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Left: The “Frontside” and “Burnpile” Trails are popular in Salida

Above: Iconic Southwest scenery draws all of us to beautiful Chaffee County.

Taking Charge of Our Future

Chaffee Common Ground makes life better for everyone in our community. In just four years, we've made dramatic progress in all three priority areas of Common Ground: reducing wildfire danger and protecting our forest health; sustaining agricultural lands and preserving scenic landscapes; and managing the impact of rapid increase in recreational use while protecting our priceless wildlife and natural resources.

How did we get here? How did we make the transition to a community that takes charge of its future and empowers citizens to make a difference?

Author William Bridges expresses it well. He says that transitions in life are *"...the difficult process of letting go of an old situation, suffering the confusing nowhere of in-betweenness, and of launching forth again in a new situation."*

When we sit back and analyze the success of Common Ground, five strategies helped us make the leap from "confusing nowhere" to vital new ideas and ventures.

We engaged diverse voices early in community discussions about the future. While we don't want to make community decisions based on a one-note banjo played exceedingly loudly, we should value thoughtful conversation from different perspectives. The Envision process captured ideas from a broad cross-section of citizens, organized the information, and then created an action plan that included the seed of Common Ground. Voters did the rest, approving the ballot initiative.

We empowered citizen leaders, especially younger leaders. Speaking as one of our older citizens, we have as much to learn from them as they do from us. We gave many more people a voice at the community decision-making table. And we won't regret it. Examples include the Envision Forest Health Council, the Chaffee Recreation Council, the Wildfire Protection Plan, Chaffee Conservation Connection, the Chaffee County Community Foundation, and many more.

We learned to embrace innovation. If invention means going from nothing to something, then innovation means finding a thousand ways to expand on that "something." Programs like Chaffee Chips make it possible for hundreds of homeowners to more adequately protect their neighborhoods from wildfire,

and support for "virtual fencing" gives ranchers a next-generation tool to manage their livestock.

We explained things in plain English. We knew that voters want accountability and transparency so we helped people understand what is going to happen, when it's happening, who's making it happen, and what time, people, and money will be required. And, not surprisingly, we told the community that we expected positive results to happen, and they have! The ballot language was simple and straightforward: three big focal points, all of them understandable, important, and urgent.

We executed dynamic plans. No excuses, no bureaucracy, no fuzziness. Everyone just got it done. Thousands of acres are being treated to increase forest resilience in the face of increasingly severe wildfires. Conservation easements are protecting valuable agricultural lands. A science-based recreation plan is already making outdoor experiences in our county better, safer, and more sustainable. Collaboration among private, public, and governmental sectors is at an all-time high in our area. And Common Ground dollars that have been invested are being matched by millions of dollars in leverage from outside funding sources.

Some of you may know that one of my favorite quotes, *"Vision without funding is just a hallucination."*

The Common Ground initiative created the funding to make things happen. No hallucinations, just an increasingly positive view of the future.

— Michael Hannigan is Vice-chair of the Chaffee Common Ground Citizens Advisory Committee





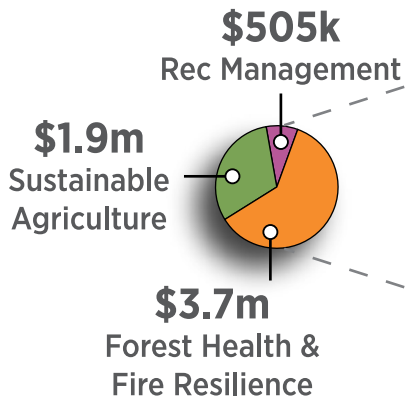
Cumulative Investments Improve Our Landscapes

Common Ground protects the county's integral landscapes — our most spectacular scenic views, our interconnected forest ecosystems, our watersheds and the wildlife habitats that define Chaffee County's unique character. These healthy lands are critical to the local economy. They are foundational to our quality of life and that of our kids and grandkids, should they be so lucky to live here.

