



Hayden Pass Fire burn scars viewed from County Road 1A. Photo ©2016 Greg Smith

## Volunteers to help in burn area recovery

In 2016, wildfire changed our landscape and our community.

In July, a rainless lightning strike ignited the Hayden Pass fire in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness above Coaldale, burning nearly 17,000 acres. In early October, the Beulah Hill fire burned more than 5,000 acres. Two weeks later, the Junkins Fire erupted when hurricane-force winds blew an outbuilding into a power pole in the Wet Mountains east of Westcliffe. More than 18,000 acres burned.

That fire affected landowners in the South Hardscrabble and North Creek drainages, including six conservation easements held by San Isabel Land Protection Trust. The fire swept over almost 3,000 acres of the Billington Ranch, owned by fourth-generation rancher Bill Donley and his wife, Vicki.

Now, you are invited to join professional wildfire recovery crews and your neighbors to work on wildfire recovery and restoration projects in



**Landowner Jack Thomas checks soil condition after Junkins Fire.**

our community. Your efforts will help reduce threats to life, structures and water supplies, stabilize soil, reduce erosion and sedimentation, increase vegetation and protect wildlife habitat.

Due to conditions in the area, volunteers must be able to perform physical work in a rugged, outdoor, post-fire

### **Congratulations!**

*Claricy and Randy Rusk are the Stu Dodge Award winners in the 2017 Southern Colorado Conservation Awards. Read more: [sanisabel.org](http://sanisabel.org).*

environment. Protective clothing and shoes will be required. Volunteers should be 16 and older. Workdays will be during the week and on weekends.

San Isabel will focus volunteer efforts on the Junkins Fire burn scar to help landowners along South Hardscrabble Creek. Project partners are Coalitions & Collaboratives, the Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative, San Isabel Land Protection Trust, and the Custer County Office of Emergency Management. **To volunteer, email Kate Spinelli at [kate@sanisabel.org](mailto:kate@sanisabel.org).**



## From our Executive Director *Challenges spring from many directions*

Greetings as spring speeds toward summer in the Sangres! May snows and rains left the fields emerald, helping an unpredictable year. No snow in March! And no new land protection to report. This is a difficult dry spell for land conservation in Colorado. I wish we had good news on the land protection front, but we don't.

Conservation easement values are down in our region, if not statewide in rural areas. Landowners and appraisers have had difficulty working with the Colorado Division of Real Estate, which oversees the tax-credit program. This program provides transferrable tax credits, which for the past 15 years have been the primary financial incentive for our landowners. The division's treatment of appraisers has forced some out of the field. Those left are cautious. Most landowners I talk with find the tax credit's financial incentives insufficient.

The lack of recent market data on sales of water rights, subdivision and protected properties limits the valuation potential. To set the market value, we have to see more good land dried up or subdivided so we can compensate landowners who choose to keep their land whole. That doesn't work.

When a government program isn't working, we all lose. Across Colorado in 2016, only \$10 million in tax credits were claimed, out of \$45 million, just 22 percent of capacity. That's a



**Ben Lenth**

lot of conservation not getting done during major population growth. The program's funding becomes vulnerable, and pressure increases on the few funders of this work, such as Great Outdoors Colorado.

San Isabel will work with the land trusts statewide to reform the tax-credit system. We believe Coloradans want to protect the heritage and beauty of open spaces, farms and ranches, and wild mountain forests. We must find a better way for willing landowners to be compensated.

### Taking the long view

Perpetuity is an interesting goal. Because San Isabel's 130 conservation easements run forever with the land, we need to take the long view. The

Board of Directors understands this obligation and has acted to perpetuate our funding, as much as possible.

Like most land trusts, we hold a stewardship fund – a fund restricted to paying for monitoring and enforcing each conservation easement. Financially, conservation easements are liabilities, not assets. Our stewardship fund balance of about \$850,000 is meager when compared with the legal risks of holding easements through time. Landowners provided most of this funding upon closing an easement.

Our new policy is to minimize using the stewardship fund by excluding normal monitoring expenses. Visiting our landowners is a core responsibility of land protection. It is reasonable to include those costs in an operating budget. By limiting how much we spend, we aim to grow the fund to achieve sustainability for this work.

That forces us to raise operating funds from elsewhere to pay our staff and keep the lights on. That's one place where you can help! Memberships start at \$35, but there's no upper limit.

All of you – friends and neighbors in the land trust community, our network of landowners, partners and members – create a different type of asset, social capital. We can't do anything without that. Thank you for contributing!

— **Ben Lenth**  
Executive director

## From our President *Forests slowly regenerate following fires*

Colorado's Front Range has experienced numerous forest fires, and they have increased in frequency, especially since the state's severe drought in 2002.

That year, the Hayman Fire was the largest in Colorado history at 137,760 acres. Recently, I visited the Hayman burn area, and I was struck by a stark fact: There is very little new tree growth on vast tracts despite the fire occurring almost 15 years ago. Grassland is found where stately ponderosa pines once stood. I also went through the Buffalo Creek Fire area that burned more than 20 years ago and saw mostly open grasslands and shrublands there. What is going on?

