or partial value of a conservation easement on private property, which is held by a land trust or other conservation partner. This has been a common and successful tool for ECOS, accounting for 8 open space transactions to date conserving over 8,300 acres.
- **Conservation Easement Transaction Costs** – Eagle County uses open space funds to assist with the transaction costs for a conservation easement, to be held by a land trust or other conservation partner. This tool has become more common in recent years, as ECOS has used it on 3 transactions in the past few years, conserving over 2,200 acres.

Conservation Outreach

To use these tools to conserve land and resources, ECOS needs to engage with private landowners and develop projects that are mutually beneficial. The individual goals vary widely by landowner and property, so it is incumbent on ECOS to build trusted relationships and develop conservation project solutions that meet the landowner's needs. General outreach strategies include:

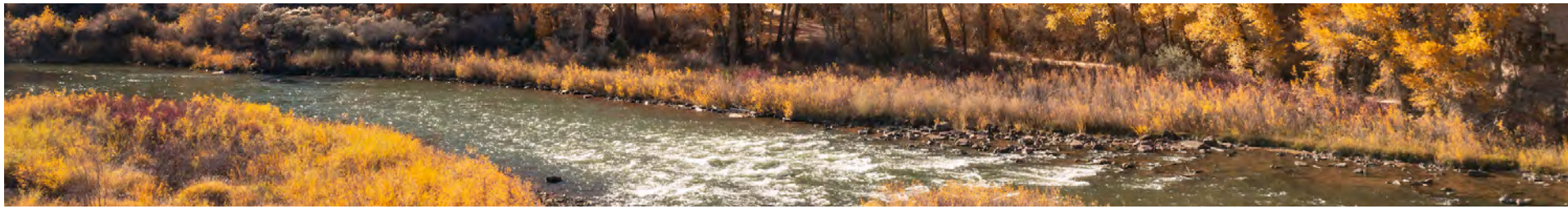
- **Work with partners** – Work with existing partners and colleagues in the community to identify potential landowners who may be interested in conservation.
- **Understand your audience** – Tailor the strategy to be relevant to the geographic context, and the personality and background of your potential conservation partners.
- **Build relationships and trust** – Take the time to sit down with landowners, listen to their interests, understand their goals, and forge a relationship. Be patient – it can take months or years to build trust.
- **Demonstrate success** – Invite other partners and landowners to share conservation projects that have worked for them, and to be honest about aspects that have not worked as well.
- **Be a resource** – Identify opportunities for ECOS or other partners to provide technical or logistical support to land management, stewardship, and conservation challenges that a landowner may be facing.
- **Design a relevant strategy** – If and when a landowner is ready to engage in conservation, design a conservation strategy that meets their financial, stewardship, personal and family goals.
- **Follow through on commitments** – Demonstrate the ability of ECOS to be a good partner at every phase of the conservation and acquisition process.

Other Conservation Tools

A full suite of conservation tools is available for ECOS to complete its mission to conserve open space for the community.

- Leases
- Trail or access easements
- Land exchanges
- Deed restrictions
- Restrictive covenants
- Development dedication
- Combination conservation easement and fee purchase
- Purchase and pass-through to other agencies (USFS, BLM, CPW, etc.)
- Other creative combinations

ECOS is encouraged to employ all of these tools, and combinations thereof, at its disposal to formulate conservation scenarios that work best for the landowner, the resource, and the community.



Complex Conservation Projects

Although ECOS's opportunistic approach to land conservation has been long-standing and effective, it is important to recognize that most of the "easy" deals have already been done. ECOS should be prepared to embrace larger and more complex conservation projects and be willing to invest the time and resources to develop and execute them. Such complex projects are those that often take many years, multiple partners, multiple funding sources, and a creative mix of conservation tools to find the arrangement that meets the needs of the landowner, the partners, the resources, and the community.