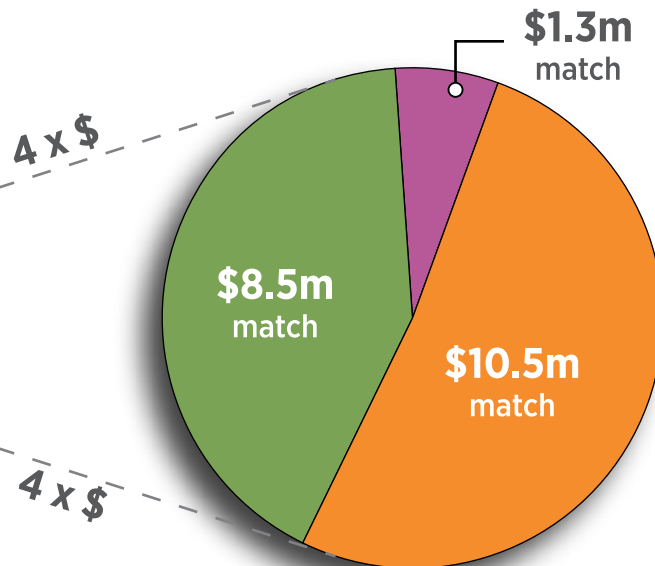
In its fourth year since voters passed a sales tax measure that makes the Common Ground Fund possible, the grant program has invested more than \$6 million in fifty programs and projects that support healthy forests, beautiful rural landscapes, and sustainable recreation opportunities. Matching investments and in-kind services for these grants will bring nearly \$27 million in value to the community — meaning that the dedicated sales tax so far has been leveraged by 4X to benefit the citizens of Chaffee County.

The cumulative impacts of these investments will change the landscape for the better. The programs and projects by people from many organizations, agencies, different parts of the county and beyond, weave together to achieve the visions the community has to protect what we love here.

Common Ground Funds



Matching Funds (Leverage)



Leveraging \$3.7 million in local dollars for forest health & wildfire resiliency, the Envision Forest Health Council has raised more than \$21 million to implement the Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, putting in motion two-thirds of the 30,000 acres of priority treatments outlined in the plan.

Just under \$2 million for sustainable agriculture is creating a myriad of “helps” to combat mounting challenges causing ranchers “death by a thousand cuts,” as they work to keep rural lands productive during a period of fast-paced growth in population and visitation. We are keeping miles of critical irrigation ditches flowing, and thousands of acres of land in agricultural production with these investments.



Outdoor recreation grants have been leveraged to bring more than \$1.8 million in value for planning and management solutions that protect landscape and watershed health. Strategies developed under the Chaffee County Outdoor Recreation Management Plan improve recreation sites, restore impacted areas, manage waste, decrease erosion, and educate more visitors.

Leveraging the dedicated sales tax revenues creates a lot of momentum, so much so that groups from around the state and nation are looking at Chaffee County as an example of how to get things done. The impact is not only on the landscape but also in our hearts and spirits as we strengthen our community's ability to achieve big visions for the future.

Page 4: The 598-acre Arrowpoint Ranch, pictured, was placed under a conservation easement in 2021 with support from Common Ground.

Left: Volunteers helped install sign posts at Chubb Park in the Fourmile Recreation Management Area for a camping management project that established designated campsites on the State Land Board parcel.

Multiplying Local Dollars by More Than 4X

	2019–2021		2022		Total	
	Grant Awards	Match	Grant Awards	Match	Grant Awards	Match
Forest Health and Fire Resilience	\$3,201,670	\$9,470,363	\$519,205	\$1,079,642	\$3,720,875	\$10,550,005
Sustainable Agriculture	\$1,749,524	\$8,344,106	\$208,100	\$178,675	\$1,957,624	\$8,522,781
Recreation Management	\$342,071	\$854,857	\$162,700	\$495,054	\$504,771	\$1,349,911
Totals	\$5,293,265	\$18,669,326	\$890,005	\$1,753,371	\$6,183,270	\$20,422,697



Forest Health & Wildfire Resilience Grants

In 2022, Common Ground invested \$519,205 in forest health and wildfire resilience. These grants support staff and equipment for firefighters and foresters to complete work prioritized in the community wildfire plan.

A grant to Chaffee County Fire Protection District creates a full-time staff position to manage wildfire mitigation programs for the next three years. Another to Colorado Firecamp provides personal protective equipment and a specialized utility terrain vehicle for slash pile management, agricultural ditch burning and other forest mitigation work.

