

2015 | Larimer County
Natural Resources
STATE OF THE RESOURCE



Cover and below: The Laramie Foothills Bison Conservation Herd was released onto Red Mountain Open Space and Soapstone Prairie Natural Area on Nov. 1, 2015. Photo © William Cotton



THUNDERING INTO THE FUTURE

I always enjoy looking back on the work accomplished each year and sharing the highlights in this annual State of the Resource report. As you read, you'll note that much of the work accomplished involves monitoring wildlife, vegetation and trails. The resources we protect are fluid, and good stewardship requires frequent monitoring and adaptive management.

A particular highlight of 2015 was the reintroduction of bison to Red Mountain Open Space and Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. The Laramie Foothills Bison Conservation Herd now freely roams a fenced, 1,000-acre pasture of shortgrass prairie on Larimer County's and the City of Fort Collins' largest protected areas. This, too, is an adaptive management project, as Larimer County and its partners monitor rangeland condition and consider expanding the herd. It is humbling for Larimer County to be part of a bigger effort to reintroduce purebred bison to northern Colorado. These bison carry on the valuable line of Yellowstone bison herd genetics but not the disease brucellosis.

Returning bison to the plains of Larimer County isn't our only success story of 2015. The year also involved successful revegetation efforts at Red Mountain Open Space, raptors fledging young at River Bluffs, farming at Long View Farm and other open spaces, and sustainable trail construction at Horsetooth Reservoir County Park.

I hope you enjoy reading about the accomplishments highlighted in this report. We certainly enjoy the opportunity to share them and welcome any questions or thoughts they provoke.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Megan Hennita".

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WANTED: VOLUNTEERS WITH HARD HATS

A day dragging Russian olive branches can bring a smile to your face. Russian olive trees are thorny buggers that ruin wildlife habitat and consume one of Larimer County's most valuable resources: water. This exotic species has been nearly eradicated from Larimer County's parks and open spaces but still survives on private lands. The best defense against spread is to remove Russian olive trees by partnering conservation easement landowners with the Colorado State Forest Service and Larimer County volunteers. Since 2012, more than 1,000 Russian olive trees have been removed from conserved private lands adjacent to Larimer County's open spaces.



A volunteer from the Colorado State Forest Service helps drag Russian olive branches to a chipper during a volunteer event on the Kauffman conservation easement property. Photo © Pam Mayhew

A STRONG YEAR

Farming and ranching in Larimer County is not for the meek. You have to be smart, tough and willing to roll with the punches. Imagine leasing Long View Farm Open Space and growing dryland wheat. Winter goes well with good snow cover that protects soil. Spring brings ample rain with heavy grain heads. Your wheat looks like a bumper crop, and then things change: Wheat rust and hail damage plants and fall rain delays harvest. The crop doesn't look so bumper after all. That's farming for you. It can be a game of chance.

Even with Mother Nature throwing curveballs at farmers and ranchers, production agriculture was strong on Larimer County's open spaces last year. More than 300 head of livestock grazed Eagle's Nest and Red Mountain open spaces. River Bluffs Open Space produced 209 tons of alfalfa and 12.7 tons of grass hay. Even with the challenges experienced at Long View Farm Open Space, 7,147 bushels of wheat were produced by farmers leasing the open space.

If farming and ranching is a game of chance, then the year 2015 was a nice jackpot.



Red angus cattle and a lone horse graze the Bryant Miller conservation easement property held by Larimer County. Photo © Jeffrey Boring

RAPTOR'S ROOST

If you are a birder, 2015 was another great year to watch raptors take flight. In total, 15 raptor chicks including red-tailed hawks, ospreys, and golden and bald eagles were observed on Larimer County's parks, open spaces and conservation easement lands. Four red-tailed hawk young fledged their nests at Long View Farm and River Bluffs open spaces. Nest platforms installed by Larimer County and its partners at Ramsay-Shockey Open Space and Fossil Creek Reservoir Natural Area were home to four osprey chicks until they fledged their nests and migrated south for the winter. Golden eagles were observed fledging from Red Mountain and Eagle's Nest open spaces as well. Finally, four bald eagle chicks hatched at the Three Bell I conservation easement property and along the shoreline of Fossil Creek Reservoir.



Ospreys use a nest built on a platform installed at Ramsay-Shockey Open Space. Photo © Joel Howard

BUCKEYE'S CHAMPIONS

The Buckeye area is a small, rural community northwest of Wellington. It's a quiet part of Larimer County, an area that hasn't changed much in nearly 20 years. And that's no accident, thanks to Patty and Bryant Miller and their neighbors.

The Millers have raised two kids and about 300 calves in Buckeye since 1997. Both Bryant and Patty are longtime residents of the area. In the mid-2000s, small acreage lots were proposed in Buckeye, threatening its rural character. Through a grassroots effort, Patty, Bryant and three of their neighbors banded together and purchased more than 600 acres of land in Buckeye. Larimer County assisted in the acquisition by purchasing development rights and placing conservation easements on the land. Instead of the proposed development threatening their rural way of life, the proposal was a catalyst for land protection that united the community.

When asked what's changed since the land and conservation easements were purchased, Patty replied: "Nothing. I still see raptors, deer and coyotes, still hear songbirds and cattle. ... This is the same place we bought almost 20 years ago."