Complex Conservation Deals – Recent Case Studies

SNOWMASS FALLS RANCH *Pitkin County, 2024*

Significant, $34 million acquisition of the 650-acre property, with a loan from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) to reduce the impact to the open space fund.

MOUNT TOM CONSERVATION CORRIDOR *Jefferson County, 2023*

Multi-party, $25 million conservation project to protect 2,000 acres, with properties going to CPW, Jefferson County Open Space, and private conservation easement.

COLLARD RANCH *Park County, 2024*

Opportunistic acquisition of the 1,860 ranch by Western Rivers Conservancy, which was then conveyed to CPW with $2 million in CPW funds and $6.5 million from GOCO.

EAGLE VALLEY LAND EXCHANGE *Eagle County, 2012*

Complex, multi-party project to conserve and exchange 1,560 acres, resulting in open space land for Town of Avon and Eagle County, and the transfer of land to the USFS, State land board, Eagle River Water and Sanitation District, CDOT, and private landowners.

The Three Meadows Ranch acquisition is a very recent (2025) example of an innovative, multi-partner effort, which included a complex partnership to conserve 4,251 acres within Eagle County.

Open Space Geographic Context

Eagle County can be described in four general geographic areas, each with its own unique geography, resources, conservation needs, and community character. These four areas are:

- **Eagle River Basin:** Central valley along the Eagle River and I-70 corridors that includes most towns and population centers. High demand for outdoor recreation, high development pressure, and a pressing need to protect critical habitats and linkages along the community interface are key issues.
- **Upper Colorado:** Rolling and rugged rangelands and mountains north of I-70 and along the Upper Colorado River. Rural, agricultural character with low population density. Limited demand for outdoor recreation outside of river corridors. Critical needs exist to conserve working ranches which support large and intact wildlife habitat areas.
- **Headwaters:** Alpine and subalpine areas dominated by National Forest lands in the upper Eagle River, Gore Creek, and Homestake Creek Valleys. High demand for outdoor recreation, with high development pressure in the limited land area, with a need to protect forest inholdings, wetland and riparian areas, and habitat linkages.
- **Roaring Fork:** Rugged ridges and valleys around the Roaring Fork and Fryingpan Rivers and Cattle Creek. Mountain community and exurban character around Basalt, El Jebel, and Missouri Heights with moderate to high demand for recreation, high development pressure, and pressing need to protect riparian habitat, winter ranges, and wildlife corridors.

Recognizing this context, open space conservation strategies should be tailored to the different goals and conservation priorities in different areas of Eagle County as outlined in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Summary of Geographic Priorities and Tools

	Eagle River Basin	Upper Colorado	Headwaters	Roaring Fork
Conservation Priorities	• Key habitat/ corridors • Community backdrop parcels (scenic/recreation) • Community recreation and nature access	• Working ranches • Critical wildlife habitat • Colorado River values	• Forest inholdings • Critical wildlife habitat • Recreation access/USFS interface	• Key habitat/ corridors • Community backdrop parcels (scenic/recreation) • Limited community recreation and nature access close to communities
Preferred Tools	• Acquisition • Conservation easement • Support partners	• Conservation easement • Support landowners • Support partners	• Limited acquisition • Conservation easement • Land swap (USFS/local) • Support partners	• Joint acquisition • Conservation easement • Support partners