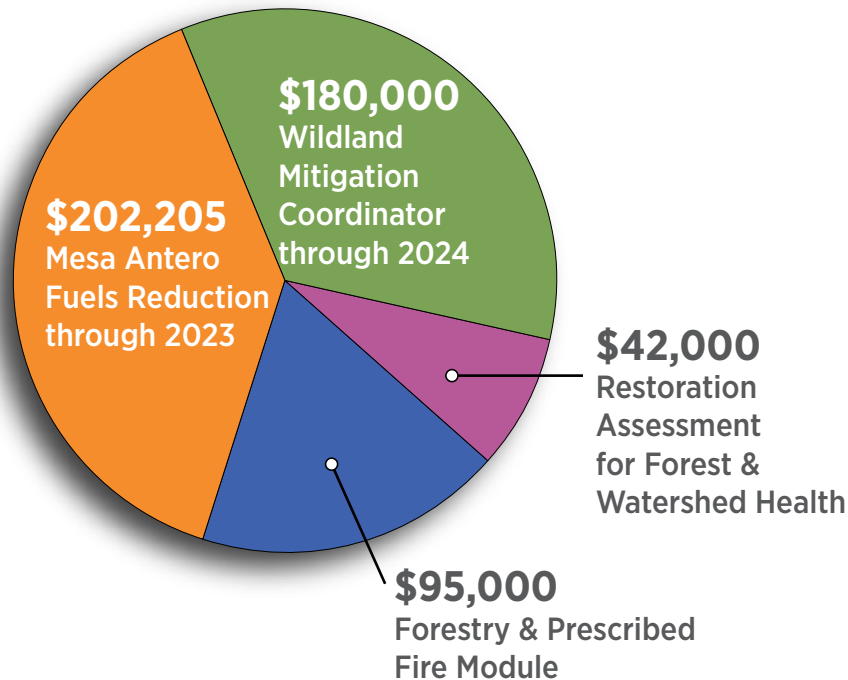
Investments in 2022 support ongoing forest treatments as planned and executed by the Envision Forest Health Council, now comprised of 44 leaders who work collaboratively to implement the wildfire plan and its top goal to treat 30,000 priority acres by 2030. This work is mapped and strategically planned to protect lives, including firefighter lives, water supply, critical infrastructure like power lines and communication towers, homes, wildlife habitat and recreation assets that support our quality of life and economy.

The wildfire plan shows that work on both public and private lands is needed, as one-third (10,000 acres) of the treatment priority areas are privately owned. Forest work involves thinning trees, low-intensity prescribed fire and mastication — a patch-clearing method used in the piñon-juniper forest.

For example, the Colorado State Forest Service is working to create fuel breaks along multiple roads in the county's wildland-urban interface (WUI). These fuel breaks are strategically located to help slow or stop a fire while improving firefighter access and evacuations.

By leveraging local dollars, the Forest Health Council has raised \$21.5 million for wildfire mitigation work and associated programs. A sample of funding partners include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado Department of Natural Resources' Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Plan (COSWAP), RESTORE Colorado, the Town of Buena Vista, Xcel Energy and the U.S. Forest Service.

Forest Health 2022



Forest Health total = \$519,205.00

“Funding success has been through our ability to use local funds to leverage additional resources from state and federal grant opportunities, corporate foundations, municipalities and the like, which are necessary to support treatments,” said Marcus Selig, Chief Conservation Officer with the National Forest Foundation and a member of the Forest Health Council.

Chaffee Chips continues to help community members create defensible space around their homes by coordinating neighborhood slash removal and chipping services. In three years since the program started with financial support from Common Ground, more than 400 landowners have spent 5,500 hours building 1,400 slash piles that were removed from WUI neighborhoods by the service partners.

Like many communities in the American West, Chaffee County’s forest health is poor due to insect infestations, drought, and decades of fire suppression. Severe wildfires are a serious threat as forests, waters and wildlife remain at risk yet they are essential to our quality of life and economy. Common Ground revenues are delivering measurable and significant results through cross-boundary treatment projects as well as collaborative programs that help citizens build a more fire-ready future.



Colorado Firecamp founder Kent Maxwell, left, the wildland firefighting school’s fire & forestry coordinator, discusses tree felling technique with a sawyer student from a Southwest Conservation Corps crew. See story, next page.

BV-area forest treatments on track

Two subdivisions and more than 45 individual landowners northwest of Buena Vista supported forest treatments in 2022 to reduce the risk and minimize the spread of a wildfire in North Cottonwood Creek, the source for the town's drinking water supply.

The project reduces tree density with 8-person crews using chainsaws to create "shaded" fuel breaks in Game Trail and Trail West in the North Cottonwood Creek drainage. Sawyers cut cords of firewood for the neighbors and either piled the remaining slash to be burned on-site or hauled it away to chip for mulch.

