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Community Creates County-Wide Results Through Common Ground

Thank you Chaffee County community for acting on Common Ground. In just two years, the fund established to protect forests, waters, and working lands from our dual threats of severe wildfire and impacts from growing population and visitation has delivered significant results. Results accomplished through citizens, non-profits, agencies and local governments working together in innovative and strategic ways.

Together, we are helping to ensure the future the ballot initiative promised. A future with healthier forests and reduced wildfire danger. A future where our beautiful open rural landscapes remain. A future where recreation is managed sustainably to protect our exceptional outdoor experiences and natural resources as we grow.

With Common Ground support, the community is creating and implementing strategic plans that encourage multi-benefit results, direct your tax dollars to the most impactful work, and deliver county-wide impact. Within these frameworks, citizens are planning and executing collaborative projects that matter and are also attracting additional funds to the county.

The Methodist Front project, developed by the Envision Forest Health Council, is delivering treatments to enhance forest health and decrease the risk of severe wildfire. Starting with Common Ground seed funds, project partners raised \$2.3 million in 2020 to begin a project that will ultimately treat more than 8,000 acres. The project includes collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, electric power providers, water interests, local fire departments, officials from three local governments, private land owners and state-

and national-level groups such as the National Forest Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Federation and Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative.

The Methodist Front project was chosen by the Forest Health Council based on computer modeling that identified the area as top-priority; a place where treatments will deliver the highest community benefit.

Similar results are taking shape in recreation management. Diverse user groups, non-profit organizations and local governments have worked collaboratively to deliver on-the-ground success toward the community goal of maintaining exceptional outdoor experiences while protecting natural resources and the benefits of our recreation-driven economy. Examples include better signs, restrooms, dispersed campsite containment and restoration of impacts.

The 21-member Chaffee Recreation Council is working with community members from 30 groups to deliver a science-based recreation management plan by next year. The strategic plan will catalyze further collaborative action to protect and enhance wildlife habitat, water quality and rural landscapes.

Collaboration is also the cornerstone of three conservation easements, funded by over \$100,000 in local donations, Common Ground and state entities. The easements will permanently preserve over 2,000 acres of some of the valley's key agricultural lands and views.

Thank you all for taking action to protect and enhance the forests, waters, wildlife and working lands that make Chaffee County such a special place to live and to visit.

— Cindy Williams is Chair of the Chaffee Common Ground Citizens Advisory Committee.



Protecting Chaffee County's Unique Character

Chaffee Common Ground enhances quality of life for everyone in the community by ensuring healthy forests, beautiful rural landscapes, and sustainable recreation opportunities — values identified by the 2017 Envision Chaffee County planning initiative that created a vision to achieve as the county grows and changes.

Common Ground supports locally based, collaborative programs and projects through a transparent grant process that leverages a portion of sales tax revenues to achieve the highest impact. The work supports the local economy and helps protect our community's unique character, now and for future generations.

Since voter passage of a dedicated sales tax in 2018 for the Common Ground Fund, the program raised \$1.16 million in 2019 and \$1.28 million in 2020. Nearly \$2.85 million in grants has been awarded to 15 groups and partnerships for 18 programs and projects.

In 2020, Common Ground invested \$450,753 in 10 local programs and projects and recommended an additional \$580,442 for multi-year proposals. A mini-grant opportunity developed this year to support small projects through a simplified application process yielded four awards of less than \$5,000 each for two agricultural enhancement programs and two recreation management projects.

In 2020, large forest health and wildfire protection proposals ranked well through the program's scoring rubric, resulting in a total of \$927,740 in investments for three programs and projects in this funding category. This year's commitments balance spending to-date with a strong agricultural focus in 2019, when \$945,000 was awarded over two years to support timely opportunities to protect rural landscapes through conservation easements.