A recent study by the University of Colorado Boulder found that many of our wildfire-stricken forests are showing limited conifer regeneration eight to 15 years after a fire. The study looked at six low-elevation ponderosa pine sites along the Front Range that had burned between 1996 and 2003. Historically, you would expect to see thousands of young trees growing on the burned areas so long after the fires. Surprisingly, 59 percent of the study



**Larry Vickerman**

plots showed no conifer seedlings.

The reason? The study cites several potential causes. Colorado is getting warmer on average. A 2014 report issued for the Colorado Water Conservation Board found that annual average temperatures in Colorado have risen 2 degrees Fahrenheit in the past 30 years and 2.5 degrees Fahrenheit in the past 50 years.

It doesn't sound like much change, but lower elevation ponderosa pine forests, such as those found along the

Front Range, are shifting to higher elevations, where it is cooler and wetter. Higher temperatures also mean seedlings struggle to get established, especially on south facing, drier slopes.

Fires also burn more intensely due to drought and decades of fire suppression that created dense growth. Hotter fires leave damaged ground that can't support tree seedlings. More intense fires also wipe out all ponderosa pines in an area. The ponderosa pine seed does not travel far. Lack of a seed source becomes a problem.

What does this mean for our region? The study found burned southern Colorado forests recovering slightly better than northern Front Range forests due primarily to our summer monsoons that provide extra moisture in the mid- to late-growing season.

Many burned forest areas may never again support the density of trees they once did. We might have to get used to more open-area forests with widely scattered tree cover, more shrublands, and in some cases, open grasslands. It is a new reality in Colorado.

— **Larry Vickerman**  
Board president



Photo by Kate Spinelli

## Bluff Stewards already making a difference

Thank you to the generous folks who are volunteering to help maintain The Bluff Park, the centerpiece of downtown Westcliffe and the focal point for area events and festivals. The park is co-owned by San Isabel and the town of Westcliffe.

More than a dozen people have signed on as Bluff Stewards to help keep the park healthy and beautiful. A Colorado Garden Foundation grant is helping to pay for supplies and plants.

If you'd like to volunteer, contact Kate Spinelli at [kate@sanisabel.org](mailto:kate@sanisabel.org).

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San Isabel Land Protection Trust is a nationally accredited 501(c)3 nonprofit, nonpartisan conservation organization that works with landowners to protect their land and water in Custer, Fremont, Pueblo and Huerfano counties. To date, we've protected more than 40,000 acres, 174 water rights and some 61 miles of stream frontage through 133 conservation easements.



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*Please accept our apologies for any errors or names omitted. If you have a correction, please email [janet@sanisabel.org](mailto:janet@sanisabel.org) or call 719.783.3018.*



# On the Move

San Isabel extends a big thank you to Vic Barnes for his nearly two decades of service on our board of directors, most recently as vice president. Vic had served on San Isabel's board since 1998. We're happy to report Vic will continue on our Land Preservation Committee, keeping his expertise and experience at the table. Thanks, Vic, for 19 years of board service!



**Chris Skagen**

Joining the San Isabel board are Kristie Nackord, our former development director, and attorney Chris Skagen.

Kristie moved to the Wet Mountain Valley in August 2006 and now lives in western Fremont County. She is the chief communicator of Infinite Moon Communications and works with land trusts across the West.

Kristie received her bachelor's degree in Economics from Sonoma State University. She fuses her business

development experience with expertise in strategic communications, outreach, fundraising and community engagement. She is a founding board member of the Coaldale Alliance, a group giving voice to Coaldale residents on the sale of the CB Ranch to Security Water District. When she's not talking land and water, Kristie can be found outside with her horses and dogs, in the garden or at the river.

Chris grew up in Colorado with a



**Kristie Nackord**

passion for the outdoors. He is the CEO of Strategic Resources Group, a Denver-based health-care consulting firm that specializes in nonprofit management and governance, lobbying, strategic planning and fundraising. Chris also maintains a solo practitioner law firm that focuses on environmental, nonprofit, business and health care law.

He is a member of the Water Law Section of the Colorado Bar Association

and the American Health Lawyers Association. Chris received a bachelor's degree in Natural Resources Management from Colorado State University and his law degree and master's degree in Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School. He and his 3-year-old son, Ronen, call Salida home. Chris enjoys telemark skiing, mountain biking and fly-fishing.

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Evergreen Giving Club members are committed individuals, families and businesses who want to protect working ranches and farms, clean air and water, and wildlife. This special group of sustaining members has pledged to make an annual gift of \$1,000 or more to protect the places they love, now and into the future.

To learn more about our Evergreen Giving Club, please contact Janet Smith, development director, at 719.783.3018 or [janet@sanisabel.org](mailto:janet@sanisabel.org).



*Bighorn sheep lick winter's salt from the highway.* ©2015 Greg Smith; imediasmith.com

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*Protecting land is protecting life.*  
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21st Annual

# *Art for the Sangres*



*Saturday, September 30, 2017, at A Painted View Ranch, Westcliffe, CO*

*2017 Featured Artist: Sarah Woods*

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