



Open Lands Master Plan

Executive Summary

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, LARIMER COUNTY

FEBRUARY 2015





Larimer County is privileged to enjoy some of the most intact and diverse landscapes within the Front Range of Colorado. For more than 20 years, Larimer County and its citizens have been working to conserve these valued landscapes that define our sense of place. Much progress has been made yet many areas remain in need of protection. With the county's population expected to grow by more than 150,000 residents by the year 2040 (Department of Local Affairs, 2013), the importance of conserving these remaining areas increases; the need to link them together becomes more critical; and the benefits of good stewardship, including restoring our rivers and other key habitats, becomes more essential. In short, the work is not complete.

This *Open Lands Master Plan* is intended to guide our future conservation efforts and optimize the use of available funding dedicated for this purpose. It provides a focused vision for the Larimer County Open Lands Program in continuing to conserve and restore natural resources, conserve agricultural lands and working landscapes, conserve and improve river health, and enhance appropriate outdoor recreation opportunities.

The full plan is available at <http://www.larimer.org/naturalresources/plans.htm>

Cover image:
Sylvan Dale
Ranch CE;
This page:
Chimney
Hollow
Open Space
overlooking
Flatiron
Reservoir,
Richard
Snell



Help Preserve Open Spaces Tax

The ¼-cent Help Preserve Open Spaces (HPOS) sales and use tax was a ballot measure initiated by citizens in 1995 to create a fund for the purpose of preserving open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, parks and trails. In 1999 the citizens extended the sunset of the tax from 2003 to 2018. Since its inception two decades ago, Larimer County has matured into a vibrant and robust open space program that is often used as a model around the state. Through the proceeds of HPOS, County residents now enjoy over 25,000 acres of publicly accessible land in addition to 8,000 acres of conservation easements. Additional lands in the County have been protected by municipalities and other partners using HPOS funds. However, experience has shown that as the amount of acreage increases, so do management costs.

In recognition of the reality of increasing management costs and in response to the scheduled expiration of the tax at the end of the year 2018, an extension of Help Preserve Open Spaces was referred to the ballot in November 2014. Larimer County voters overwhelmingly (82%) supported an extension of Help Preserve Open Spaces through 2043. The extension also included two key revisions: 1) the formula for revenue sharing between the County and its municipalities was modified to allow a 50/50 split, and 2) the percentages allocated for the County's acquisition, restoration and management funds were modified to better reflect a maturing program.

*Devil's
Backbone
Open Space,
Christa
Ahrens;
Hermit Park
Open Space,
Sue Burke.*



Public Engagement

Education

Larimer County Natural Resources utilizes a number of outreach tools in order to engage the public and help them connect with the resources the Department has conserved. This robust community engagement program includes marketing and public relations, environmental education and interpretation, and volunteer services.

The Department delivers its key messages to the public through its Virtual Courthouse webpage, social media, an e-mailed newsletter, community presentations and talks and through interactions at various public and private events. The Department leads several major events throughout the year including the Larimer County Fishing Expo, National Get Outdoors Day and the Northern Colorado Nature Fest, and participates in a number of other events community-led events.

The education program in the Department is responsible for both personal and non-personal (e.g. signs, kiosks, etc.) interpretation at open spaces and parks as well as environmental education and educational product development. Volunteer Naturalists deliver nature programs to the public on a wide range of topics throughout the system. School field trips take place at several locations in the system and thousands of school children utilize the open spaces at outdoor classrooms per year. The education program also facilitates several clubs and programs targeted at different age groups.

Volunteers

The Department's volunteer program has hundreds of active volunteers per year, and works with many others on projects to benefit the Department. Volunteer assignments range from assisting on the boat docks to hiking the trails and interacting with visitors. The Department will continue to make wide use of volunteers in order to enhance staffing capacity as well as to allow the public to take some ownership in the stewardship of their parks and open space areas through community engagement.



We Heard You

Throughout the planning process, two themes were consistently voiced by Larimer County residents: keep doing what you are doing, *and do more!* For this reason, the Open Lands Program is more committed to its mission than ever before.