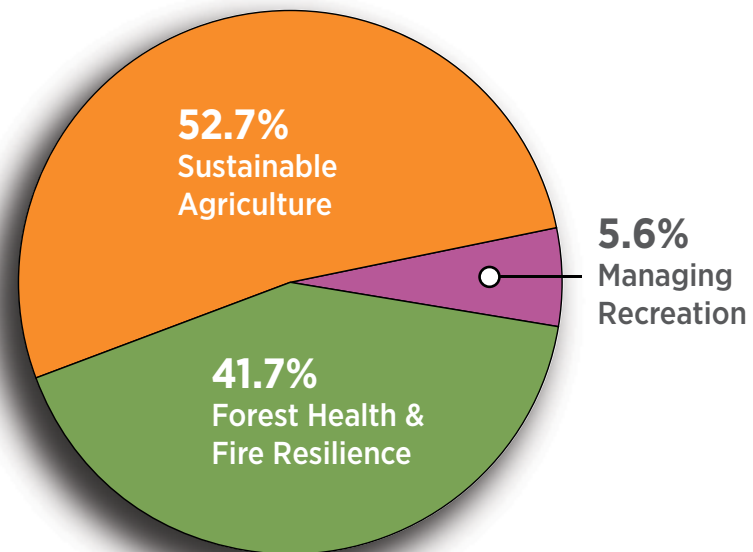


Addressing Top Community Concerns

Top community concerns identified by Envision Chaffee County are poor forest health contributing to the threat of severe wildfire and damaging floods that can follow; the threat of losing working agriculture and associated rural landscapes to growth; and negative impacts to public lands from rapidly growing recreation use. The 0.25% sales tax that funds solutions to these challenges allows residents as well as visitors to contribute to healthy forests, clean waters and sustainable recreation, ensuring that all who use and enjoy the county's natural resources also pay to protect them.

Common Ground strives to maintain a balance in investments among its three funding areas. Program revenues earmarked by the ballot measure are as follows: Strengthening forest health – 25%; Conserving and supporting working ranches and farms and rural landscapes – 25%; Managing the impacts of recreation growth – 5%. The remaining 45% is allocated in generally similar proportions among the three categories, minus administrative expenses that are capped at 5%. Administrative costs in 2020 were \$28,463.33 or 2.22%.

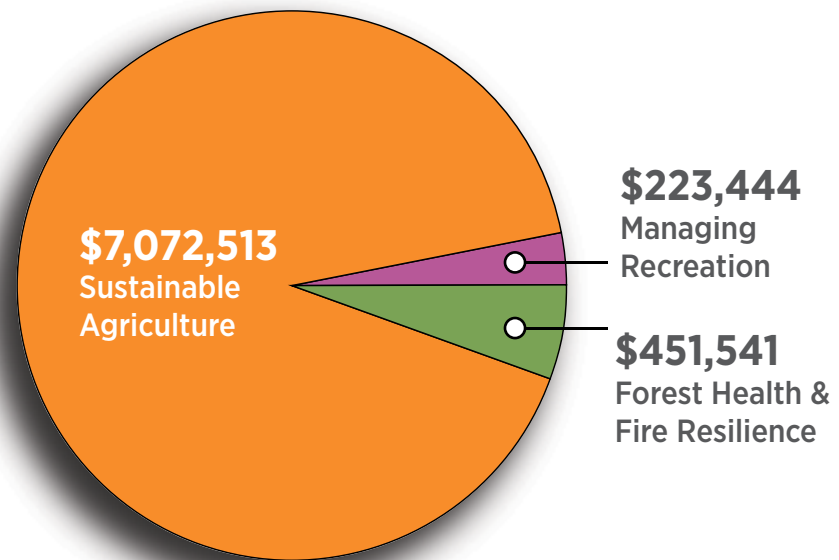
Distribution of Funds





Common Ground encourages collaborative partnerships that produce results across the landscape by assigning greater value to proposals that address multiple program goals. Also striving to leverage public dollars to the highest extent, annual revenues are balanced through long-term funding commitments of up to five years to increase combined cash and in-kind matches. The program's \$2.85 million in investments to-date will bring nearly \$9 million in value to the community by 2024.

