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*Left: Mule deer and bighorn sheep grazing near Chalk Creek (Photo by Gabe Hobson);
Below SMT volunteers working on National Public Lands Day (Photo by SMT).*



Cover, top to bottom, left to right: Rec Rangers eat lunch in Fourmile (Photo by AHRA); Fall Aspen below Mt Shavano (Photo by G Hobson); Cyclist takes in the view from the Monarch Crest Trail (Photo by G Hobson); Cronin Peak (Photo by G Hobson); Cattle at sunset (Photo by Leah Talbert); Rec Adopters on National Public Lands Day (Photo by GARNA).



Fall aspen along the Colorado Trail
(Photo by G Hobson)

Filling the Void Through Community Contributions

Around the country, communities like Chaffee County have struggled to close resource gaps for improving forest health, reducing the impacts of outdoor recreation, and sustaining the legacy of agricultural operations. This is where the Chaffee County's Common Ground Program has helped our community stand out. More than \$11 million that has been raised by the 0.25% sales tax since 2018. It has been spent to improve the landscape around us and has been leveraged to bring additional resources to the County.

Since 2019, over \$10 million has been dispersed through a competitive grant cycle. Yet that only represent a fraction of the resources put on the ground through Common Ground. Grant recipients and partners have used the funding they have received for match on other larger grants, and to empower the local community to give back through many volunteer opportunities.

Through work funded by Common Ground, we have seen substantial improvements in all three resource categories of Forest Health, Recreation Impacts, and Supporting Agriculture. The scale and scope of these impacts have been felt by our visitors and our community as a whole. They have also reached Chaffee County citizens in ways that benefits individual land owners and translates to long term community benefits.

Chaffee County is unique in its character but it is not unique in its challenges. We are lucky to have a community that has chosen to rise to the challenge and support preserving our natural and agricultural resources through a small sales tax that has produced big results. As many accomplishments as Common Ground has achieved, there are still many more hurdles to overcome. Thankfully we have the ability to provide a leg up through Common Ground.

**In 2025 only microgrants and partnerships, which do not require match, were funded for Recreation. Impacts*

	2019-2024		2025		Total	
	Grant Award	Match	Grant Award	Match	Grant Award	Match
Forest Health and Fire Resilience	\$4,918,852	\$13,421,351	\$468,262	\$972,354	\$5,387,114	\$14,393,705
Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Landscapes	\$2,878,701	\$9,751,192	\$511,684	\$681,125	\$3,390,385	\$10,432,317
Recreation Impacts	\$1,605,830	\$5,111,790	\$195,808	\$0	\$1,801,638	\$5,111,790
Totals	\$1,813,829	\$7,107,781	\$1,175,754	\$1,653,479	\$10,579,137	\$27,206,220



2025 Grants Supporting Forest Health and Wildfire Resilience

By funding forest health plans, projects, and programs across the county, Common Ground has made meaningful strides in reducing wildfire risks. Guided by the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which was developed using Common Ground funds, community partners have conducted large scale forest health treatments on public and private lands in critical locations across the county. To date, these projects have treated over 16,500 acres in or adjacent to the wildland urban interface, achieving 55% of the goal of the 30,000 acres identified in the CWPP.

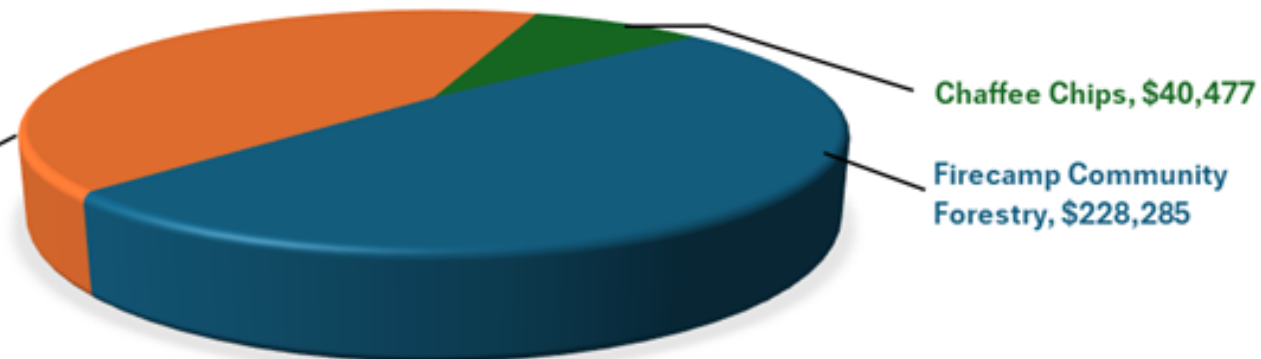
Funding for forest health has also had impacts through smaller scale projects. Chaffee Chips has made fuels reduction services available to average homeowners in the wildland urban interface. Through Common Ground grants, Colorado Firecamp has been able to increase their training capacity and ability to provide services to the community.

