



CHAFFEE
COMMON
GROUND

Annual Report 2023





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Cumulative Investments in Chaffee County's Landscapes

The Common Ground Fund protects Chaffee County's spectacular scenic views, interconnected forest ecosystems, clean water and wildlife habitats that define our unique character. These lands are not only critical to the local economy but are foundational to our quality of life. The Fund's investments to date total \$7.6 million to dozens of local programs and projects that support healthy forests, rural landscapes, and sustainable outdoor recreation. Matching investments and in-kind services associated with these grants will deliver \$28 million in benefit to the community by 2026.

With \$4.2 million from the Common Ground Fund for forest health & wildfire resiliency, the Forest Health Council has raised half the money needed to implement the ten-year Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which will reduce the potential effects of a wildfire and provide more safety to wildland firefighters and citizens.

About \$2.5 million for sustainable agriculture is supporting programs that combat challenges ranchers face as they keep lands productive during a period of fast-paced growth. Common Ground is helping to keep miles of irrigation ditches flowing and thousands of acres of land green with these long-term investments.

Recreation management grants have been leveraged to bring \$2.6 million in value for planning and management solutions that protect landscape and watershed health during a time of soaring visitation to public lands. Strategies developed under the Chaffee County Outdoor Recreation Management Plan improve recreation areas, restore impacted lands, manage waste, decrease erosion, and educate more visitors.

In 2023, nearly \$1.5 million in grant awards went to 18 recipients. Awarded programs and projects included matching cash and in-kind contributions of \$2.8 million. This report details those investments — the partnerships, innovative ideas and hard work that are benefiting our landscapes and strengthening our community's ability to achieve big visions for the future.

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

Previous page: A rancher attaches a radio collar tracking device used in Central Colorado Conservancy's Vence livestock management project, which is funded by Chaffee Common Ground.

Above: Volunteers with Chaffee Rec Adopters clean up a large campsite in the Clear Creek drainage. Campfire rings are frequently downsized to reduce human-caused wildfire danger in dispersed camping areas.



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.

Left: The Browns Grotto dispersed camping area near Hecla Junction was improved with designated sites and metal campfire rings in 2023. Bureau of Land Management staff worked with Chaffee Rec Rangers and volunteers to complete the project. Similar work started at the Shavano area on County Road 250 as well as in north Fourmile’s Midland Hills. A Common Ground grant to the National Forest Foundation supplies materials for these camping management projects.

	2019–2021		2022		2023		Total	
	Grant Awards	Match	Grant Awards	Match	Grant Awards	Match	Grant Awards	Match
Forest Health & Fire Resilience	\$3,201,670	\$9,470,363	\$519,205	\$1,079,642	\$450,451	\$398,861	\$4,171,326	\$10,948,866
Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Conservation	\$1,749,524	\$8,344,106	\$208,100	\$178,675	\$ 588,077	\$137,224	\$2,545,701	\$8,660,005
Recreation Impacts Management	\$342,071	\$854,857	\$162,700	\$495,054	\$402,800	\$299,531	\$907,571	\$1,649,442
Totals	\$5,293,265	\$18,669,326	\$890,005	\$1,753,371	\$1,441,328	\$835,616	\$7,624,598	\$21,258,313



Forest Health & Wildfire Resilience Grants

In 2023, Common Ground invested \$450,451 in forest health and wildfire resilience. This funding continues to support staff and equipment for firefighters and foresters to complete work prioritized in the community wildfire plan. Staff support goes to Colorado Firecamp to hire a part-time forestry technician and seasonal work crews from Southwest Conservation Corps. Along with Colorado State Forest Service and others, Colorado Firecamp is a major partner in the Chaffee Treats program, which works with homeowners to mitigate private forested property in treatment priority areas as defined in the community wildfire plan.