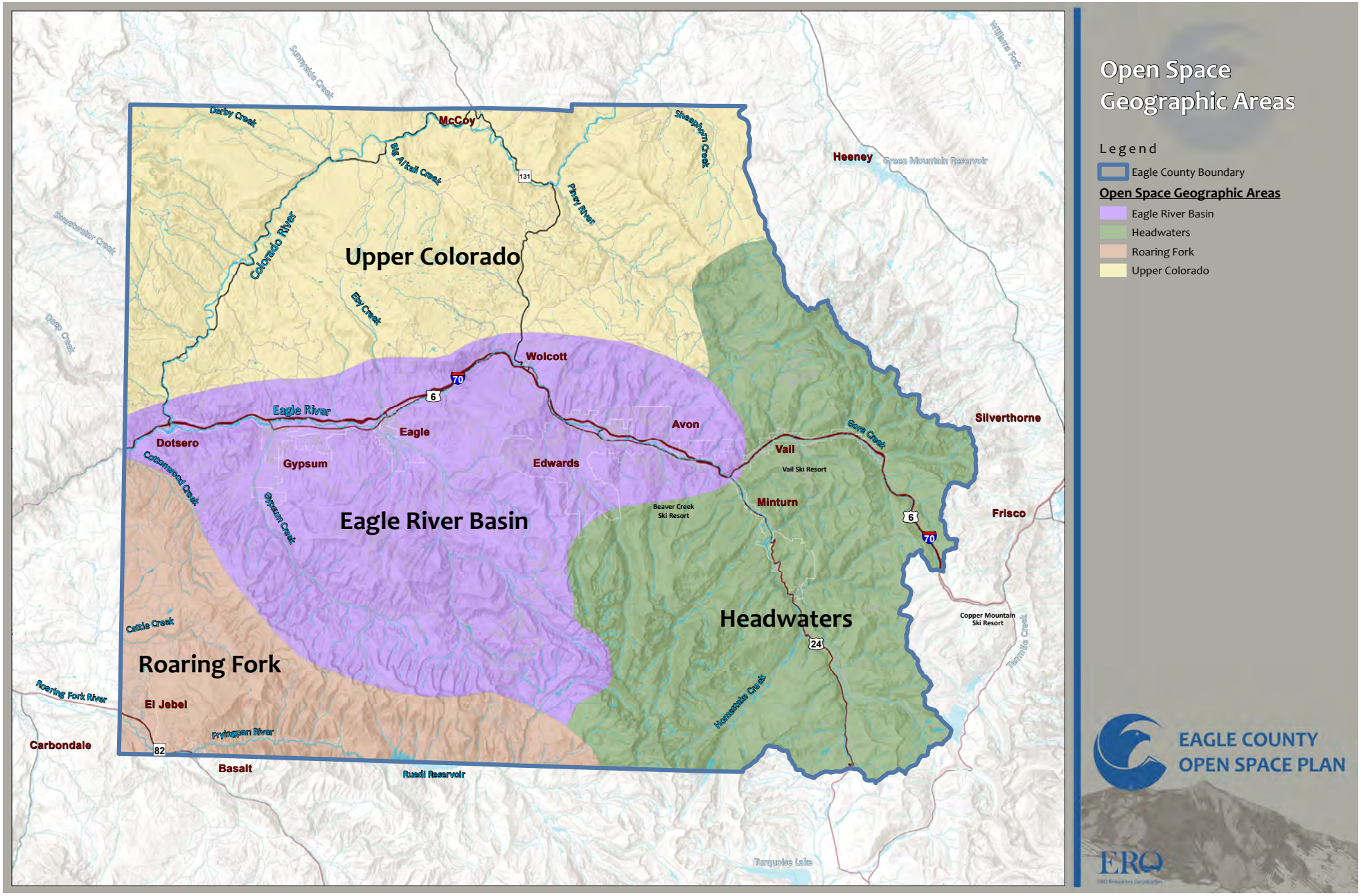


Figure 8. Open Space Geographic Areas

Table 3. Conservation Strategies and Tools for Different Geographic Areas

	Eagle River Basin	Upper Colorado
Vision for ECOS Engagement	ECOS presence contributes to the conservation of land in a manner that protects wildlife habitat, provides a frontcountry transition between urban communities and public lands, and is compatible with overall community goals and values.	ECOS actively works with landowners and partners to maintain the rural character, scenic and agricultural values, and large areas of intact wildlife habitat.
Conservation Priorities	1. Conserve the few remaining areas that provide intact wildlife habitat and linkages 2. Conserve critical community backdrop parcels that provide scenic, habitat, and recreation values 3. Conserve small, key parcels that support localized habitat needs and provide for community access to nature 4. Support a framework for well managed access to surrounding public lands	1. Support working ranches in their ability to remain intact and well managed 2. Conserve the agricultural, wildlife, and scenic values of large working ranches 3. Protect critical wildlife habitats on a large landscape 4. Preserve the scenic and recreational values of the Colorado River corridor
Preferred Conservation Tools	• ECOS acquisition • Conservation easements • Funding to support partners	• Conservation easements • Support landowners with acquisitions or land exchanges
ECOS Ownership and Management	High priority – Provides an opportunity for ECOS to actively manage the land and to have a visible presence in the community.	Mixed priority – May be a higher priority for access and recreational values while agricultural and wildlife values may be a lower priority for ECOS because they are already stewarded by large landowners in the area.
Suitable Recreation Activities and Amenities	• Trailheads • Trails and trail-based activities (hiking, biking, equestrian) • Wildlife viewing • Education and interpretation programs • Interpretive signs and kiosks • Picnic shelters/pavilions • Restrooms in key locations • Limited commercial use and special events	• River access/boat ramps • Overnight campsites and day use areas in select locations • Education and interpretive programs • Wildlife viewing • Restrooms in key locations
Key Partners	• Colorado Parks and Wildlife • Land trusts • Local municipalities	• Colorado Parks and Wildlife • Bureau of Land Management • Land trusts

Table 3. Conservation Strategies and Tools for Different Geographic Areas, continued.

	Headwaters	Roaring Fork