Many other grants have helped local organizations build staff capacity that directly benefit wildfire resilience projects. These programs and grants not only benefit these organizations and landowners, but they are complimentary to large scale projects. Combined they are helping to prevent the wildfires that would otherwise affect our area and reduce the impacts of wildfires if they do occur.

In 2025, Forest Health projects were awarded the largest portion of Common Ground funds. This year's investments have enabled local fire-fighting resources to provide increased capacity for education, code enforcement, training, and wildfire mitigation projects in the wildland urban interface. These efforts continue the critical work taking place across public and private lands in Chaffee County, positioning the community for the strongest possible response when wildfires reach the region.

*Southwest Conservation Corps crew leader tends a burn pile, reducing fuels on the forest floor.
(photo by Kent Maxwell)*

**South Arkansas FPD
Wildfire Mitigation &
Community Resilience
Education Initiative,
\$199,500**



2025 Grants Reducing Impacts of Outdoor Recreation

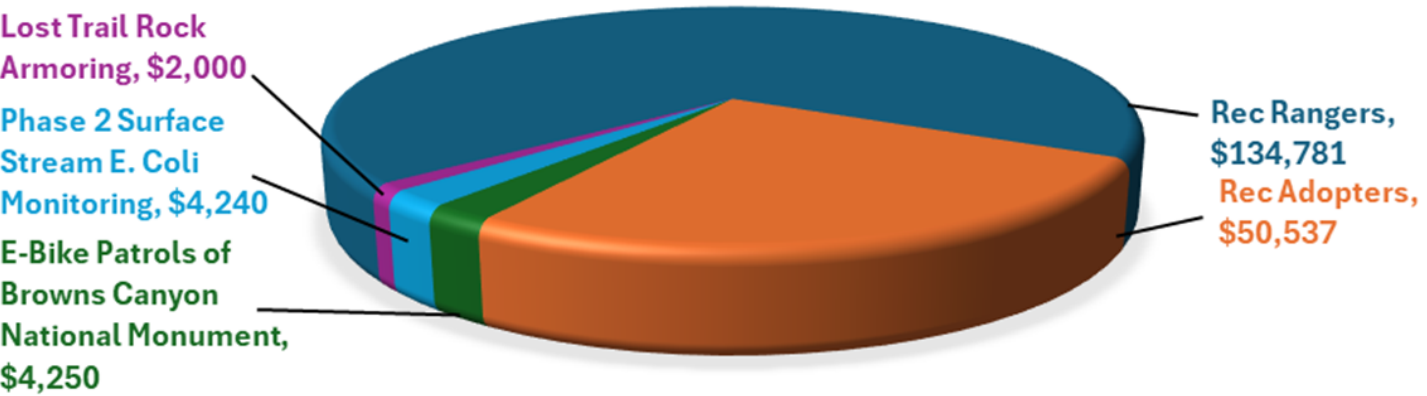
When our residents or visitors think of Chaffee County their minds often go immediately to rafting the Arkansas River, hiking or biking our many trails, or submitting one of the twelve 14ers in the county — the most of any county in Colorado. However, with such outstanding recreational resources comes the responsibility to managing them. In recent years increased use has had notable impacts on both the landscape and user experience.

