

# Executive Summary: Caring for Colorado Public Lands:

A Statewide Assessment to Inform Partnerships  
between Public Land Management Agencies and  
Volunteer Stewardship Organizations

Submitted to the Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition

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## A Statewide Assessment to Inform Partnerships between Public Land Management Agencies and Volunteer Stewardship Organizations

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# Executive Summary

The Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition (COSC), a collaboration of nonprofit volunteer stewardship organizations (groups that give their time to care for the outdoors and natural resources) and federal, state and local land managers, promotes stewardship of Colorado's outdoors, elevating the awareness and engagement of the public in caring for the state's outdoor spaces. Hosted by Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, the Coalition has been working since 2010 to organize forums for stakeholder organizations and to document the collective impact of outdoor volunteer stewardship. In 2013, the Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition, with support from the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Conservation Excellence grant program and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, commissioned OMNI Institute, an independent social science nonprofit, to assess how volunteer stewardship organizations can advance their partnerships with public land management agencies for the protection and care of public lands. The study identifies conditions facing both Colorado public land managers and volunteer stewardship organizations in their collective efforts to maintain the state's outdoor resources and residents' quality of life.



## Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition

## THE STUDY

There are nearly 29 million acres in Colorado (more than 35% of the state) designated as public lands.<sup>1</sup> Residents and visitors to the state alike are attracted to the many recreational opportunities and beautiful settings that Colorado's public lands offer. Agencies at the federal, state and local levels are responsible for managing the care of these vast public lands, some of which are hundreds of miles from the state's capital. The growth of recreational tourism and the widespread use of outdoor spaces by residents has strained the

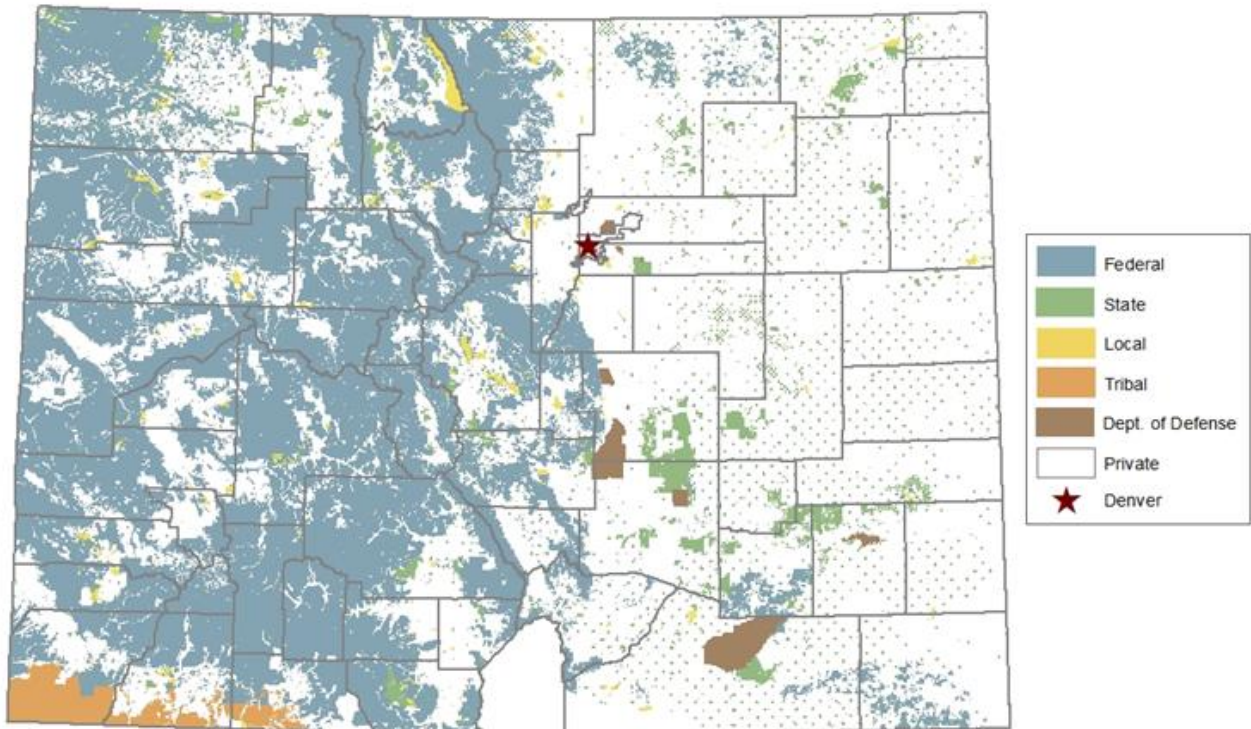
- Bureau of Land Management
- Colorado Fourteeners Initiative
- Colorado Mountain Club
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado State Forest Service
- Colorado State Trails Program
- Colorado Youth Corps Association
- City of Fort Collins
- International Mountain Biking Association
- Jefferson County Open Space
- National Park Service
- Responsible Recreation Foundation
- Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers
- US Forest Service
- Wildlands Restoration Volunteers
- Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado

[www.voc.org/colorado-outdoor-stewardship-coalition](http://www.voc.org/colorado-outdoor-stewardship-coalition)

<sup>1</sup> Public lands are defined here to include parks, forests, wildlife refuges, monuments, and local open spaces.

resources of public agencies charged with caring for Colorado's outdoor spaces. Outdoor volunteerism and volunteer stewardship organizations provide an important source of support in maintaining recreational land use, educating the public about natural resources, and cultivating leaders who care for public lands.

Figure 1. Land ownership in Colorado, 2012



Source: Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State Office. (December 26, 2012.) Statewide Colorado Land Ownership, Land Status [GIS shapefile]. Retrieved February 3, 2014 from: [http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/BLM\\_Programs/geographical\\_sciences/gis/gis\\_mapping.html](http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/BLM_Programs/geographical_sciences/gis/gis_mapping.html)

OMNI Institute, working with Meridian Institute, a nonprofit agency that strategically engages groups in public policy decision making, facilitated the project involvement of the Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition and assembled a subcommittee that functioned as the project's advisory group. The advisory group took part in setting project objectives, developing questionnaires, recruiting public land managers and representatives from volunteer stewardship organizations, and reviewing preliminary findings to inform additional data collection and analyses. Public land managers and representatives from volunteer stewardship organizations were surveyed regarding their respective capacities, needs and perceptions of one another. Survey data were supplemented with qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Statewide assessment activities culminated in an outdoor stewardship stakeholder meeting at the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region Office in Golden, Colorado, with video teleconferencing in:

- Grand Mesa Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest Office in Delta, Colorado

■ National Forest Service, Salida Ranger District in Salida, Colorado

■ Pike and San Isabel National Forest Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands Office in Pueblo, Colorado.

Coalition member agencies, assessment study participants and representatives from GOCO, the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, and other funders active in protecting Colorado's outdoors took part in the meeting. Altogether, 46 stakeholders participated in the half-day meeting to review assessment results, refine the report's recommendations and discuss next steps for the Coalition and its member agencies. Working with the meeting facilitator, Meridian Institute, OMNI Institute documented meeting outcomes and incorporated them into the final report for the Coalition.

## FINDINGS

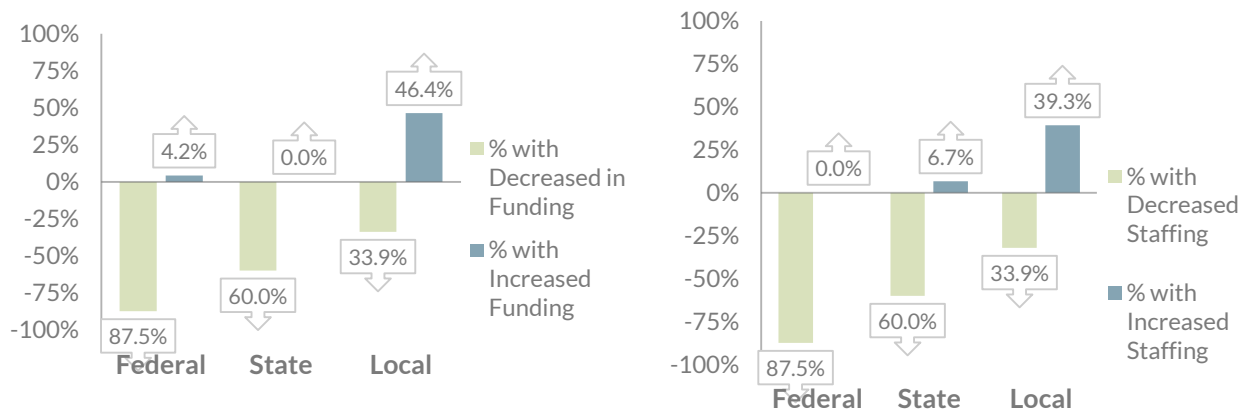
### THE NEW REALITY OF PUBLIC LANDS MANAGEMENT

One hundred and seven public land managers from federal (n=27), state (n=18) and local (n=62) agencies participated in the assessment. Thirty nine percent of participating public land managers represented public lands outside of the Front Range (the most populous area of the state, running north and south along the area just east of the Rocky Mountains), and another 8% served the state as a whole.