Vision for ECOS Engagement	ECOS successfully works with the White River National Forest and other partners to protect key landscapes and resource values and support managed recreational access to public lands.	ECOS actively works with partners to preserve critical wildlife habitat and transitional lands along the community/ public land interface.
Conservation Priorities	1. Conserve strategic inholdings and remaining large tracts of intact land and habitat 2. Protect significant wildlife habitats on a large landscape 3. Conserve the scenic, habitat, and recreational values along the Eagle River and Homestake Creek corridors 4. Support a framework for well managed access to surrounding public lands	1. Conserve sensitive habitat areas at the transition between developed communities and public lands 2. Protect the sensitive habitats and wildlife linkages near the Emma/Glassier/Highway 82 interface and the Cottonwood Pass Corridor 3. Conserve sensitive habitat areas along Cattle Creek, the Fryingpan River, and their small tributaries 4. Conserve small, key parcels that support localized habitat needs and provide for community access to nature
Preferred Conservation Tools	• Limited ECOS acquisition • Acquisition with transfer to USFS or other partners • Conservation easements • Funding to support partners	• Funding to support partners • Joint ECOS/Pitkin County acquisition • Conservation easements
ECOS Ownership and Management	Medium priority – Emphasize USFS transfer and management, but look for opportunities for ECOS to support managed public access.	Medium priority – Provides an opportunity for ECOS to have a stronger community presence, but more feasible to partner with Pitkin County and others who have a more active presence.
Suitable Recreation Activities and Amenities	• Trailheads • Trails and trail-based activities (hiking, biking, equestrian) • Wildlife viewing • Education and interpretation programs • Interpretive signs and kiosks • Limited commercial use and special events	• Trailheads • Trails and trail-based activities (hiking, biking, equestrian) • Wildlife viewing • Education and interpretation programs • Interpretive signs and kiosks • Picnic shelters/pavilions • Restrooms in key locations • Limited commercial use and special events
Key Partners	• White River National Forest • Colorado Parks and Wildlife • Land trusts	• Pitkin County Open Space and Trails • Colorado Parks and Wildlife • White River National Forest • Land trusts

SECTION III

Open Space Management

OPEN SPACE MANAGEMENT

The open space management strategy includes guidance for ECOS and partners to operationalize the Conservation Framework. This includes general guidance on open space designations, ECOS' role in balancing stewardship and public access, and management guidelines for ECOS owned properties. This section also provides a roadmap for implementation through partnerships and ECOS staffing.