Community and citizen input is critical to the success of this *Master Plan*: both during the planning process and its subsequent implementation in the future. Public involvement for this plan began in 2012 with the outreach efforts of two county-wide studies: *Plug In To Nature* and *Our Lands-Our Future: Recreation and Conservation Choices for Northern Colorado*, which gathered feedback on regional public values and conservation, stewardship, and recreation strategies. These studies included two citizen surveys, regional meetings, and interactive open space modeling that established the groundwork for a shared vision for the county’s critical landscapes and outdoor recreational opportunities. A separate county-wide survey in 2013 found that protection of open spaces should be the county’s number one priority.

For the *Open Lands Master Plan*, outreach focused on public perceptions and opinions on the role of Larimer County and the program’s efforts in county-wide conservation, resource management and outdoor recreation. Multiple online and in-person feedback opportunities and a broad range of methods were used to engage the public during the planning process.

LARIMER COUNTY OPEN LANDS PROGRAM MISSION:

“To preserve and protect significant open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, and develop parks and trails for present and future generations. These open lands provide opportunities for leisure, human renewal and protection of our natural and cultural resources.”

Cinco de Mayo public outreach, Larimer County



Key Accomplishments

Since the inception of the Open Lands Program, Larimer County has protected nearly 33,000 acres of high quality land with willing landowners, including more than 25,000 acres conserved in fee simple purchase that allow for public access. Among the lands protected by fee simple purchase are several of the iconic properties that define the program and attract many visitors to our open lands, such as Red Mountain, Devil’s Backbone, and Hermit Park open spaces. Three additional properties, including Chimney Hollow Open Space, not yet open to the public were also acquired during this period.

More than 8,000 acres have also been protected through conservation easements. Conservation easements are restrictions that private landowners willingly place on their property to reserve certain values, such as agriculture, wildlife habitat, or scenery. These properties remain privately owned and managed and are not generally open to the public, thereby minimizing the County’s long-term management costs. Most of the County’s conservation easements focus on agricultural properties where an important goal is to keep the land in production by encouraging on-going farming and ranching. Accordingly, many of these easements are in the Buckeye, Waverly and Wellington areas. Conservation easements also contribute to maintaining community separation, such as between Fort Collins and Wellington. In total area, the largest conservation easements the County has contributed to have been placed on working ranches, including the historic Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch and Blue Mountain Bison Ranch.

The County’s prior master plan, which was completed in 2001, defined a series of conservation priority areas, which range from smaller, discrete areas such as the Berthoud/Loveland Separator to much larger units like the Laramie Foothills. The following table describes lands conserved in fee and managed by Larimer County or conserved by conservation easements that are held by Larimer County in these priority areas. This does not include over 11,000 additional acres of land where Larimer County was a financial partner but does not have an ownership interest or management responsibility.

*Horsetooth
Reservoir,
Harry
Strharsky*



Red Mountain Open Space, Harry Strharsky

Conserved Lands Managed or Held in Conservation Easements Primarily by Larimer County

Priority Area Name	Acres Managed/ Held in Conservation Easements*	Notes
Laramie Foothills	16,639	Red Mountain Open Space accounts for approximately 90% of the total.
Buckeye/Waverly Agricultural Lands	810	These are all conservation easements distributed over several different ownerships.
Wellington Agricultural Lands	421	All are conservation easements.
Poudre River	764	These are a combination of conservation easements and one fee simple purchase (River Bluffs Open Space)
Fort Collins/Loveland Separator	839	The great majority of these acres were fee simple purchases.
Big Thompson River	1,841	Consists mostly of conservation easements placed on Sylvan Dale Ranch.
Blue Mountain	6,124	Includes Blue Mountain Bison Ranch conservation easement and fee simple purchase of Chimney Hollow Open Space.
Estes Valley	1,362	Entirely made up of fee simple purchase of Hermit Park.
Foothills Corridor / Devil's Backbone to Horsetooth	3,692	Includes a combination of fee simple and conservation easement purchases.
Little Thompson River	335	Primarily is fee simple purchase of Red-tail Ridge Open Space

*Includes both fee simple and conservation easements owned or held primarily by Larimer County since 2001. These numbers do not include approximately 11,000 acres conserved in financial partnerships with other agencies where Larimer County has no ownership interest.



Conservation Priority Areas

-  Open Lands
-  Partnership
-  River

Land Status

-  Larimer County Open Space & Parks
-  Larimer County Conservation Easements
-  Other Open Space and Parks
-  Other Conservation Easements
-  Federal
-  Federal-National Park
-  State Land

Base Layers

-  Larimer County
-  Urbanized/Growth Management Areas

It is not the intention of Larimer County To conserve all lands within the priority areas. Rather, these areas will be considered as prime candidates for protection when willing landowners desire to sell or donate tier land or conservation easements to Larimer County. The ability of Larimer County to implement this conservation strategy is dependent on local or state partnerships and long-term funding, such as the extension of the Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax.