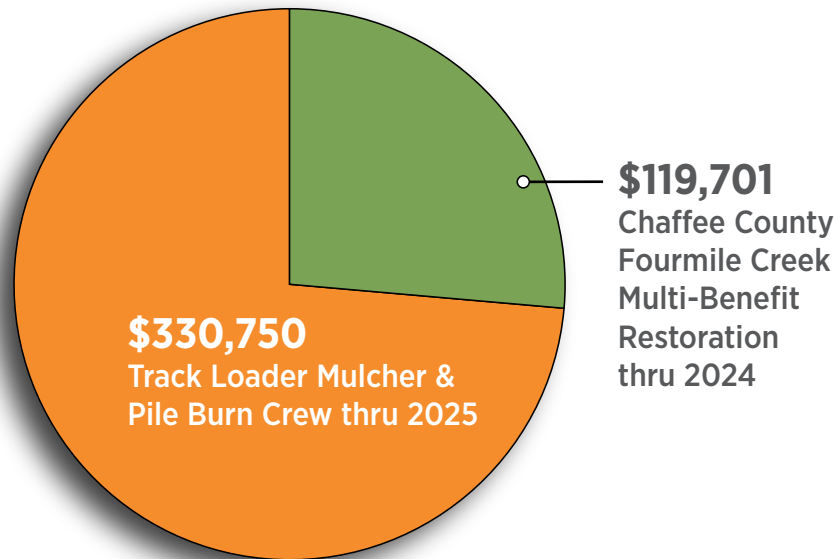
A two-year grant awarded in 2023 to Envision Chaffee County and EcoMetrics supports the restoration of Fourmile Creek and surrounding wetlands, to improve wildlife habitat and wildfire resiliency in the treatment priority area.

A mini-grant was awarded to Chaffee County Fire Protection District for signs that notify visitors about fire danger level and campfire restrictions at the department's highly visible stations throughout the county.

These investments support ongoing forest treatments as planned and executed by the Forest Health Council, comprised of 60-plus leaders working together 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 the local quality of life and economy.

By leveraging local Common Ground dollars, the Forest Health Council has raised \$30 million for wildfire mitigation work and associated programs. A sample of funding partners include the Colorado Water Conservation Board, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado Department of Natural Resources' Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Plan (COSWAP), RESTORE Colorado, Xcel Energy and the U.S. Forest Service.

Forest Health 2023





Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Landscapes Grants

Common Ground awarded \$588,077 in grants to support rural landscapes and working lands in 2023.

Maintenance projects ensure that the irrigation system will continue to help grow hay, water stock and keep the valley productive. These grants were awarded to seven different ditch companies, for operations from the Poncha Springs area to east of Salida to well north of Buena Vista. The Murray Ditch Company repaired bank damage and removed debris piles caused by a flash flood on the South Arkansas River in 2022; the Sunnyside Park Ditch Company finished piping a 2-mile section of ditch underground; and culverts were installed along multiple ditches to conserve water, improve annual maintenance capabilities and avoid problematic bank failures.