Through a variety of programs and grants Common Ground funding has helped turn the tide. Rec Rangers and GARNA’s Chaffee Rec Adopters have made substantial contributions by educating recreational users and mitigating negative impacts of recreation.

Grants awarded for outdoor recreation have also supported improving trails, campgrounds, dis-

persed camping, and paid for porta potties at trailheads across the county. These projects have improved the experiences of residents and visitors alike, while reducing the impacts of recreation on wildlife and the environment.

In a competitive grant cycle which more applications for larger projects in Forest Health and Agriculture, three microgrants and two partnerships were funded. The microgrants will improve the long term durability of the Lost Trail. They will also improve monitoring of recreational impacts on water quality and Brown's Canyon National Monument. Common Ground also continued to support the Rec Rangers and Rec Adopters programs, two standout programs that have helped volunteers and land managers reduce the impacts of ever-growing demand for recreation and dispersed camping in Chaffee County.



Photos top to bottom: Rec Rangers install Wilderness sign on Salida Ranger District (Photo by USFS); Swiftwater rescue training at AHRA with Rec Rangers (Photo by AHRA); Salida Mountain Trail volunteers removing brush along a trail (Photo by SMT).



*A calf at Arrowhead Ranch
(Photo by Ashleigh Cogan)*

2025 Grants Supporting Agriculture and Working Lands

Of the three resource areas that Common Ground supports, none have deeper roots in our community than agriculture and working lands. We can no longer claim to be the “Lettuce Capitol of the World.” However, our valley remains home to many ranches and smaller farms that help make our county feel like home. Today, population growth and shrinking margins are placing increasing pressure on agricultural producers. These challenges threaten operations that help feed America and shape Chaffee County’s character. While no single resource can remove these hurdles, Common Ground provides another tool to help keep agricultural operations viable.

In 2025 grants supporting agriculture were the most numerous, enabling 11 projects across the county. This year’s grants have helped improve and update aging irrigation infrastructure, the lifeblood of agriculture in the Upper Arkansas Valley. Funding has also enabled the preservation of agricultural land through conservation easements. In addition, it has expanded the use of new technology like virtual fence and remote water tank monitors to make ranching operation on open range more efficient. Many challenges remain for agricultural producers in Chaffee County, but Common Ground remains committed to providing resources to overcome them.

Riverside Ditch and Allen Extension Company Ditch Improvement Initiative 2,
\$153,436

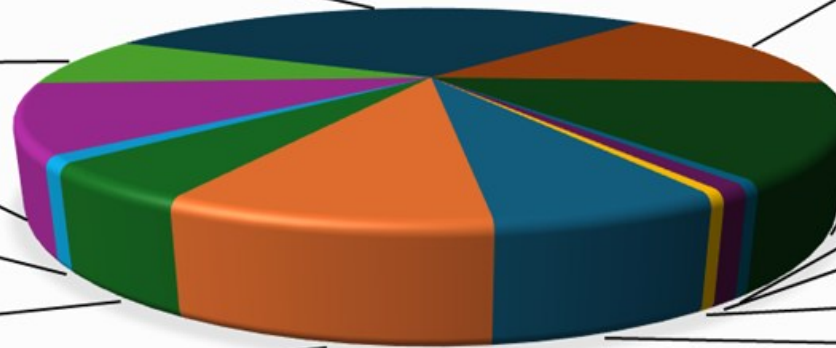
Enhancing Ranch and Rangeland Management Through Virtual Fencing,
\$40,000

TN Bar Pipeline Project,
\$52,706

Ranch Bot Water Storage Indicator, \$5,300

Lowland Ditch Headgate,
\$26,244

Del Monte Ditch (1881)- Diversion and Head gate Improvements, \$47,500



Frechman's Creek Conservation Easement,
\$71,250

Williams Ranch Conservation Easement, \$71,250

Expanding Utilization of Chaffee Provides to Increase Local Food Access and Purchasing, \$2,698

Dew Drop Drill, \$4,800

Hoosier Ditch Willow Removal Project, \$2,500

Keeping Working Lands Viable: Strengthening the Guidestone Colorado - Hutchinson Ranch Partnership, \$34,000

Chaffee County Common Ground: An Evolving Program

The Chaffee Common Ground Program can be described as nothing short of a standout success. Like any strong program, it continues to evolve. Grounded in the vision outlined in Resolution 2018-46, approved by voters in 2018, its strategies are adapting to meet the moment while staying true to that original commitment.