Conservation

Conservation Vision

The Open Lands Program will continue to do what it has done effectively to meet the desires of the public and strengthen the assets that make Larimer County so special. While many of the priority areas remain the same or similar to the 2001 Open Lands Master Plan, there is still work to be done. There are important strides to be made in completing the open space network by conserving in-holdings and closing gaps between existing protected areas, as well as creating new areas that will require partnerships from other conservation organizations. As the program matures, Larimer County will also place greater emphasis on resource management and habitat restoration: allowing rivers to act as rivers; enhancing native plant communities; managing healthy grasslands and forests; managing non-native and invasive species;

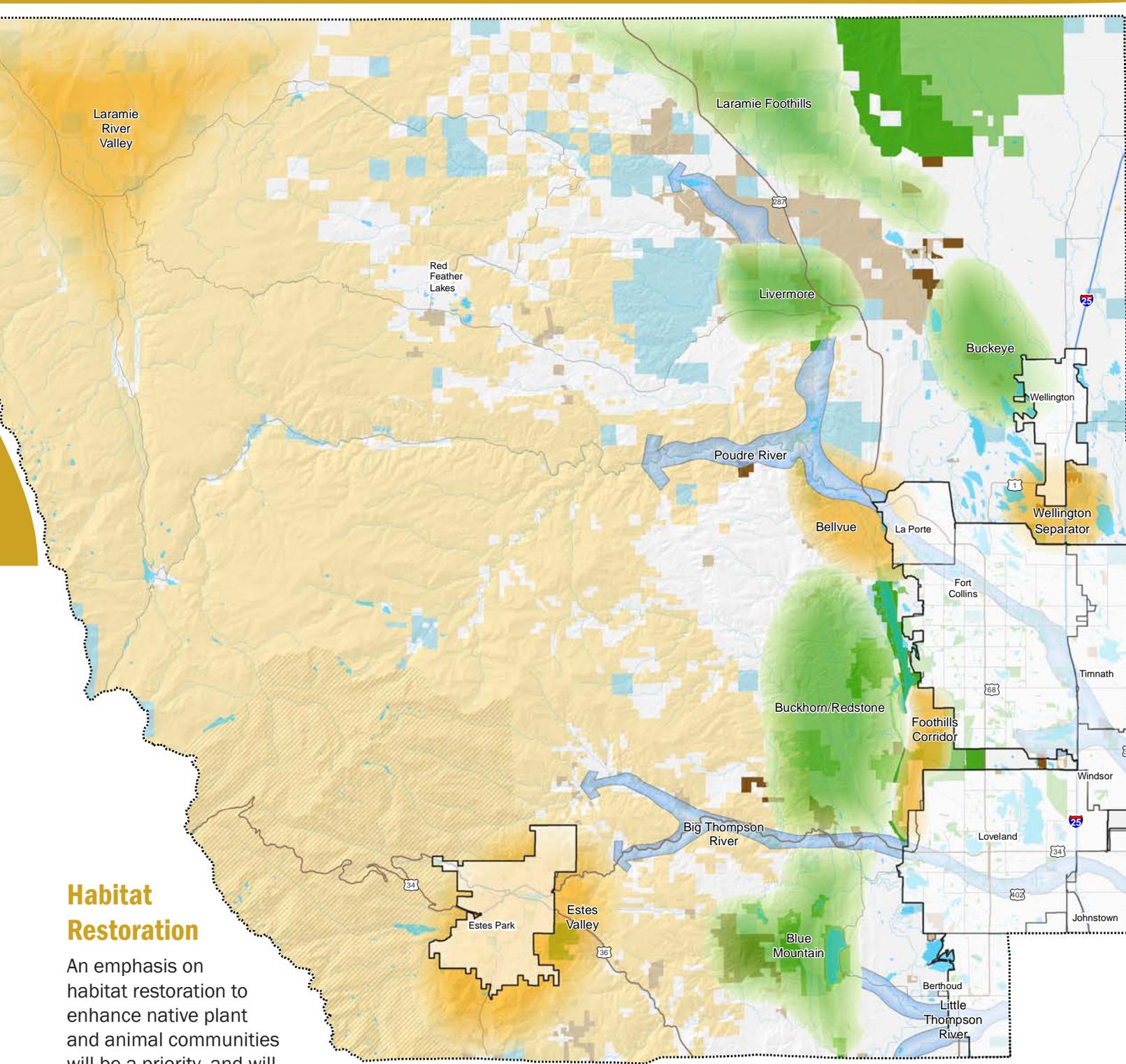
*Eagle's Nest
Open Space,
Charlie
Johnson*