Matching Funds

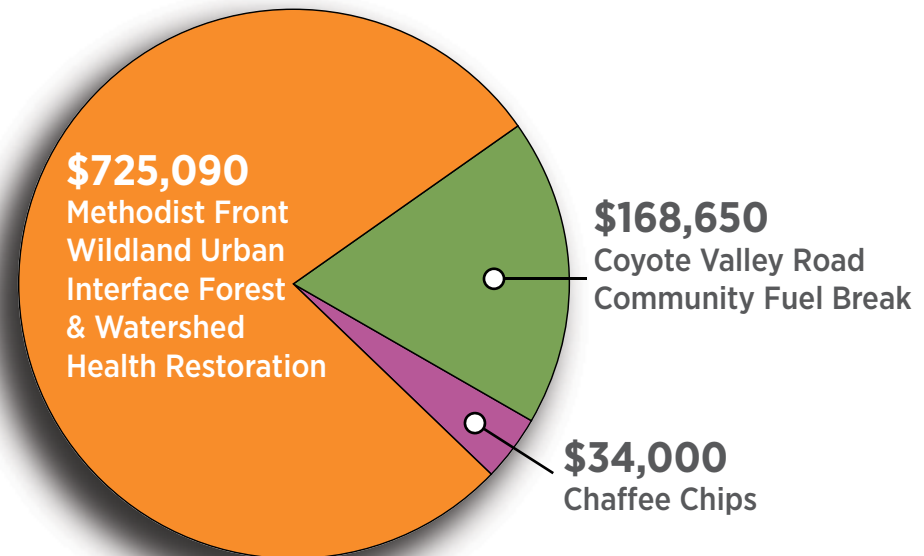




Forest Health Investments

Healthy lands, waters and wildlife are some of the main reasons people live in Chaffee County and visit. They are part of what citizens value most and are vital to the local economy. Forest health has declined due to insect infestations and years of forest fire suppression. Wildfires now are a serious community threat.

2020 Forest Health Grand Awards



Investments in wildfire mitigation and forest restoration projects in 2020 will create two community fuel breaks in top treatment priority areas identified in the Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. These fuel breaks protect thousands of citizens, provide safer firefighter access to forests, and improve egress for residents and visitors in the event of a wildfire. Common Ground grants totaling \$893,740 over two years for these fuel breaks are combined with significant match and in-kind contributions from state and federal sources to bring total funding raised in 2020 to \$2.3 million. This work is also supported by a three-year forest health program grant of \$258,330 awarded in 2019.



The fuel breaks are planned, funded and executed by the Envision Forest Health Council, a group of 30 leaders whose mission is to implement the community wildfire protection plan. The plan reduces overall community risk of the effects of a wildfire through computer modeling that identified the right areas to treat for the highest cost efficiency and community benefit.

Common Ground support catalyzes strategic planning and implementation efforts through groups like the Forest Health Council. Council membership grew in 2020, with the addition of state and national representatives such as electric power providers and the National Forest Foundation.

In 2020, Common Ground invested \$34,000 in Chaffee Chips, for the Chaffee County Fire Protection District to purchase trailers to haul slash, chain saws and other materials, rent a chipper and pay for labor for Chaffee Chips. In its first year, the service helped hundreds of homeowners remove nearly 500 piles of wood slash from wildland-urban interface neighborhoods. This work in specified neighborhoods also is driven by community wildfire protection plan mapping.



Forest mitigation work creates community fuel breaks

The Envision Forest Health Council will create two community fuel breaks in the coming years in top treatment priority areas identified by the Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

The Methodist Front Wildland Urban Interface Forest & Watershed Health Restoration Project creates a 10-mile-long area of fuel breaks to protect the southern flank of the Salida and Poncha Springs communities of 7,000 people. More than 8,000 acres of forest treatments

on city, state, federal and privately owned lands create the fuel breaks, connecting them to the 2019 Decker Fire burn area and extending protective measures across the west and up to Poncha Pass — an important ingress and egress route for the entire county.

Methodist Front protects municipal water supplies as well as the Gold Medal Trout Waters of the Arkansas River, by reducing the likely intensity of a wildfire in the forests above the

South Arkansas River. The water system includes two important ditches that serve wetlands and agricultural operations in the valley and beyond. The work also protects power lines and communications sites located in the Methodist foothills and on Poncha Pass.