#### *Gaps in the Capacity to Meet Agency Priorities*

The study found a trend in declining funds, changing budget levels and staffing shortfalls at public land management agencies, in particular at the federal and state levels.

**Figure 2. % of public land management agencies reporting declining funding and staffing over the last five years**



Moreover, funding, staffing and budget planning constraints left moderately small to moderately large gaps in the capacity of federal, state and local agencies to address public land management priorities:

- Invasive species
- Newly acquired land parcels
- Trail construction and maintenance
- Facility construction and maintenance.

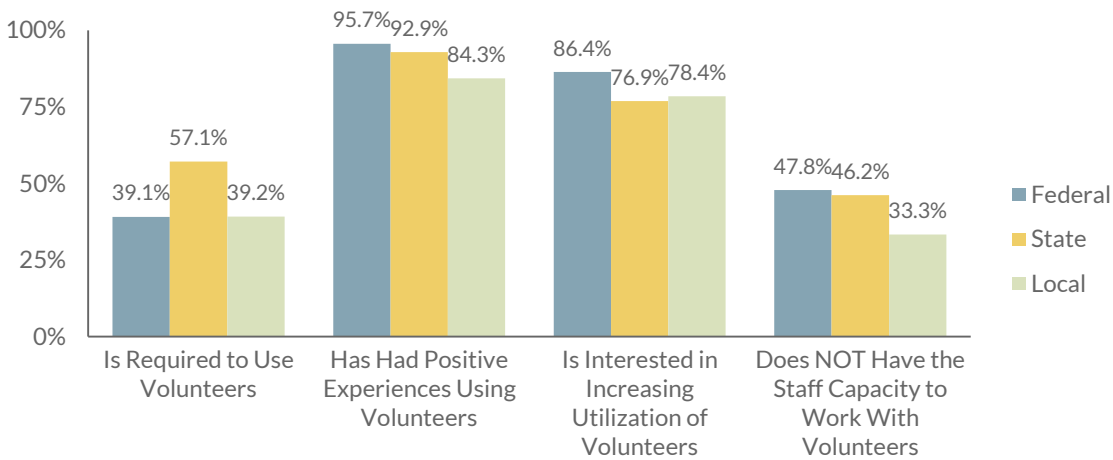
The most persistent and prevalent challenges reported by public land managers were:

- Invasive species management
- Capacity to serve a growing population.

Qualitative interviews also indicated that public land managers faced significant challenges in keeping methods and technologies current with technical advances in the field, as well as having sufficient staff time to plan for future strategic resource allocation.

With the exception of some well-resourced local government agencies, public land managers have more demand for their time and lands, and less funding and staff to address arising issues. This has proven challenging to public land managers, who are responsible for nimbly responding to emerging needs (e.g., wildfires or flooding) while also maintaining public land access, wildlife and recreational use facilities. Public land managers reported widespread use of volunteers and that volunteers are an integral and vital part of most agencies.

Figure 3. Experience of public land managers in working with volunteers



Despite their reliance on volunteer support, public land managers typically identified volunteer engagement and management as a common challenge and that they lacked the resources to adequately support it. Nearly 48% (47.8%) of federal agencies, 46.2% of state agencies and 33.3% of local agencies reported lacking sufficient staff capacity to work with volunteers. Despite the great need for volunteers and the challenges associated with volunteer management, only 46.4% of public land managers surveyed reported utilizing volunteer stewardship organizations; in contrast, 58.8% reported relying on individual volunteers.

## VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP ORGANIZATIONS - NATURAL PARTNERS IN PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

OMNI also surveyed representatives from 90 volunteer stewardship organizations throughout the state, including youth corps, recreation and special interest groups, nonprofits and community coalitions. These organizations recruit, organize, train and deploy volunteer or youth workers to care for and educate others about Colorado's outdoors. Forty-eight percent of participants represented organizations along the Front Range, with 18% from the south central region of the state, 17% from the southwest and 16% from the northwest.