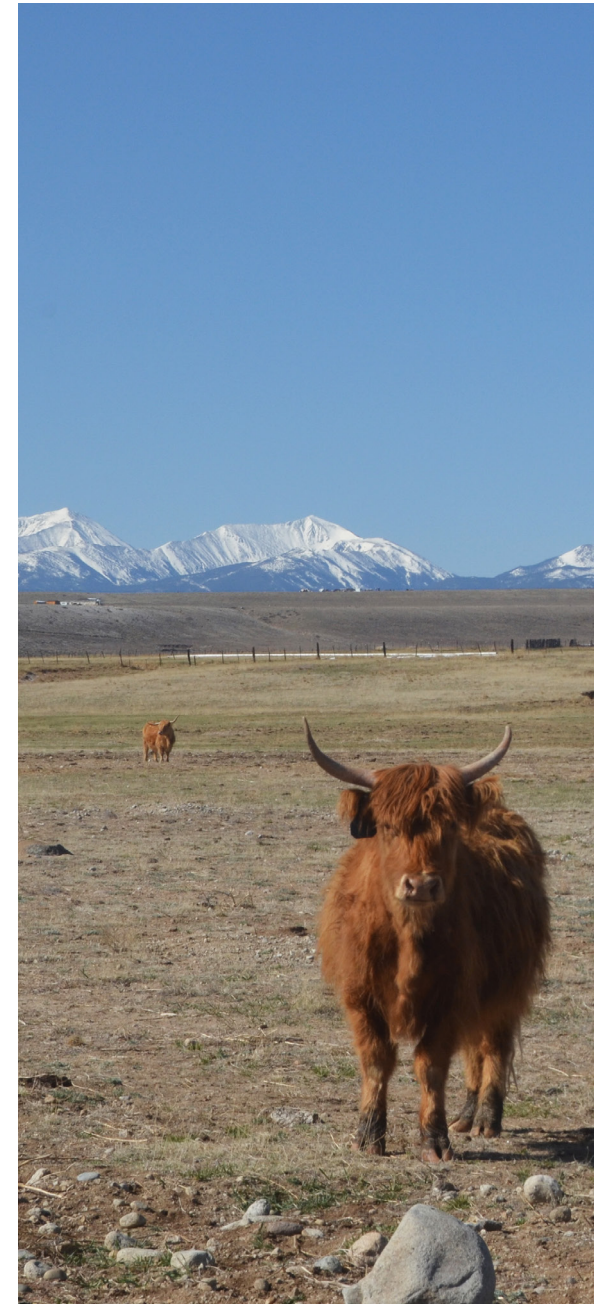
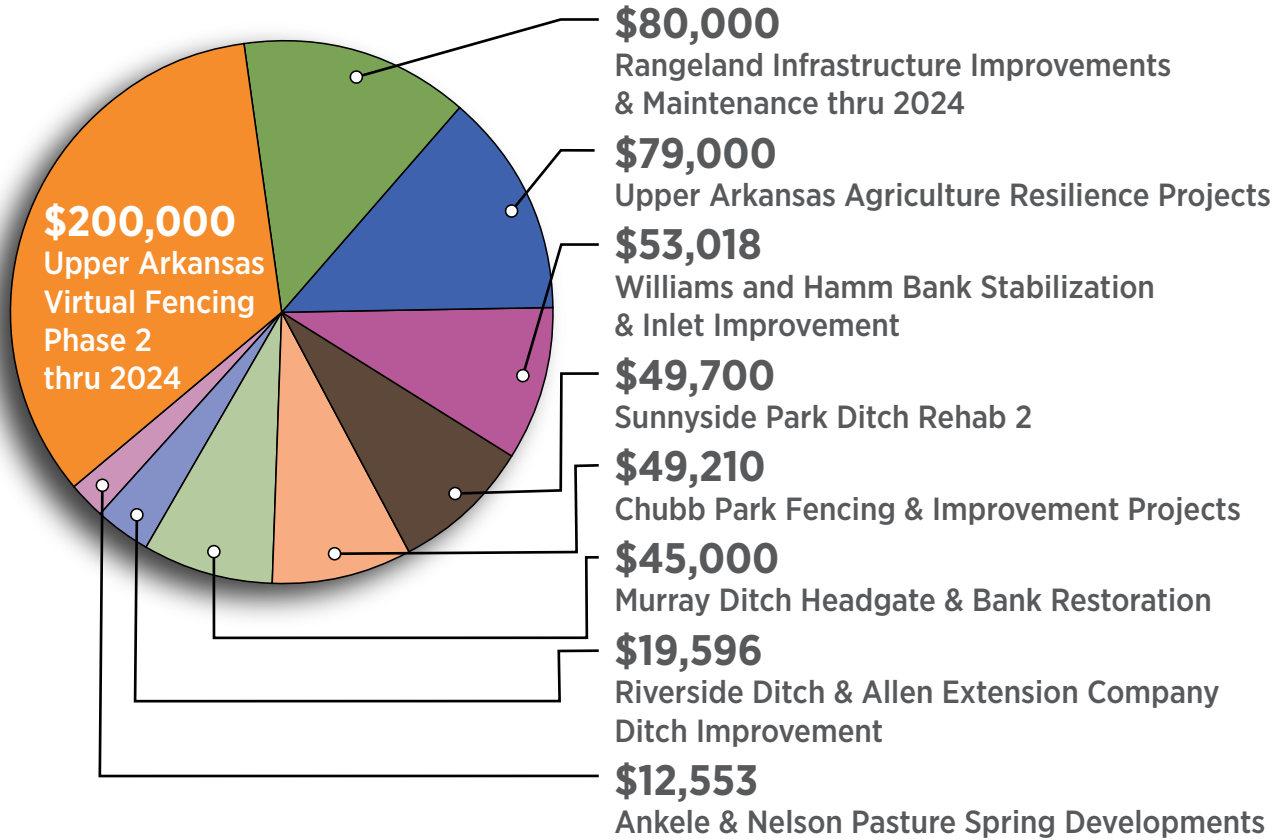
Common Ground also invested in new infrastructure to reduce conflicts with outdoor recreation uses, such as cattle guards to replace gates that are frequently left open by outdoor enthusiasts, and adding stream culverts, fencing, stock tanks and educational signage.

