

President's Letter

Recessed Conservation

A friend who runs a local foundation recently asked me what impact conservation was having on rural economies during this economic downturn. It was a good question, and raised the bigger issue of the impact of the recession on land conservation, and vice-versa. It probably goes without saying that a recession that appears to have hit all sectors of society has hit conservation as well.

In most conversations today, it isn't long before the topic turns to the economy, and the conservation community is certainly no different. Land trust people, foundation directors, legislators, agency staff, landowners – it doesn't matter, it's on everyone's mind. Everyone is adjusting or cutting back, and the question is, how much and for how long? Concern is the rule of the day.

I have yet to talk with a foundation representative that hasn't seen a significant drop in the foundation's assets, and is consequently paring back their donations. On a brighter note, individuals seem to be continuing to contribute to charities, although the size of their donations is often smaller.

I recall a lunch I had with Will Shafroth shortly after he became the first Executive Director of [Great Outdoors Colorado](#). Will and the new board were charged with developing and implementing GOCO's spending policies. At one point he asked, if I had \$35 million to spend on land protection, how would I do it? I wisecracked that I'd save it all until a recession and then buy as much land as I could.

Thankfully, GOCO hasn't hoarded its funds since 1994. But people are still buying lottery tickets (it beats my 401(k)), and GOCO does have funds at a time when conservation dollars are very limited. They are giving careful attention how to most strategically use the funds in this struggling economy.

Among the victims of the recession are the sales-tax revenues that provide the source for most local government open space programs. With other funding sources reduced as well, identifying monies to meet GOCO matching requirements may prove the greatest challenge. This may be one of the items on GOCO's strategic planning agenda.



In face of these financial hardships, it's important to remember that most conservation lands protected in Colorado have been donated. The Colorado conservation easement tax credit has played a major role in stimulating these donations. The tax credit has taken its share of criticism the last couple of years, some of which was deserved.

But needed corrections to the program are being implemented, and the credit will likely be essential in helping some rural landowners stay afloat. As I told my foundation director friend, conservation easement tax credit proceeds will be used to help meet mortgage payments, replenish livestock herds, or make needed ranch improvements. At a time when money is scarce, the tax credit will be a valuable local stimulus.

I've talked with several ranchers and farmers lately. Cattle and commodity prices are significantly down from the highs of early 2008. Credit is tight. I sense they know things are bad and the future uncertain. But that's often been the case with them. Drought, hard winters, low crop or beef prices, high fuel costs – these are uncertainties farmers and ranchers have lived with all their lives. But I've found most agricultural producers are the way they always are - guardedly optimistic – following the old adage of hoping for the best but preparing for the worst. Perhaps that's a lesson for the rest of us.