Treatments were completed by Colorado Firecamp in a partnership with three chainsaw crews from the Southwest Conservation Corps and other sawyer students of the Maysville-based wildland firefighting school. Twenty-five weeks of crew time, along with funding for firefighter and sawyer training for crew members, was provided by the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP).

Work started in June in Game Trail, where many lots border the National Forest and evacuation from a wildfire might be necessary along County Road 365. Roadside thinning can reduce the intensity of a wildfire as it nears routes of travel to improve firefighter and public safety.

In August, forest treatments moved to Trail West, where 40 acres of open space owned by the homeowners association abutting National Forest lands was treated, along with work along subdivision roads closer to homes. The Douglas fir trees in the area have been decimated by an insect infestation.

Funding for additional forest treatment, including the adjacent Trail West Young Life camp, was announced by Gov. Jared Polis in July, when the state granted \$1 million in support to Chaffee and Lake counties to kick-start these needed projects to protect life, property and critical infrastructure, according to the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

The project will resume in 2023. "We're on track to treat more than a hundred acres to help protect the homes and the watershed," said Kent Maxwell, Colorado Firecamp's fire & forestry coordinator. "Just as important, we're helping build community and develop our workforce to complete future wildfire mitigation projects."

Two additional projects continued this year north of Buena Vista, along the Arkansas River and west of Highway 24 to protect the Gold Medal fishery while improving habitat for bighorn sheep and other wildlife while



protecting homes. These projects, named Riverside and Railroad Bridge, involved work managed by the National Forest Foundation on National Forest lands and private property.



Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Landscapes Grants

In 2022, Common ground awarded \$208,100 in grants for continued support to sustain rural landscapes and the county's working lands. An exciting new project tests the efficacy of virtual fencing to more efficiently manage livestock on private and public lands (see story, page 10).

Investments in the county's irrigation system and intricate network of ditches continued in 2022 for maintenance projects that help grow hay, water stock and keep the valley green and productive. Agricultural irrigation also recharges ground water supply and supports critical wildlife habitat.

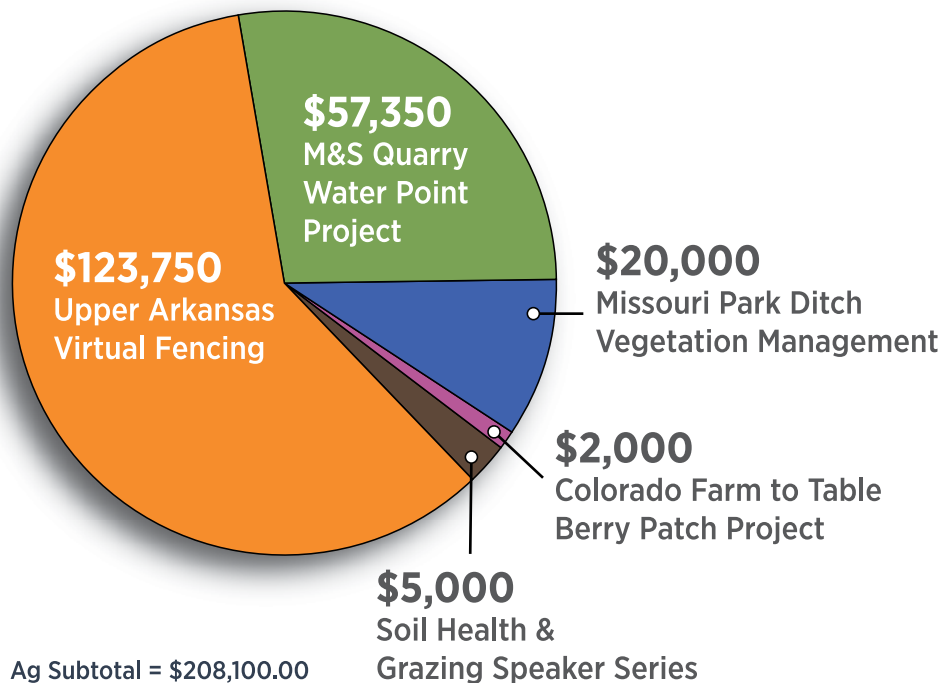
In 2022, Centerville Ranch was protected from development in perpetuity through a Central Colorado Conservancy agreement with the landowner supported by Common Ground funds. The project is part of a package of easements financed in part by Common Ground grant awards that will ultimately protect about 3,000 acres of working ranch lands in Chaffee County. Additional lands already protected forever are the Arrowpoint Ranch in the center of the valley near Centerville, as well as the Lewis Ranch near Poncha Springs.