Common Ground Reserve Fund

One key advancement in 2025 was the development of a strategy to establish and grow a reserve fund. The fund is expected to reach approximately 6 million dollars by 2030. This reserve will help ensure the program's long-term sustainability. It will provide stability during periods of lower tax revenue or unexpected demand for funding. It will also position the county to act quickly when significant project opportunities arise.

Building on a Partnership Model

In 2024, the Citizens Advisory Committee recognized that key partners can achieve deeper impact through sustained, multi-year efforts. Reliable funding is essential to that success. What began as a partnership model has grown into a targeted investment approach supporting organizations that deliver countywide impact across forest health, working lands, and growth-related challenges.

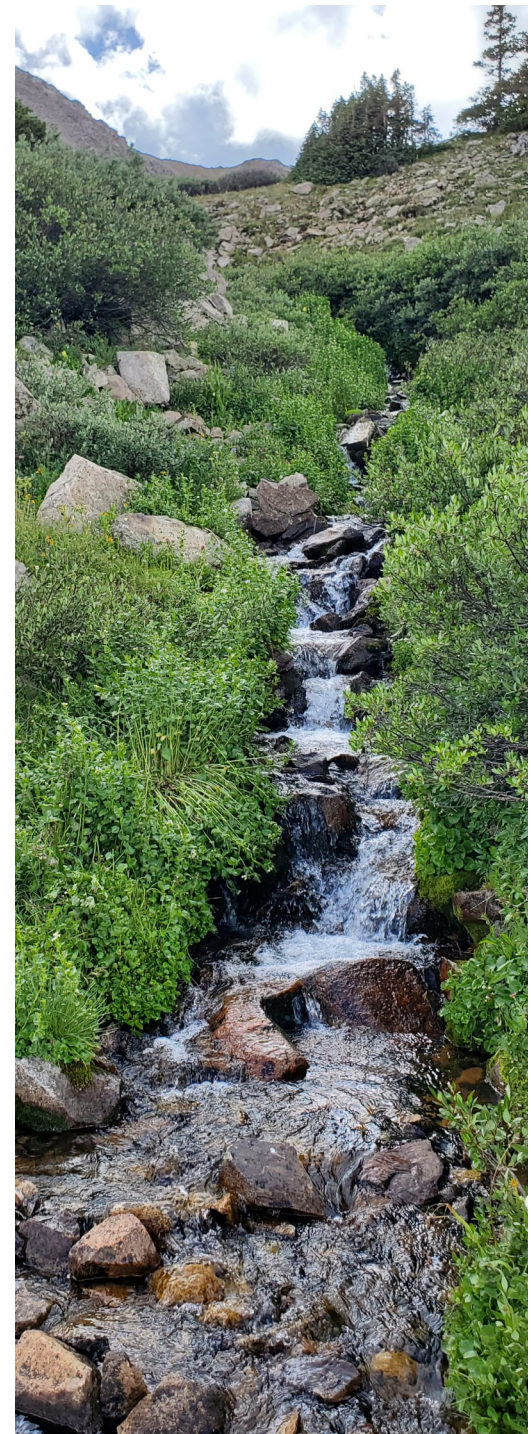
In 2025, this model continued to expand and strengthen. Current partnerships include:

- GARNA - Chaffee County Rec Adopters
- AHRA/BLM/USFS - Chaffee County Rec Rangers
- Chaffee County Fire Protection District - Chaffee Chips
- Central Colorado Conservancy - Community Conservation Connection

Working Lands Initiative

As efforts to support working lands expanded, a gap in resources for agricultural producers became clear. Acting on guidance from the Citizens Advisory Committee, the Board of County Commissioners hosted listening sessions with ag producers in Buena Vista and Poncha Springs. These conversations highlighted the need for dedicated coordination and support. In response, the County identified the importance of a coordinator to help assess needs and guide the development of a Working Lands Resilience Program.