Types of Open Space

Eagle County does not have defined open space classifications or other formalized designations independent of existing zoning or definitions included in Eagle County's land use code. This plan does not intend to create formalized classifications, but it is important to describe and articulate the different types of open space areas that may be conserved, owned, or managed by ECOS in concert with the previously described open space values.

- **Habitat Protection Area** – Sensitive or high-value habitat areas where ecological conservation is the top priority. Public access is generally prohibited, but limited, managed access (e.g., seasonal, guided) may occur consistent with a property management plan.
- **Natural Area** – Natural landscape and habitat areas where wildlife habitat protection and public access are balanced. Designated public access and use along trail corridors may be allowed, and agricultural use may occur consistent with overall property goals.
- **Agriculture Area** – Productive agricultural land where agricultural management and operations are the priority. Public access is generally prohibited, but limited, managed access may occur consistent with ownership status and property management goals.
- **Recreation and Education Area** – Habitat/community interface areas where opportunities for public access, education, and programming are the priority. May include trailheads, trails, overlooks, interpretive sites, and similar facilities as determined by a property management plan.
- **Open Space Infrastructure** – Developed and disturbed areas that support historic or operational features such as buildings, barns, equipment storage on open space. Public access is generally prohibited.
- **Habitat Restoration** – Degraded areas where long-term habitat restoration and enhancement is the priority. Restoration strategies may include earthwork or other ground-disturbing activities. Public access may be allowed, if consistent with overall property goals and restoration plans.

These general open space designations should be *considered* during the open space acquisition process to help articulate general goals and objectives for the property. Any actual management zones, designations, or emphasis areas should be determined through a property-specific management plan that carefully considers resource values and opportunities on the property.

Open Space Stewardship

Eagle County Open Space actively partners with towns, other counties, federal land managers, land trusts, private landowners, and other entities to conserve and manage open space. Management priorities align with the resource and community values collectively known as the conservation criteria. ECOS's role will depend on the type of property (easement vs. ownership) and geographic area. The ECOS program is known as a conservation leader in Eagle County and beyond for developing innovative partnerships to conserve open space.

ECOS Role in the Community

Stewardship is the respect and care for land, water, habitat, scenery and open space values to ensure healthy, functioning systems for current and future generations. Stewardship takes the form of active management, monitoring, and engagement with landowners, volunteers, nonprofit organizations, recreation users, and community members - collectively known as stewards.

ECOS identifies stewardship goals for all open space properties. ECOS staff and partners engage with communities, recreationists, and interest groups across the County to educate and facilitate participation in stewardship activities.

Recreation Management

Along with stewardship, proactive recreation management contributes to the conservation values of the Eagle County Open Space program. Access to nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities is integral to the lifestyle, community identity, and social wellbeing of Eagle County residents. Outdoor recreation - from fishing and hiking to hunting and wildlife viewing - is how most residents and visitors engage with the natural environment. These activities provide critical physical and mental health benefits to Eagle County residents and visitors. Meaningful and responsible access to public lands helps instill an appreciation for nature, a curiosity about the environment, and a commitment to conservation among the general public.

Through site-specific management plans, ECOS identifies the appropriate type of community and recreation access for county-owned properties. Most ECOS-managed open space properties have some public access, but some properties may have restrictions or no access to protect sensitive habitat or other conservation values. Recreation amenities and infrastructure will continue to be simple and rustic in their design and will provide the appropriate level of development to support visitor use and resource protection needs on ECOS owned properties.