The Community Conservation Connection program, also managed by the Conservancy, has grown to involve 10 large landowners with a combined 3,958 acres participating in five-year conservation lease agreements that limit development and continue basic agricultural management practices such as irrigation.

Additional investments in 2022 involve a project that moves an important water supply for grazing livestock and wildlife away from a popular outdoor recreation destination so that animals can continue to drink from the only source in the area.

Two mini grants of less than \$5,000 each support an agricultural speaker series and a cooler to store fresh berries at The Shine Farm.

Sustainable Agriculture



Virtual fencing helps ranchers address evolving changes

New tech can help mitigate conflicts between livestock and recreational land users

Agriculture has been practiced for millennia, but that doesn't mean farmers and ranchers have stopped innovating since the invention of barbed wire. This is clear in Chaffee County, where Central Colorado Conservancy is partnering with the U.S. Forest Service and local ranchers to launch a pilot virtual fencing project.

Virtual fencing is a new technology for the grazing world. It uses a network of radio towers and programmable animal collars to set virtual fence boundaries. The Conservancy received a Chaffee Common Ground grant in 2022 to purchase the first set of towers for the region.

The organization reports that local ranchers are excited to try the technology, which enables them to manage livestock to protect riparian areas and the soil, target noxious weeds and improve forest health.

Ranchers also hope virtual fencing will mitigate conflicts between livestock and recreational land users. Such conflicts are on the rise as recreation booms in Chaffee County, bringing visitors who are not always familiar with or respectful of fence and gate etiquette.

While virtual fencing can't replicate the value of a rancher riding out to check on a herd, it can help ranchers meet new and old

challenges, and ensure that they will be riding fence lines and tending to the land long into the future.

New technology sets virtual fence boundaries to manage livestock and could help ranchers with many different and growing challenges. Photo by Taf McMurray





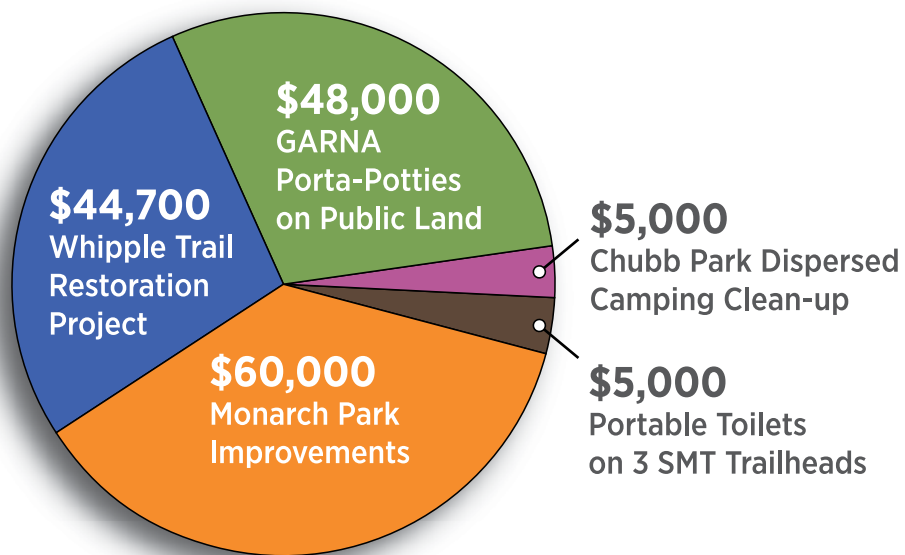
Recreation Management Grants

Common Ground since 2020 has supported a community process under the Envision Recreation in Balance program to create the Chaffee County Outdoor Recreation Management Plan. Approved in June of 2021, the recreation plan outlines and promotes strategic efforts across the landscape and among stakeholders, many of which are funded by Common Ground.

The plan helps guide current and future recreation across all jurisdictions in the spirit of shared stewardship with state and federal land management agencies. Main goals are to protect natural resources and maintain exceptional outdoor experiences while sustaining the economic benefits of tourism.