The Central Colorado Conservancy's virtual fencing program was supported for a second time in 2023, expanding it to ranchers using radio technology to manage livestock.

The Community Conservation Connection program, also managed by the Conservancy, involves 10 large landowners participating in five-year agreements that limit development and continue basic management practices such as irrigation. And the Conservancy completed two permanent conservation easements on the Lewis Ranch near Poncha Springs and the Rawhide Ranch near Nathrop. The two agreements are part of a package of easements now permanently protecting more than 3,500 acres of ranch land in Chaffee County. The agreements were financed in part by previous Common Ground grants.

Mini grants of less than \$5,000 each went to three agricultural non-profits in 2023, to support a volunteer land stewardship program, career education, and the purchase of a seeder for a community rental program.

Sustainable Agriculture 2023



Right: The gorgeous Arrowpoint Ranch in Nathrop is one of several conservation easements supported by the Common Ground Fund. Investments in these agreements are in response to clear public support for the local agricultural community and the value placed on the county's iconic Colorado landscapes. The lands also provide important ecosystem services such as irrigated pasture and critical habitat for many species of wildlife.



Buena Vista Singletrack Coalition won a mini-grant to address waste issues in the Midland Hills Trail System, including placing new pet waste stations along the trails.

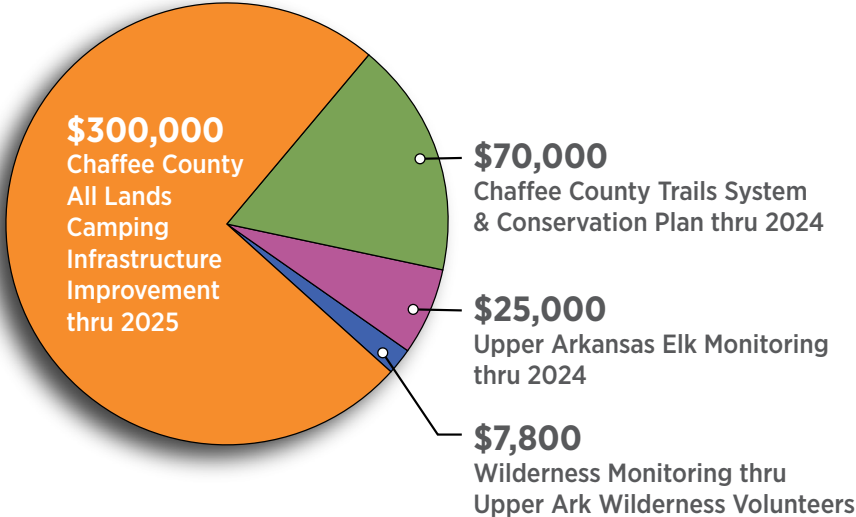
Outdoor Recreation Management Grants

Common Ground invests in programs and projects that manage the impacts of outdoor recreation growth to protect landscape and watershed health. Many of these projects are outlined as strategies in the Chaffee County Outdoor Recreation Management Plan, which helps guide recreation use in the spirit of shared stewardship among all stakeholders, including federal and state land managers. The plan’s main goals are to protect natural resources and outdoor experiences while sustaining the economic benefits of tourism.

