

Colo. Ranches Preserved on Film

Photographer John Fielder lauds conservation easements

By Margaret Jackson
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As the state's conservation-easement program comes under scrutiny, legendary landscape photographer John Fielder is working on a new book aimed at illustrating the importance of the program for preserving Colorado's ranching heritage.

Fielder is photographing 50 working ranches from the Eastern Plains to the western river canyons. He is focusing on multigenerational, centennial-quality ranches, about two-thirds of which have conservation easements on them.

"I want to show people how glorious ranches are in this state," said Fielder, who is well-known for previous books he has published, such as "Colorado 1870-2000" and "Colorado Then & Now." "We can show Colorado what's at stake."

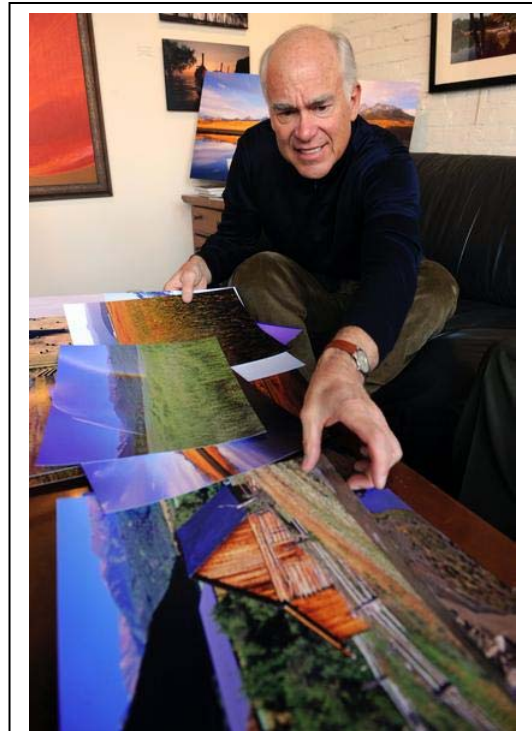
The conservation-easement program allows landowners to get tax deductions and earn tax credits they can sell for cash in exchange for restricting development on their land.

Preliminary results from an investigation launched by the state's Division of Real Estate in October have revealed some highly suspect transactions that may have cost the state a significant amount of lost revenue. A bill wending its way through the state legislature is aimed at stemming abuses of the program.

"What John is capturing on film is what we're talking about with the legislation about land values in Colorado," said Chris West, executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

Fielder's book, "Ranches of Colorado," is expected to hit stores in September 2009. A percentage of sales will go to the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts, Colorado Open Lands and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

Rocky Mountain News reporter James Meadow will write essays about 15 ranchers throughout the state to accompany the images.



Legendary landscape photographer John Fielder is working on a book that he hopes will show the importance of the state's controversial conservation-easement program. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post)

Fielder said he expects to publish 35,000 books during the first printing. They'll sell for about \$95 each, generating more than \$100,000 for the land-trust organizations.

Fielder isn't stopping with the book. He wants to produce a documentary about saving Colorado ranches that would be broadcast on either a commercial or a public television station. He also plans to hold a major exhibit of his photographs in September 2009 at John Fielder's Colorado, his gallery at 833 Santa Fe Blvd. The show will travel throughout the state, and a percentage of the prints sold will be donated to land trusts.

Other components aimed at raising awareness of the importance of protecting Colorado's ranches could include exhibiting the photographs at the National Western Stock Show in 2009 and 2010 and a slide show accompanied by cowboy music and poetry at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Denver.

"We need to raise money and awareness for land protection," Fielder said. "We're trying to restore what the reputation of the tax-credit program and ranch protection means in Colorado."

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