The Coyote Valley Road Community Fuel Break is located south of the Mesa Antero subdivision west of Hecla Junction. The 2-mile-long, 400-foot-wide fuel break will improve firefighting capabilities in the event of a wildfire in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness, improve egress for residents and visitors, and protect structures in the surrounding area. The fuel break ties into future and previously completed mitigation work by the U.S. Forest Service on more than 6,000 acres to the west.

Both projects benefit wildlife because thinning the dense forest over-story improves habitat by allowing sunlight to reach the ground so that new shrubs and grasses grow, thereby providing better cover and forage for wildlife, according to Jim Aragon, Colorado Parks and Wildlife Area Wildlife Manager and a member of the Envision Forest Health Council.





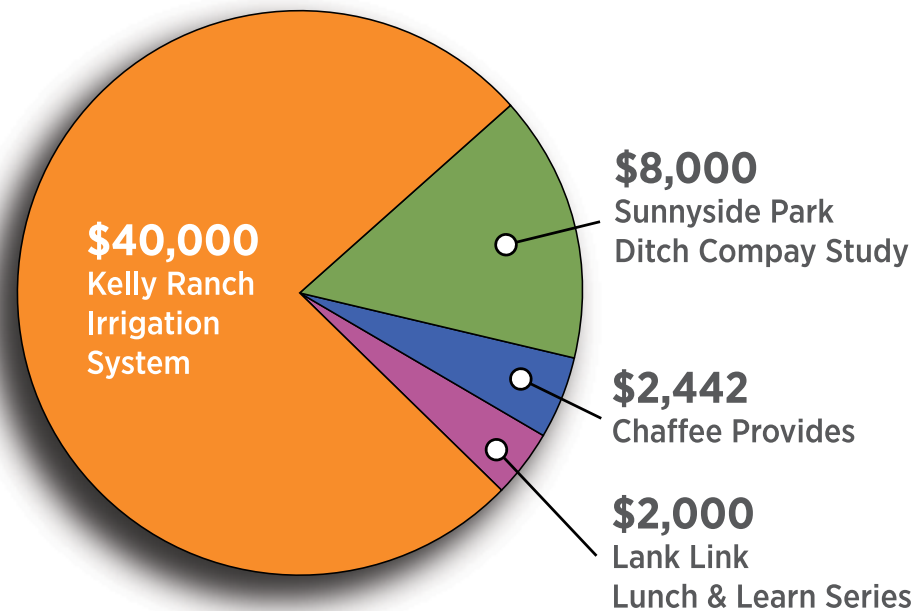
Sustainable Agriculture Investments

Working lands make up the many meadows that give our valley its beautiful open spaces and provide wildlife critical forage during deep-snow winters. Nine out of ten local producers say they want to keep their lands in production but face economic challenges and ever-increasing conflicts with the growing population.

Common Ground helps keep working lands working through conservation agreements and programs that support agricultural sustainability to protect rural landscapes for everyone. In 2019, Common Ground committed \$945,000 in three conservation easements that, with matching funds of nearly \$7 million, protect more than 2,000 acres of rural landscapes from development.



2020 Sustainable Agriculture Investments





Smaller agricultural grants were awarded this year to help rural lands stay productive and ensure our beautiful open spaces remain. In addition to green landscapes and wildlife habitat, many of these private lands provide ground water recharge, long-term preservation of water resources, economic diversity, and a direct tie to the valley's heritage.

In 2020, Common Ground invested \$40,000 in the Kelly Ranch EQIP Irrigation System to capture and transport water to 40 acres of the Kelly Ranch. The 389-acre ranch west of Johnsons Village is on the National Historic Register of Places and under a conservation easement since 2011. Irrigation supports the burrowing owl, a state threatened species, as well as elk, antelope and deer, and the property contains one of the largest natural high-altitude fen wetlands in Colorado. Funding partners include the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In 2020, the Sunnyside Park ditch company received \$8,000 to conduct a feasibility study for repairs and reinforcements of the ditch serving ranches north of Salida on both sides of Highway 291.