A request for proposals was issued, and the Upper Arkansas Conservation District was selected to lead this work. This new capacity will strengthen support for agricultural producers and help sustain working lands across Chaffee County.



A headwaters stream near the Continental Divide that feeds the Arkansas River (Photo by G Hobson)

Spotlight: Chaffee County Rec Adopters

The Chaffee Rec Adopters program has delivered outstanding results since it began in 2021, promoting volunteerism on public lands throughout Chaffee County. In 2025 the program was recognized for its sustained success and selected for transition into the partnership model. As part of this evolution, and alongside changes in partner organizations that had collaborated in previous years, Chaffee County issued a request for proposals to coordinate the Rec Adopters program.

After being awarded the contract in July, the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association (GARNA) quickly worked with land managers

to plan events through the remainder of the year. During a protracted season the Rec Adopters held 13 events with 167 volunteers, totaling 702 hours contributing to improving recreation and reducing its impact on public lands.

With a successful 2025 season complete, GARNA has continued to build momentum while thoughtfully planning and hosting volunteer events in 2026. Common Ground is proud to partner with GARNA and looks forward to continued collaboration that empowers volunteers and enhances stewardship of public lands across the county.

Left: Volunteers contain campsites and install signage near Clear Creek; Below: Volunteers and USFS personnel after planting tree at Monarch Park Campground . (Photos by GARNA)



Spotlight: Chaffee County Rec Rangers

The Chaffee County Rec Rangers has also proven to be a successful grant that has helped land management agencies overcome staffing shortages and the challenges associated with the surge of recreation the county has seen in recent years. Common Ground has funded multiple Rec Rangers at the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area (AHRA), US Forest Service (USFS), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Rec Rangers educate visitors on Leave No Trace Principles, clean campsites, and conduct maintenance on recreation infrastructure.

Because of the sustained success of the Rec Rangers Program, Common Ground transitioned the program to a long term part-

nership model to ensure continued success and streamline the funding process. This year Common Ground funded three positions at AHRA, two positions with the USFS, and two positions with the BLM. When San Isabel National Forest faced hiring this year, AHRA stepped up to support the program and hire additional Rec Rangers to complete work on the National Forest. Through partnerships and ingenuity the program was once again able to maintain clean and safe recreational opportunities while mitigating the negative impacts to wildlife and the environment.

Rec Rangers from AHRA and the US Forest Service conduct cleanup and maintenance. (Photos by USFS)



Spotlight: Chaffee Chips

Chaffee County is fortunate to have outstanding partners in conservation. Those working to plan and implement large scale forest health projects on public lands are no exception. However, the wildfires do not simply stop at the boundaries of public lands. Some of the most critical areas to prepare for wildfires is in the Wildfire Urban Interface (WUI). While some larger scale Forest Health projects do work in the WUI, Chaffee Chips has provided essential support to landowners in these critical areas to help improve conditions on their land. The Chaffee Chips model has combined efforts of landowners and the Chaffee Chips program. Land owners remove slash and limb

up trees, making piles along the roadside in designated neighborhoods. Chaffee Chips then follows by chipping or removing the debris, resulting in significantly improved conditions.

Like Rec Adopters and Rec Rangers, this program was identified as ideal to transition to the partnership model. The Chaffee County Fire Protection District was selected to lead the program. In 2025, the program served four neighborhoods, 98 land owners, and removed 433 slash piles. As the program continues into the new year, new participants are expected and the program will continue to evolve to meet emerging need, preparing the county for future wildfires.

Left: Piñon-juniper forest near Salida (Photo by G Hobson);

Below: Chaffee Chips removes brush from local property (Photo by Colorado State Forest Service)



A Citizen Guided Fund

When the Common Ground ballot measure was approved, it established the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) that makes recommendations on fund expenditures to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC). Members are chosen from each of the three Commissioners Districts and have diverse expertise in agriculture, outdoor recreation, and forest management. These volunteers are appointed to the committee by the BOCC for staggered 3 year terms. Below are short bios of your 2025 CAC members.