Among \$402,800 invested in 2023 for recreation management was a three-year grant to support a transition on some federal and state lands to designated dispersed camping. Funding pays for site posts, metal fire rings, signs and barriers to protect the camping experience and landscape health. Other funded projects include elk monitoring by satellite, backcountry campsite condition monitoring by mobile app, and trails system planning.

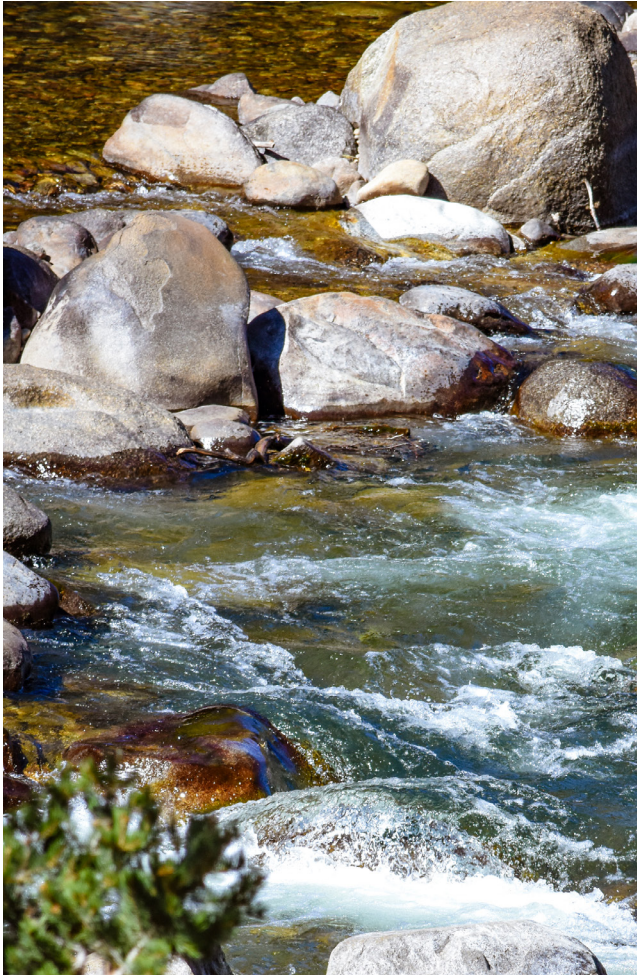
Previous multi-year grants continue to support new management programs such as Recreation Rangers and Chaffee Rec Adopters, a volunteer stewardship group, and seasonal portable toilets at busy trailheads — part of a Keep it Clean initiative outlined in the Chaffee Recreation Plan.

Recreation Impacts Management 2023



Mini-grants were awarded for volunteer education, waste management on Buena Vista’s trails system, and the McPhelemy Park Learning Loop, an educational outdoor experience around the town lake.

As with the other funding categories, Common Ground revenues spent on recreation management are leveraged to the highest extent. Funding partners include Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Water Conservation Board, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, National U.S. Forest Service and Chaffee County Government.



Left: The McPhelemy Park Learning Loop around the town lake in Buena Vista was supported by a Common Ground mini-grant.



Commitment to the Community

This report is the 5th installment of Chaffee Common Ground's commitment to accountability made during the 2018 1-A ballot initiative that funded the program through a 0.25% county sales tax.

The program promises transparency so the community is aware how public funds are distributed to achieve program goals. 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 2023 were Cindy Williams, Michael Hannigan, Kit Kuester, Ben Lenth, Dan Omasta, Jim LaRue and Sydney Schnurr. Commissioner Greg Felt served as the county liaison. The program thanks former member Brink Messick for more than four years of service on the committee.

For more information, visit the website or contact Program Administrator Ben Doon at ccg.cac@gmail.com.