Balancing Open Space Recreation and Habitat Conservation

While the concept of balancing outdoor recreation and wildlife habitat conservation is a common and worthy goal for many public land managers and partners, it is often difficult to find that balance or to agree on what "balance" looks like. Nature-based recreation is an appropriate and important use of open space land and should be integral to the program. However, as the demand for outdoor recreation continues to grow, so do concerns about the impacts of those activities on the wildlife and ecosystem values in those areas. Impacts of human development on wildlife habitat and natural systems are exacerbated by the increasing and cumulative extent of recreation use on the landscape.

Recognizing this challenge to find balance, the prevailing philosophy of ECOS is to support meaningful conservation of habitat and other open space values *on balance* with intentional nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities. What this means for ECOS is that:

- ECOS will work with community and agency partners to identify opportunities for both conservation and nature-based outdoor recreation within the overall open space property portfolio.
- Properties or sites acquired to preserve historical, cultural, or agricultural values will prioritize those purposes along with strategies to reduce impacts on wildlife.
- The concept of balance does not mean that every open space parcel should be programmed for both habitat protection and recreation; instead, balance should be sought across the open space system with some areas that provide more access and others that are strictly for conservation.
- Access and management decisions will be based on the best available science and practical management expertise, with consideration from partner and stakeholder input and the geographic context.
- When access or conservation decisions are in conflict, ECOS will err on the side of habitat conservation.

Property Management Guidelines

The following guidelines are best management practices for all ECOS-owned properties.

General

- A management plan is in place that identifies the property's focus (see Types of Open Space, page 34), habitat conservation goals, specific management approaches, and specific stewardship goals.
- ECOS staff actively manage properties based on their site-specific management plans and are available to facilitate partner and volunteer support.
- ECOS staff, partners, and volunteers conduct outreach and engagement with traditionally underserved residents in Eagle County to improve awareness of and access to the outdoors.
- ECOS staff, partners, and volunteers help residents and visitors appreciate the diverse landscapes of ECOS properties and embrace a stewardship ethic while enjoying these areas.

Stewardship

- Emphasize conservation and restoration of sensitive species, critical habitat areas, and degraded or disturbed landscapes.
- Limit or prohibit public access/recreation as necessary to protect habitat and conservation values.
- Use science, technology and active management to implement and monitor stewardship activities.
- Coordinate with landowners and partners to provide stewardship and volunteer opportunities at ECOS properties.