conducting wildlife management; and restoring degraded areas. Specific conservation priority areas are shown on the following page.

The conservation priority areas shown in the map provide a long-term vision for land acquisition. However, it is not the intention of Larimer County to acquire all land within the priority areas. Rather, these areas will be considered as prime candidates for conservation when willing landowners desire to sell or donate their land or conservation easements. All acquisitions will only occur with willing landowners. Additionally, it should be noted that land outside the priority areas are not precluded from being considered for conservation and are given appropriate consideration when such opportunities arise. In particular, prime agricultural lands will be considered a priority wherever they are within in the County.

Water Wise

Larimer County has focused the majority of open space acquisition dollars on the purchase of fee-simple and conservation easement lands. However, due to an unpredictable climate and anticipated population growth, the importance of protecting water along with the land it supports has become a higher conservation priority. Ensuring water availability for agriculture, healthy rivers and streams (in-stream flows) and wetlands and recreation (such as canoeing, kayaking, and fishing) is critical to sustaining conservation values throughout Larimer County.



Habitat Restoration

An emphasis on habitat restoration to enhance native plant and animal communities will be a priority, and will require larger scale and longer term efforts. Numerous wildlife species rely on our native grasslands, yet today there are few intact systems remaining. Restoring native grasslands provides important habitat, increases biologic diversity, and reduces land fragmentation.

Improving river and associated riparian health is also integral to the long-term viability of these systems. Allowing rivers to act as rivers can be accomplished by providing space for natural flooding. Inundation of floodplains helps to ensure river resiliency, habitat regeneration and protection in flood events.

Wildlife Management

Wildlife management to protect species and their habitats is another important activity that occurs on a limited basis today. There are opportunities to increase these efforts as well as to contribute to the restoration of specific wildlife species on open space lands.



Recreation

Recreation Vision

The planning process overwhelmingly confirmed the Open Lands Program’s role and existing direction to continue to provide diverse recreational activities, such as:

- Offering paved and natural surface trail opportunities for hiking, biking, horseback riding, and other activities.
- Connecting conserved lands and local communities via regional trails.
- Providing river access for fishing, picnicking, wildlife viewing, photography, and enjoyment.
- Offering low-impact camping, picnicking, day use, rock climbing, natural play areas for children, fishing, non-motorized boating, and swimming at select open spaces.
- Offering limited hunting.

In accomplishing the above, facilities will be developed and managed to minimize conflicts with wildlife and other natural features. Several existing open space properties are proposed to be opened for public access. These include:

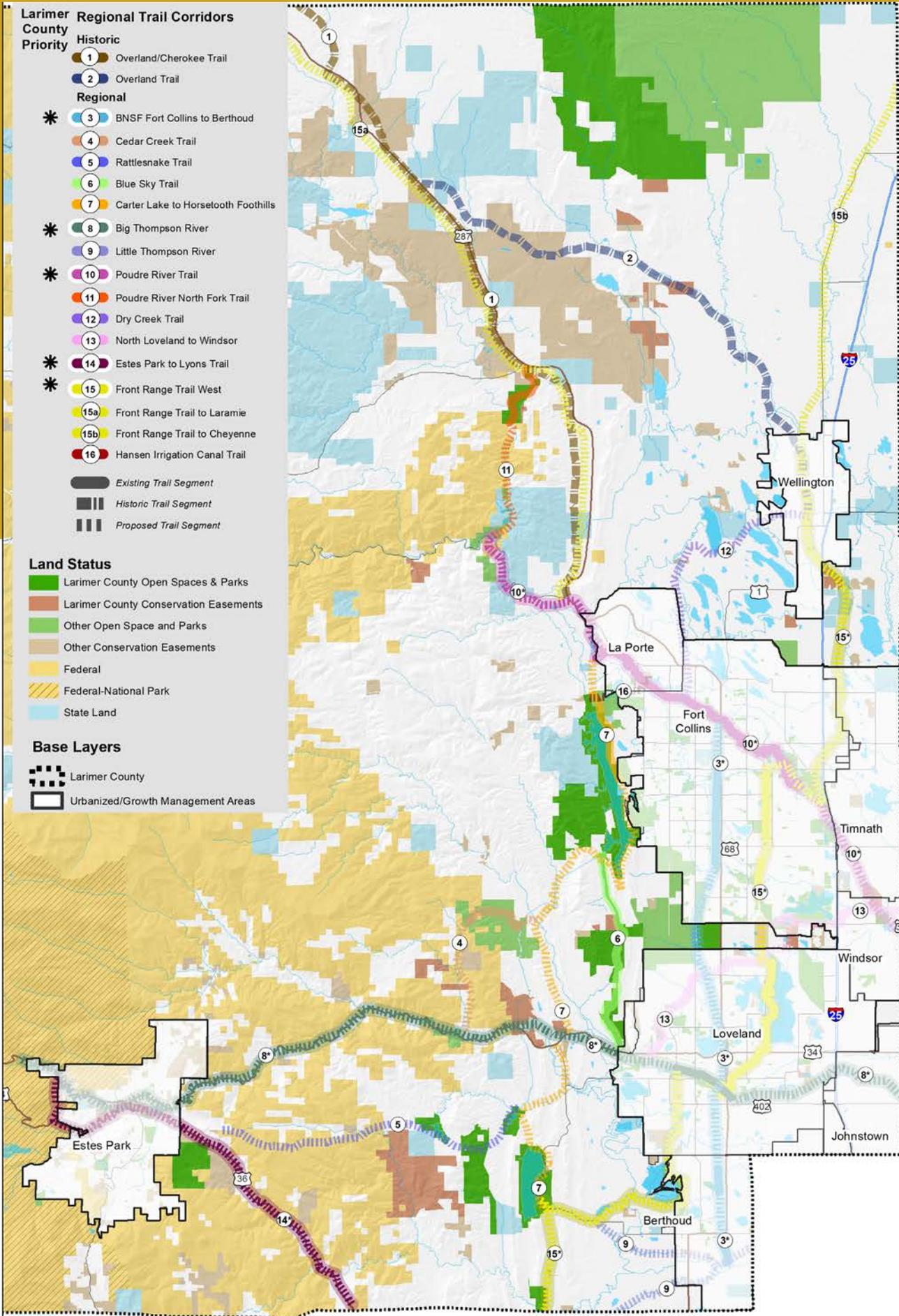
- Red-tail Ridge Open Space: The vision for Red-tail Ridge Open Space is to protect scenic, recreational, natural, wildlife habitat and significant vegetation community resources in southern Larimer County.

- Long View Farm Open Space: Future recreation opportunities will be provided in the future via a regional trail linking Fort Collins and Loveland trail systems.
- Chimney Hollow Open Space: If a reservoir is built by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, recreation will be managed by Larimer County. Kayaking, canoeing, sailing, fishing and other non-motorized recreation are anticipated and approximately 10 miles of natural surface trails.

A Regional Trails System

Our trail systems are more and more popular for hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, wildlife viewing, and even commuting. It seems we cannot build trails fast enough to meet demand! In the future the County will focus on leading and collaborating outside of city growth management areas to better connect regional communities and recreation areas of regional significance. Within city growth management areas, Larimer County will support city leadership by leveraging funding and assisting with connectivity planning to the County’s trails system.

Blue Sky Trail, Harry Strharsky; Kelley Savage



Regional Trail Corridors Priority Map. The Regional Trail Corridors map is the collaborative efforts of all participating jurisdictions, agencies, and community organizations to create an inventory map of existing and planned (future) trails within and connecting to the public open space in Larimer County. The Regional Trail Corridors map is intended to be used primarily for the coordination of regional connectivity between open space and jurisdictions. Alignment of trails and corridors are conceptual and may or may not be on railroad, ditch, or public rights-of-way and are for planning purposes only.



Chimney Hollow Open Space, Charlie Johnson

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the citizens of Larimer County who supported the passage of the Help Preserve Open Spaces tax extension, with specific appreciation to the many citizens who helped shape this Open Lands Master Plan.

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