Among \$162,700 invested in 2022 for recreation management that protect watersheds and landscapes were projects that improve popular camping areas as well as one of the most-used trails in Buena Vista to ensure that healthy forests, waters and wildlife are in balance with growing outdoor recreation.

Recreation Impacts Management



Rec Impacts Management Subtotal = \$162,700.00

Camping management projects include assistance with renovations at the U.S. Forest Service Monarch Park Campground, to protect nearby streams and riparian areas by reducing user-created social trails, grading eroded areas and revegetating old campsites.

The Whipple Trail project, funded in-part by a grant to the Town of Buena Vista, addressed the impacts of overuse in 2022 by improving access points to the river, naturalizing numerous social trails to eliminate erosion, and enhancing two existing overlook areas.

The Chaffee Rec Rangers and Chaffee Rec Adopters programs (see story, page 12) continued for a second season in the summer of 2022 to ensure high-quality, low-impact camping opportunities and increase visitor education. The number of Rangers doubled in 2022 to eight full-time staff working for the USFS Salida Ranger District, Bureau of Land Management and the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area.

Two separate grants to the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association (GARNA) and Salida Mountain Trails paid for 30 portable toilets placed at a dozen popular

recreation areas this summer, part of a Keep it Clean initiative outlined in the Chaffee Rec Plan. The project addresses an immediate need as visitation grows while providing time to pursue permanent vault toilets.

Common Ground revenues are leveraged to attract more funding to implement strategies on the landscape that are outlined in the Chaffee Rec Plan. To date, \$504,771 in Common Ground investments has been matched by more than \$1.3 million in cash and in-kind contributions for recreation growth management, including from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Town of Buena Vista, U.S. Forest Service and the Chaffee County Visitors Bureau.

About 200 volunteers helped clean up recreation areas in 2022, removing 7 tons of trash and campfire ash from popular dispersed camping areas.



Volunteers ‘Adopt’ public lands to support value of recreational lands

Chaffee Rec Adopters’ cleanup events, sign-up map & mobile app help address growth in visitation

Volunteers are helping land managers address the impacts of visitation to Chaffee County’s public lands through the Chaffee Rec Adopters program supported by Common Ground funding.

The program allows the public to be active participants in preserving the beauty and value of recreational lands. “Adopters” not only monitor conditions using a mobile app but also track and report their stewardship efforts.

During six cleanup events in 2022, volunteers collected trash and fire pit ash, dismantled inappropriate fire rings, and downsized fire pits that were too large or too tall. They used heavy-duty, biodegradable lawn bags to collect the ash with shovels, buckets and trash cans, dumping

the refuse into trailers provided by Chaffee County Fire Protection District.

The cleanup events removed more than 7 tons of material from popular camping areas this summer. “I appreciate the community coming together to care for these areas. Cleaning out fire rings and removing

excess rings helps keep everyone safer,” Chaffee Fire Chief Robert Bertram said.

Adopters also helped transition the State Land Board’s Chubb Park camping area in the Fourmile Recreation Area to designed sites. They installed natural barriers to contain campsites, steel fire rings for increased wildfire safety, and portable toilets and educational signage to ensure that clean, quality camping and wildlife habitat is available in the future at an area that could have been closed by without new management.

Chaffee Recreation Adopters’ use of the Chaffee Rec Collector app helped assess land conditions, report problems to land management agencies and take action such as the cleanup days. The data is aggregated in an online dashboard to support planning and management by the USFS, BLM and AHRA.

Volunteers can join group cleanup events or steward lands on their own. About 200 people attended events and 40 signed up to steward sections of public lands in 2022.

Chaffee Rec Adopters was also funded in 2022 by Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) and the Chaffee County Visitors Bureau.



Contact and Follow Us!

This report is the 4th installment of Chaffee Common Ground's commitment to accountability made during the 1-A ballot initiative that funded the program through a 0.25% sales tax.

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

The Citizens Advisory Committee oversees the program. Members in 2022 were Cindy Williams, Rick Hum, Michael Hannigan, Kit Kuester, Ben Lenth, Brink Messick, Dan Omasta and Sydney Schnurr. Commissioner Greg Felt served as the county liaison. The program thanks former member Andrew Richardson for more than two years of service on the committee.

For more information visit chaffeecommonground.org or contact Program Administrator Ben Doon at ccg.cac@gmail.com.

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www.chaffeecommonground.org



Photos throughout the report are by Big River Collective and many grant recipients.