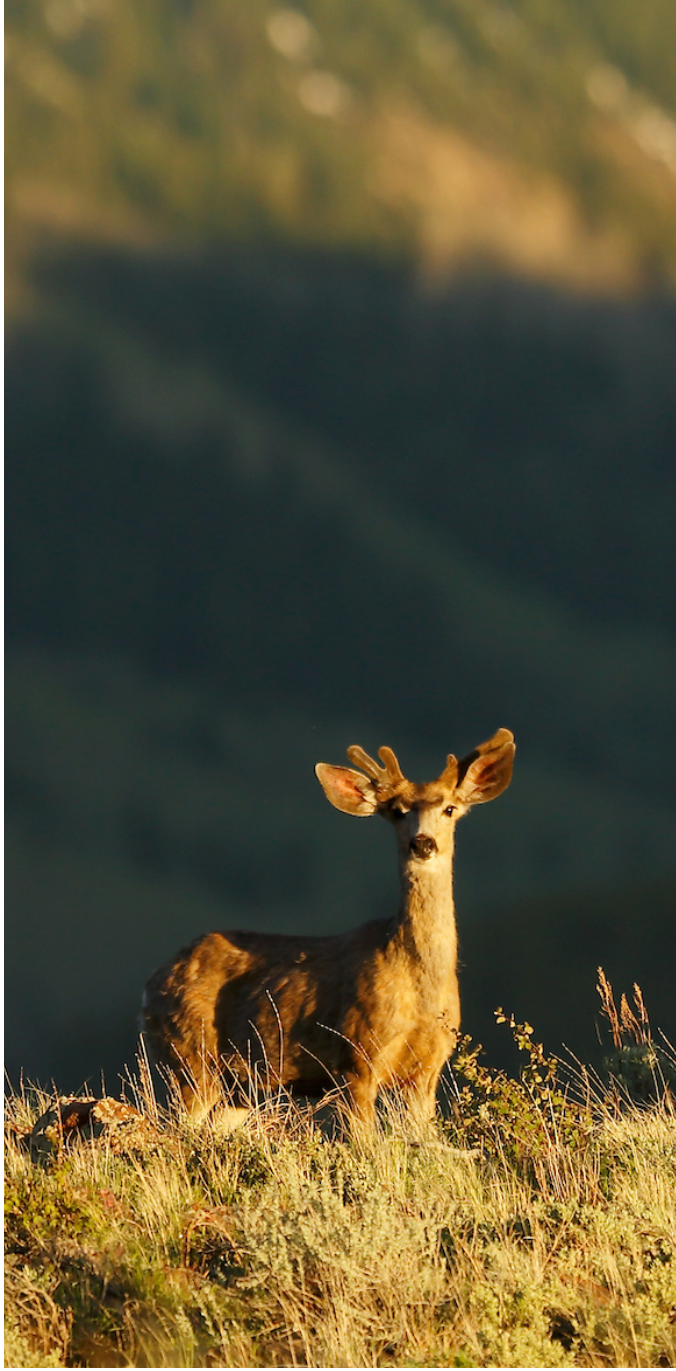
Visitor Access Management

- Provide lower-intensity nature–based outdoor recreation opportunities on appropriate ECOS-owned properties to support continued access to nature aligned with the site management plan.
- Identify new opportunities for recreational use close to communities to support nature-based learning and access for traditionally underserved communities.
- Support partners (e.g., local jurisdictions, USFS, BLM, and others) to conserve and manage more extensive, trail-based recreation opportunities in suitable locations.
- Seek opportunities to support federal partners (USFS and BLM) in managing access to broader public lands.
- Prioritize conservation efforts over recreation and public access. If necessary, prohibit or limit public access to protect conservation values.

Eagle County Open Space Focus Areas

The following focus areas are priorities for ECOS, and are described in greater detail in Volume II, Appendix G:

- Support and Manage Habitat Conservation Efforts Across the County
- Improve Ecological Integrity through Restoration
- Enhance Community Connection, Accessibility and Inclusion
- Retain and Support Agricultural Management
- Continue to Support River Access and Management



Implementing the Plan

This Open Space Plan provides a roadmap for managing the ECOS program over the next decade to "conserve landscapes and promote the sound management of our natural resources to support Eagle County's way of life." The conservation framework and associated management guidance and focus area strategies provide clear direction for ECOS to implement its mission and vision. This section and Volume II contain additional guidance and tools to operationalize the Plan.

Partnerships

As described throughout this plan, partnerships are integral to implementing the overall conservation framework and achieving the mission and vision of ECOS. Partnerships may be both formal, (i.e., documented through a memorandum of understanding or other partnership instrument), or informal, (i.e., a verbal or written commitment to work together) to be effective.

Through this Plan, ECOS commits to formalizing partnership approaches to achieve its mission and vision and support broader conservation goals across Eagle County. These include:

- Developing and implementing a conservation assistance program for non-profits (e.g., land trusts, conservation organizations) to request funding assistance for acquisition and conservation projects that align with ECOS's mission and vision.
- Coordinating and discussing ECOS acquisition and conservation projects with Colorado Parks and Wildlife to ensure regular and ongoing communication.

Eagle County Open Space Staffing

The Open Space Program is committed to efficient and effective management, ensuring that funding resources are allocated to meet the diverse needs of open space conservation and stewardship. The program effectively leverages the expertise of dedicated OSNR staff, guidance from the Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC), and collaboration with conservation professionals and partners to maximize its impact. A healthy Open Space Fund, with projected revenue growth, supports a balanced approach encompassing both large-scale and targeted conservation projects. The program strives to maintain appropriate staffing levels to effectively manage its responsibilities, which include program administration, operation and maintenance, stakeholder engagement, public outreach, and natural resource stewardship. Recognizing that larger, more complex projects require increased investment of time and resources, the program continually assesses its capacity to ensure it can effectively deliver its services.