A mini-grant of \$2,442 to Envision Chaffee County and Guidestone Colorado supports Chaffee Provides, a marketing and educational program connecting agricultural producers and local consumers during a time of food insecurity due to COVID-19. Guidestone Colorado also received \$2,000 in 2020 for the Land Link Lunch & Learn Online Series that encourages conversation and resource development for land access and farm succession.

Common Ground invested \$75,000 in both 2019 and 2020 for Community Conservation Connection, one of the original Envision Community Action Plan projects developed by local agricultural operators and advanced in a partnership between Central Colorado Conservancy, County of Chaffee and Common Ground. The program is designed to support agricultural operators with 160 acres or more, who agree to limit non-agricultural development and continue basic management practices such as irrigation. The program compensates participating landowners on a per-acre basis for views, water, wildlife habitat and other values conserved by five-year, legally binding agreements.



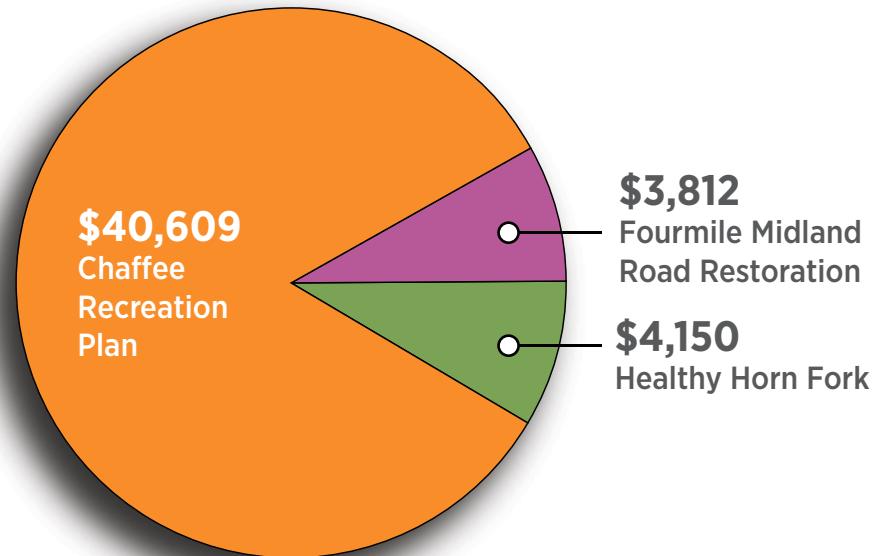


Recreation Management Investments

Quality outdoor recreation is an essential part of the Chaffee County lifestyle as well as a key economic driver. Informed by the community-led Envision Recreation in Balance planning program, Common Ground invests in programs and projects that address the impacts of recreation to forests, waters, wildlife and working lands.

Chaffee County sees up to 4 million visitors a year, according to state-level spending data that shows an average 13% annual uptick in visitation to Chaffee County in recent years. Visitation to public lands likely grew during the Covid-19 pandemic, but if growth continues at the pre-2020 pace the number could climb to 8 million by 2026.

2020 Recreation Management Grant Awards





Common Ground since 2019 has invested \$132,172 in five projects, four of which directly address on-the-ground impacts of growing recreation use. These grants support the costs of visitor education materials, road restoration to protect natural resources, bathroom facilities, and public lands stewardship by volunteers, non-profits and federal land agencies.

In 2020, Common Ground allocated \$40,609 over two years to the Chaffee Recreation Plan, for the delivery in 2021 of a strategic plan by the Chaffee Recreation Council, to manage outdoor recreation growth and support the goals developed by the Envision Recreation in Balance program. This investment supports community-led, strategic planning efforts that lead to implementation across the landscape.

Wildlands Restoration Volunteers received a \$3,812 mini-grant in 2020 for Fourmile Midland Road Restoration, to close and revegetate a 3,200-foot road section in the popular recreation area, as requested by Bureau of Land Management partners. The project helps direct recreation to less sensitive areas and allows deteriorated natural areas to recover for a better overall user experience.