Ben Lenth

Ben has worked in the field of land conservation for nearly 20 years, including 10 years with nonprofit land trusts including his current role with Colorado Open Lands. He also serves on the Board of Directors for the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District. Prior to that, he served as executive director of San Isabel Land Protection Trust in Westcliffe. Ben has worked with hundreds of landowners on conservation planning, and has raised and managed more than \$7 million for land protection, forest and stream restoration, and other conservation and nonprofit capacity projects across the state.

Ben has lived in Chaffee County with his family since 2015, after moving from Westcliffe where he served as vice-president of the Custer County Conservation District and managed a working ranch. Ben has a master's degree in ecology



from Colorado State University, has worked as a wildlife biologist for the US Forest Service, and served in the Peace Corps in Mexico, where he focused work on quantifying and marketing ecosystem services.

Sydney Schnurr

Sydney is a founding board member of Chaffee County Community Foundation. She retired from the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music where she taught in the Graduate Arts Administration Program. Prior to that she was Development Director for the Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival and Associate Development Director for the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. She also served as President of the Greater Cincinnati Association of Fundraising Professionals and was a member of 100 Wise Women.

She and her husband moved to Buena



Vista in 2017, where she has been an active member of the Midland Hikers. She has three daughters and nine grandchildren who keep her on her toes.

Paul Muelle

Paul has been involved in the environmental stewardship and outdoor recreation community for over 35

years. A graduate of Michigan State University with a degree in Landscape Architecture, he has served on multiple environmental nonprofits, and advisory councils on the local, state and federal level during his career.

Prior to his retirement in 2016, he served as the Chief of Natural Resources and Environmental Compliance for the Huron - Clinton Metropolitan Authority, a 5-county regional park agency in Southeast Michigan where he was responsible for the protection and management of over



25,000 acres of parkland, developing and coordinating projects in water resource protection, wildlife and forest management, and the preservation of the region's biodiversity thru restoring quality natural communities. Paul and his wife Peggy, moved to Chaffee County from Michigan in 2020 and are actively enjoying Colorado.

Jim LaRue

Jim LaRue has lived in Colorado all his life and in Chaffee County since 1992. He worked



in residential construction until 2008, when he and his wife decided to jump all-in on ranching. He has served on the Chaffee County Homebuilders Association, Chaffee County Right to Ranch Board and the Chaffee County Fair Board.

Jim was an active participant in the agriculture meetings during Envision Chaffee County's initial planning phase, and he helped draft the county's Right to Ranch ordinance. He is an active member of the Chaffee County Cattlemen's Association, Colorado Cattlemen's Association and the American Angus Association. His Post Office Ranch was the first to complete a conservation easement in Chaffee County,

and has been active advocates of conservation easements ever since.

Dani Cook

Dani Cook brings extensive public service experience with focus areas in outdoor recreation, wildland fire response, and natural resource project management. Dani worked for the Forest Service for 13 years, serving in leadership and planning roles across the western U.S, with the bulk of her career spent in the San Isabel National Forest working in and around Chaffee County. Dani's skills focus on project management, volunteer coordination, and grant administration while fostering an inclusive and collaborative work environment.



Dani moved to Chaffee County in 2011 as an Americorps volunteer which then sparked her interest in community driven collaborations. Seeking to further serve Chaffee County in a meaningful way, Dani now volunteers on the Poncha Springs Parks and Recreation Committee along with the Common Ground Citizens Advisory Committee and is excited to help inform decisions for the betterment of our public resources and community.

Joe Stone

Joe is an award-winning editor, journalist, and science writer with an extensive background in writing about water and land-use issues. A member of the Society of Professional Journalists, Joe has reported on local, regional and state water issues for more than 20 years. He currently works as the Communications Director for Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics (FSEEE) and is the Editor of FSEEE's quarterly publication, Forest News, where he researches and writes about forest management, forest health, and wildfire mitigation issues.