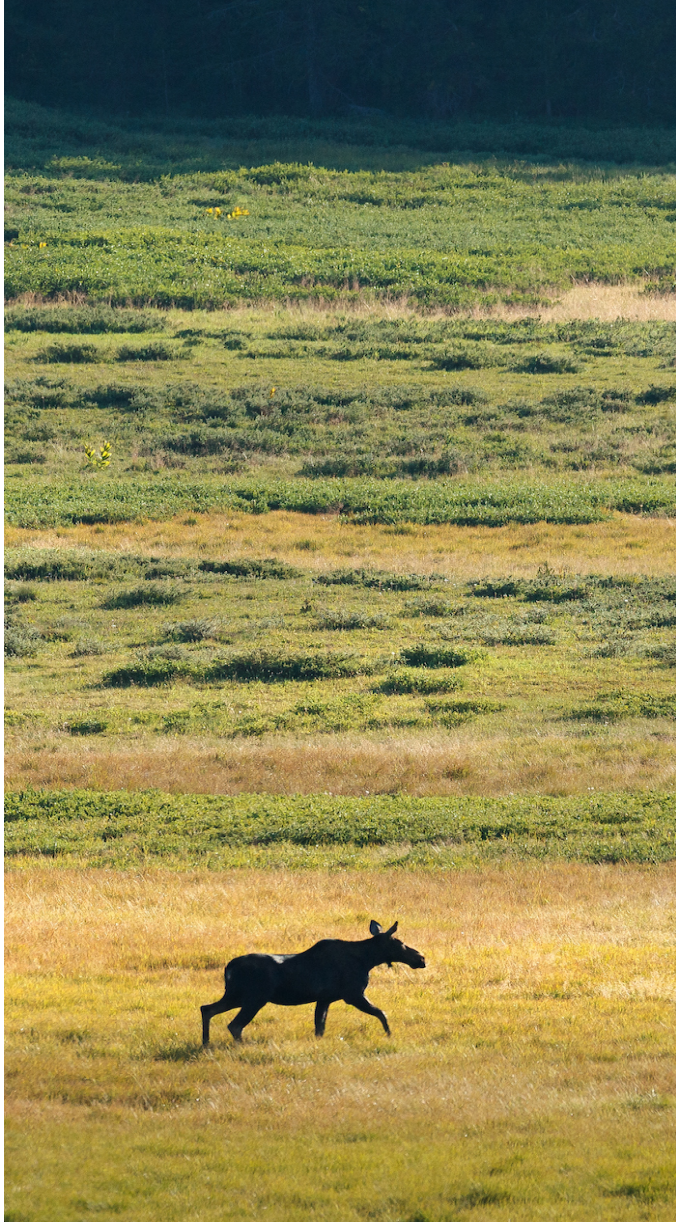
Implementation Recommendations

Recommendations and approaches to implement the ECOS Open Space Plan are summarized below.

Key recommendations to support implementation of this plan include:

- Develop and implement a process to assist non-profit partners with conservation funding assistance
- Formalize coordination with Colorado Parks and Wildlife in developing conservation projects
- Implement an asset management strategy to evaluate and track the costs, benefits, and maintenance requirements of assets and infrastructure
- Formalize updated policies for management and operation of the open space program
- Strategically and appropriately staff programs with FTEs and seasonal support, leveraging contract services for specific project needs
- Foster partnerships to maximize impact, and utilize conservation partners and volunteer programs to enhance community involvement and project implementation

These key strategies will provide ECOS with the tools and capacity to implement the conservation strategies described in this plan and to meet its mission and vision in service to the Eagle County community.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ERO Project #23-215