A second mini-grant of \$4,150 was awarded to the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association in partnership with Noah's Ark Rafting & Adventure Co., U.S. Forest Service and Envision Chaffee County to plan and implement stewardship activities in Horn Fork Basin, a 6,000-acre area west of Buena Vista encompassing Bear and Kroenke lake drainages and three Fourteeners in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness. The project is designed to serve as a model for long-term stewardship of Wilderness areas.



Stewards work to fix problem areas on public lands

Local community groups are working on multiple projects that address the impacts of growing recreation use in Chaffee County. The variety of projects supported by the Common Ground Fund includes dispersed campsites containment, campfire ring deconstruction, and educational signage in popular recreation areas such as Horn Fork Basin, Fourmile and Raspberry Gulch.

Chuck Cichowitz, a backpacking outfitter in Horn Fork Basin and owner of Noah's Ark Rafting & Adventure Co., leads a stewardship project in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness



Area that received a Common Ground mini-grant in 2020.

"Over many years, I have seen the proliferation of over-sized campfire rings, spreading social trails, and damage to irreplaceable krumholtz fir trees at treeline, where limbs are broken off for an evening's fire," Cichowitz said.

In a unique, innovative collaboration between the business community, USFS, Envision and GARNA, the Healthy Horn Fork project maps and prioritizes stewardship works in the basin. This summer, a work crew remediated campsites and social trails that threaten resources such



as Boreal Toad breeding habitat, while encouraging recreation use where it can be accommodated. More than 60 campfire rings were removed by the crew.

The Southwest Conservation Corps also worked with the Forest Service this summer to erect about 3,000 feet of buck-and-rail fencing around popular campsites, to limit their expansion and associated plant degradation and soil erosion. The project reduced wildfire risk by dismantling large campfire rings and thinning thick stands of lodgepole pine to create fence material.

Friends of Fourmile, a chapter of GARNA, installed 30 signs in the Fourmile Recreation Area this year. The new education is meant to improve visitor behavior on roads and trails by sharing Leave No Trace-style ethics.

Fourmile has more than 200 miles of system roads, 27 miles of ATV trails, more than 35 miles of hiking and biking single-track, and hundreds of dispersed campsites. New sign information includes proper campfire practices, fire bans and how to report illegal fires, suggestions to pack out human waste, new maps with appropriate camp locations, and much more.



An Open, Transparent Process

Chaffee Common Ground promises transparency so the community is aware how public funds are distributed to achieve program goals. All meetings are noticed and open, and they include an invitation for public comment. Grant cycles also are publicly announced and supported by information sessions for potential applicants to ask questions and receive feedback about their proposals.

Grant applications are subject to criteria that ties awards to values outlined in the ballot measure. The criteria was initially developed in 2019 by the Citizens Advisory Committee and three Subject Matter Expert boards comprised of up to nine members each. The SMEs included ex-officio professionals and county residents that offer experience in one of the funding topics. Applications receiving the highest scores are funded, and final scores are shared with applicants. This objective system is modeled after similar grant programs around Colorado.

The Citizens Advisory Committee oversees the program. Seven members serve one-to three-year terms, and one-third of the terms expire each year. Members in 2020 were: Cindy Williams, Chair; Rick Hum, Vice-chair; Patti Arthur, Secretary; Michael Hannigan; Ben Lenth; Brink Messick; and Andrew Richardson. Commissioner Greg Felt served as the county liaison for the Citizens Advisory Committee.

Committee members Ben Lenth and Brink Messick were reappointed to their seats in 2020. Committee openings are publicly noticed and County Commissioners conduct applicant interviews before making appointments. All members agree to sign and abide by Guiding Principles that include a promise to follow the spirit and letter of the Colorado Open Public Meetings Act; disclose personal and professional relationships with grant applicants; and work for the best interest of the program and not act as a representative of one of the funding areas or region of the county.

The Committee recommends grant awards to the Board of County Commissioners, which makes final decisions. Awards are administered by the County of Chaffee through written agreements with each recipient.





How to Contact Us

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Photography Generously Provided by:
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