While working as a Senior Science Writer/Editor at Oak Ridge National Lab, Joe contributed to numerous reports about energy and environmental issues. Topics included nuclear power, biomass fuels, groundwater contamination, hydroelectric power, radioactive waste management, chemical weapons neutralization, radioactive emissions from coal-fired power plants, and much more. Joe's public service background includes serving on the Chaffee County Planning Commission, volunteering as president of the Friends of Browns Canyon Board of Directors,

representing Park County communities on the South Platte River Basin Roundtable, serving on the Harris Park Water and Sanitation District Board, and volunteering on the Organizing Committee for the Arkansas River Basin Water Forum.

Scott Gillilan

Scott Gillilan, as owner of Gillilan Associates, Inc., holds a BA in Biology and MS in Hydrology, chose the field of aquatic and land restoration sciences beginning in 1984 and has been professionally consulting in the field for 35 years as a project manager and design/builder working on both public and private lands. He has lived his entire life in the western US, mostly in the Rocky Mountains. He is now beginning retirement after moving to Chaffee County and Buena Vista 6 years ago. Formerly, his professional focus was on end-to-end management of large aquatic and terrestrial restoration projects meeting the ground. Now he is more focused on empowering individuals and groups to improve smaller communities' physical and economic resilience to climate change challenges, local food security and production, conservation, and wise stewardship of water, both in Chaffee County and beyond.



Scott believes in the combined power of small, organic, individual, and group efforts as well as larger strategic stakeholder efforts promoted by agencies, local government and non-profits stepping into helping with specific community needs. He believes that all these efforts have inherent risks and unknown outcomes, but the consistency of learning from each project, small and large, that makes a program successful. With his free time, Scott is an avid explorer of the trails, mountains, forests, waterbodies, and deserts in his backyard and other more far-flung geographies.

Gina Lucrezi

Gina Lucrezi serves as Chaffee County Commissioner for District 1 and is the BOCC liaison for the Citizens Advisory Committee, as well as the Arkansas Basin Roundtable. She has established herself as a community-focused leader with a background in both local governance and outdoor advocacy. Lucrezi served the Town of Buena Vista as a Trustee and Mayor Pro Tem, and is Vice President of Chaffee County Search & Rescue - North. In the private sector, Lucrezi is the founder of Trail Sisters, an organization dedicated to increasing women's participation and equity in trail run-



ning. Her background as a 10-time NCAA Division III All-American and professional trail runner has shaped her work ethic and approach to leadership.

Lucrezi finally moved to Chaffee County in 2019 after 10 years of visiting the valley. Her passion for outdoor recreation and love for the neighborly sentiment of the local community and their appreciation of heritage made Chaffee County the place Gina wanted to live and contribute to.

Chaffee County Community Foundation

In April, 2025 Chaffee County Community Foundation was contracted by Chaffee County to provide grant administration services for the Chaffee County Common Ground Program. CCCF is dedicated to making grantmaking in our community fair, transparent, and impactful. CCCF offers support to applicants every step of the way—from managing the online portal and confirming eligibility to providing technical guidance.

Chaffee County Community Planning and Natural Resources Department

In 2025 the Community Planning and Natural Resources Department was tasked with oversight of Chaffee County's Common Ground Program. Director Miles Cottom and Senior Planner Gabe Hobson have worked closely with CCCF to help guide the admiration of the program. They have also worked with the CAC and BOCC to develop policies, plan to establish a reserve fund, and establish long range programs.

Contact & Follow Us!

This report is the seventh installment of Common Ground's Annual Report, highlighting our commitment to accountability made during the campaign to support the ballot measure that funds the program through a 0.25% sales tax.

Common Ground promises transparency so that the community is aware of how public funds are distributed to achieve program goals as outlined to voters in 2018. All meetings are noticed and grant cycles are publicly announced. Funding applications are evaluated using criteria that ties awards to values outlined in the ballot measure. Applications receiving the highest scores are funded.

For more information, visit <https://www.chaffeecommunity.org/commongroundfund>.



Top right: Leroy Cogan, 6th generation Chaffee County rancher helping with fall work. (photo by A Cogan);

Below: Sunset at Vandaveer Ranch in Salida. (photo by G Hobson)