Every year, Larimer County monitors the Millers' conservation easement and the other 47 conservation easements held by the County. This monitoring allows the County to ensure the conservation values are protected and allows staff to reconnect with each landowner. In 2015, no conservation easement violations were observed on any of Larimer County's conservation easements.

A forever rural Buckeye is one step closer, thanks to a couple of champions.



Bryant and Patty Miller operate their cattle ranch in Buckeye. The ranch is protected from development by a Larimer County conservation easement. Photo © Danielle Levine

TRAIL TO ZOO

The Poudre River Trail, a planned 45-mile paved trail along the Poudre River, is one step (really 4,752 feet) closer to completion. In 2015, a new 0.9-mile section of paved trail was built east of I-25 through unincorporated Larimer County and the Town of Timnath. Timnath, the County and Great Outdoors Colorado partnered to build the trail through the historic and one-of-a-kind Swetsville Zoo and maximized safety by installing two new trail underpasses, at Harmony Road and County Road 5. Take a trip to Timnath and check out the trail!



A new section of the Poudre River Trail meanders along the Poudre River through the Swetsville Zoo and under County Road 5 in Timnath. Photo © Jeffrey Boring

OFF THE DEEP END

Larimer County mountain bikers are passionate about riding and some may say they can “go off the deep end.” That could have literally happened in the summer of 2015 when a section of the Foothills Trail on the east side of Horsetooth Reservoir collapsed during high water levels. Out of the collapse came creation: A new, more sustainable segment of the Foothills Trail was born. The Larimer County trail crew and volunteers from In-Situ, Larimer County Horseman’s Association, Overland Mountain Bike Club, Team B.O.B. (Babes on Bikes) and C.A.T.S. (Colorado Addicted Trailbuilders Society) installed a new half-mile segment of the Foothills Trail and separated it from the Horsetooth Reservoir shoreline. Amphibious mountain biking will have to wait.



A wet spring with high water levels at Horsetooth Reservoir led to the collapse of a section of the Foothills Trail. Photo © Josh Weinburg



Left: A calving pasture at Red Mountain Open Space is barren of grasses in June 2012.
Right: The same calving pasture in September 2015 has abundant grasses after herbicide and seeding applications. Photo © Casey Cisneros

RESEARCH LEADS THE WAY

Integrated weed management is more than just “spraying weeds.” Casey Cisneros, Larimer County weed control technician, notes that good land stewardship is research based and requires understanding the site, applying the correct prescription and measuring success. Case in point is an old calving pasture at Red Mountain Open Space. This 22-acre pasture was nearly absent of vegetation from historic, unsustainable grazing practices. Casey’s crew set up plots to test three seeding and herbicide prescriptions. The outcome won’t be determined until this summer, but based on the before and after photos, the results look promising.

KNOW THE FLOW

Rivers provide critical environmental and public services. They deliver water for drinking and irrigation, provide habitat for fish and other wildlife, and offer opportunities for recreation – nothing beats floating down a river on a lazy summer day. Flow rates vary considerably throughout Larimer County, from flood stage to bone dry. Larimer County Department of Natural Resources is a participant in the Poudre Runs Through It, a work group that installed two new river gages along the Cache la Poudre River to educate the public about the importance of river flow. Check out the new gages along the Poudre River Trail at McMurry Natural Area in Fort Collins and County Road 1, downstream of River Bluffs Open Space. You decide: Is the river up or down?



fill reservoirs for drinking and property damage.

and aquatic species' life cycles. reduce irrigation water for crops.

STREAM FLOWS

Water Spring Summer Fall
Water Year

New river gages along the Poudre River Trail at McMurry Natural Area and County Road 1 educate the public about river flow. Photo © John Bartholow

Managing natural resources in Larimer County depends on developing strong relationships with partners, such as the Colorado State Forest Service.



OPEN SPACES TAX TURNS 20 IN 2016

From wildlife to trails to breathtaking views, natural resources are a big part of what makes Larimer County such a great place to live. Many of the natural amenities we all enjoy in the county have been conserved thanks to funding from the Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax. Thank you, voters!

In 1995, citizens approved the Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax in Larimer County. The successful initiative launched the county-wide Open Lands Program in 1996 to conserve special places around our communities, helping us do much of the important work you've read about in this report. Thanks to Help Preserve Open Spaces funding, our citizens have gained new parks, open spaces and natural areas, ensuring the values of these lands exist for generations to come.

In 2016, the Department of Natural Resources is celebrating 20 years of Help Preserve Open Spaces and the impact it's had on all of us in Larimer County. Without funding from this sales tax, we wouldn't have amazing places such as Devil's Backbone, Red Mountain, River Bluffs and Eagle's Nest open spaces.

Join us in celebrating with a year of fun, free activities on our open spaces. To stay in the loop on these activities, sign up for our e-newsletter at www.larimer.org/naturalresources or follow us on Facebook and Twitter ([#OpenSpaces20th](https://twitter.com/OpenSpaces20th)).



Larimer County Department of Natural Resources receives funding for the acquisition and management of parks and open spaces from the citizen-initiated Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax.

THANK YOU, VOTERS!

2015 STATE OF THE RESOURCE REPORT

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