

Colorado Open Lands soars because of easement values

137 percent gain in revenue linked to donation deals

By Joanne Kelley, Rocky Mountain News
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A growing push to protect Colorado landscapes from future development put two groups on higher ground in the *Rocky's* second annual ranking of the top 100 nonprofits in the state.

At the top of the heap: Colorado Open Lands, which moved to 28th place, up from 56th last year. The group booked a 137 percent revenue gain partly because of a deal to preserve a huge ranch on the eastern side of the San Luis Valley.

The group's roughly \$65 million in revenue actually reflects the value of the land protected through so-called conservation easements, rather than the money flowing into its coffers. But the measure still offers a way to quantify its success in 2005, the latest year for which data were available in Guidestar's database.

"The easements that people donate have value, and we have to recognize the value of that gift in our revenue," said Daniel Pike, president of the Lakewood-based land conservation group.

Over the years, the popularity of putting open space, ranches and farms into easements has increased. In exchange for a tax write-off, landowners give up development rights.

The number of transactions has also jumped in recent years.

"It's kind of taxed our ability to accommodate everyone," Pike said. "We had to start turning people away."

Colorado Open Lands now focuses on areas where it thinks it can have the most impact. Among its current targets: the South Park area, and property along Tomichi Creek running from Monarch Pass toward Gunnison.

It also has handled a number of easements closer to the metro area.



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Dan Pike, president of Colorado Open Lands, stands in a meadow on Upper Bear Creek Road in Evergreen. The group helped protect the ranch property from further development. Colorado Open Lands moved to 28th place from 56th last year in the *Rocky's* list of the top 100 nonprofits.

In Evergreen, for instance, it has arranged for easements that preserve open space in the Upper Bear Creek area, which faces development pressure as vacant building lots become more scarce.

Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust made its first appearance on the list in 54th place.

The group, which tends to work on large ranch properties, recently changed its accounting to book easements in the same way that Colorado Open Lands recognizes its revenue.

It had about \$33 million in its revenue column in 2005 vs. what would have been about \$15 million a year earlier if it had accounted for easements in the same way, according to Executive Director Chris West.

"It reflects the value of the properties that we've protected," West said. "We did have a big jump in terms of acreage and contributions."

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Nonprofit giant: health care

More than half the groups on Rocky's top 100 list are from this sector

**By Joanne Kelley, Rocky Mountain News
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The *Rocky Mountain News'* second-annual ranking of the top 100 nonprofits speaks volumes about the role the huge sector plays in one key area - health care.

More than half the groups on this year's list are either hospitals, health centers or other groups that support those in need of specialized care. Ranked by annual revenue, the rest of the list includes everything from universities to arts groups to those focused on the poor.

The same five nonprofit hospitals ranked at or near the top of the list for the second year in a row. Smaller hospitals, mental health providers and those serving disabled and terminally ill patients appear in droves.

"The trend is that these services are now provided by nonprofit agencies," said Charley Shimanski, president of the Colorado Nonprofit Association. "Many of these programs would have been provided by state government in the past."

The Colorado Health Foundation's Annie Wohlgenant agreed that nonprofits have stepped in to provide health care for low-income and uninsured populations.

"What's sort of foreboding about this is that the health care needs and costs are going up, and it's not possible for the nonprofit sector to meet the already huge and growing demand," said Wohlgenant, the foundation's vice president of philanthropy.

The top 100 list captures just a tiny slice of the growing pie.

The state has an estimated 18,000 tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, about 8,400 of which meet the threshold for filing annual financial reports with the Internal Revenue Service.

The list ranks only those known as 501(c)3 groups, the so-called public charities. Guidestar, a database of information on nonprofits, provided the data used to compile the *Rocky's* rankings.

A host of other nonprofits also claim tax-exempt status - trade groups, labor unions, local parent-teacher associations, even cemetery companies, to name a few.

While stacking up the largest nonprofits helps show how big and broad the sector has become, observers contend that many of the smallest organizations play a more significant role for Colorado residents.

"Most nonprofits are grass-roots groups that were designed to assist the most vulnerable," said Richard Male, a nonprofit consultant and longtime activist in the sector. "The size of the budget doesn't define the impact."

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