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COLORADO CONSERVATION

Two huge wins for the state as money is earmarked and land is kept open



A bill being considered would offer state tax credits to private landowners in exchange for voluntarily restricting development on their land. *Denver Post file*

By Ken Salazar and Tom Gougeon
Guest Commentary

Colorado's iconic mountain ranges, farms and ranchlands, parks, rivers and open spaces are an undeniable part of our shared identity as Coloradans. We live in a state where three in four residents consider themselves conservationists, and 87% understand that Colorado's open lands and outdoor lifestyle give the state an economic advantage.

That's why we hope every Coloradan

will take a moment to recognize two huge legislative wins achieved this month for conservation in our state — and what together these wins mean for future generations and their quality of life.

The most lauded success happened on May 1, when Governor John Hickenlooper signed into law a measure ensuring that Colorado lottery proceeds will continue to be a steady source of revenue for conservation and outdoor recreation through at least 2049. This measure extends and affirms the will of Colorado voters, who in 1992 passed a constitutional

amendment that created Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), an independent body that annually receives up to half of all lottery proceeds.

Over the past 25 years, GOCO has been the single most important tool for advancing conservation in Colorado. It has funded more than 5,000 projects — including dozens of school playgrounds, over 900 miles of trails, and more than 1,600 parks and outdoor recreation areas — benefitting all 64 Colorado counties, and permanently protecting more than 1 million acres of open space.



Ken Salazar is former U.S. Secretary of the Interior (2009-2013) and U.S. Senator from Colorado (2005-2009); he authored the Great Outdoors Colorado amendment while serving as head of Colorado's Department of Natural Resources.



Tom Gougeon is President of the Denver-based Gates Family Foundation, which for the past two decades has been Colorado's largest private match source for GOCO-funded land conservation, statewide.

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For ensuring GOCO endures another 25 years, Coloradans can thank the efforts of a broad, bipartisan coalition of local governments, nonprofit partners, agricultural and business leaders, and thousands of individuals and other advocates who signed on to Keep It Colorado — a campaign to ensure lottery proceeds continue flowing to conservation for future generations.

The second accomplishment was quieter, but also will have significant impact into the future. Last week, in the waning hours of the 2018 session, legislators passed a bill that paves the way for a new, forward-looking approach to conservation in Colorado.

The bill, now awaiting Governor Hickenlooper's signature, extends a tool that is a strong complement to GOCO funds in the conservation toolbox: a program that rewards private landowners with state tax credits in exchange for voluntarily restricting development on their land — in perpetuity. Since 2000, conservation tax credits have been used to conserve more than 2.2 million acres of private land — majestic vistas, working farms and ranches, forest and river ecosystems — 80 percent of which is now under the stewardship of nonprofit land trusts across Colorado.

For years, a statewide coalition of these land trusts and landowners have been advocating for a number of refinements to the program. The measure will create a new Division of Conservation with a mandate to lead an inclusive workgroup of stakeholders to advance the program in a transparent, effective, inclusive manner.

The opportunity presented by the creation of this new division and visioning process is hard to overestimate. The legislation moves oversight of this critical conservation program from the state's Real Estate Division to a new body that is, by design, aimed at assessing conservation values more holistically and ensuring the effectiveness and success of the program. This step aligns with the current work of the field that is looking at conservation's return on investment — not just in real estate value, but more broadly to include the value of ecosystem services (such as carbon sequestration, climate regulation, or water storage and purification), as well as conservation's economic value to state and local communities. It also comes at a time when land conservation leaders statewide are embarking on the yearlong Conservation Futures Project — supported by the Gates Family Foundation, GOCO, and other funders — to re-envision the role and value of land trust organizations to the communities they serve.

Thanks to these two legislative victories, the state's conservation partners are positioned for even greater success over the next 25 years. With secure access to the resources, tools, and vision necessary to protect Colorado's working lands and natural inheritance, both today's Coloradans and future generations will benefit.