Figure 4. % of volunteer stewardship organizations serving public lands by region and organizational reach

<u>% of VSOs Conducting Projects by Region</u>				<u>% of VSOs Recruiting Volunteers by Region</u>		
<u>Tourism Region</u>	<u>Local</u> (n=61)	<u>Serving 2 Regions</u> (n=12)	<u>Serving 3+ Regions</u> (n=17)	<u>Local</u> (n=61)	<u>Serving 2 Regions</u> (n=12)	<u>Serving 3+ Regions</u> (n=17)
Front Range (26% public lands)	46%	59%	94%	62%	67%	94%
Northeast (1% public lands)	2%	8%	47%	5%	17%	47%
Northwest (66% public lands)	16%	33%	71%	18%	33%	59%
South Central (51% public lands)	12%	50%	100%	16%	42%	82%
Southeast (8% public lands)	2%	25%	59%	2%	53%	53%
Southwest (56% public lands)	23%	25%	82%	23%	77%	77%

Note: Although the Northeast and Southeast have relatively few volunteer stewardship organizations active in their regions, these regions also have comparably smaller proportions of land designated as public lands.

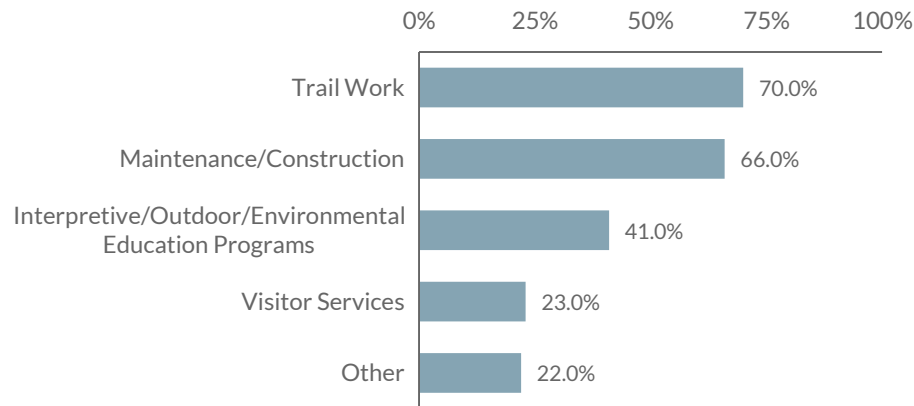
As the figure above shows, volunteer stewardship organizations have a broad reach within the state, although the relative proportions of land projects and volunteer recruitment activities varied by region. Further, the survey found that across the 90 organizations surveyed, two-thirds of participants reported the volunteer base supporting their organization had increased over the last five years.

However, the study also documented wide-ranging capacity among volunteer stewardship organizations – ranging from organizations that operated with as few as 10 volunteers annually to those that manage and recruit several thousand annually. More than half of the volunteer stewardship organizations surveyed indicated working with 100 or fewer volunteers per year.



In addition, the study found that volunteer stewardship organizations provide a wide range of services:

Figure 5: Volunteer opportunities offered by volunteer service organizations



Note: Among “other” services reported by volunteer stewardship organizations were monitoring vegetation and wildlife; community outreach; fire mitigation, fighting and rehabilitation; research; and policy development.

These included service areas that public land managers identified as areas of need: trail work and maintenance/construction. Moreover, volunteer stewardship organizations rated their overall capacity to support the needs of public land management agencies as “moderate.” Among the various services they provided, volunteer stewardship organizations ranked environmental education, trail construction and maintenance, erosion control, habitat restoration and invasive terrestrial species mitigation as their highest areas of capacity to meet public land manager needs.

Against this backdrop, the study identified a number of areas in which volunteer stewardship organizations faced challenges in advancing their goals:

- Short-Term Volunteerism -- Despite reported trends in the growth of outdoors volunteerism, many volunteer stewardship organizations reported that volunteer engagement was often of short-duration. This, in turn, presented challenges in meeting both the training requirements associated with many public land management projects and the long-term need for volunteers.
- Lack of Skilled Volunteers -- Overall, volunteer stewardship organizations were largely neutral (not agreeing or disagreeing) about having enough skilled volunteers to accomplish their work. In some areas of the state, this meant that there is an insufficient supply of skilled volunteers to meet the needs of public land management. This was especially true for projects needing expertise in fire restoration, facility construction/maintenance, equipment maintenance, water quantity and quality and supporting the management needs associated with newly acquired lands.

- Insufficient Organizational Capacity to Maximize Effectiveness -- Volunteer stewardship organizations were generally “neutral” regarding internal organizational capacities, such as having sufficient training resources, managing volunteer absenteeism and lacking opportunities to network with, learn from and collaborate with other volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Limitations in Project-Based Funding -- Volunteer stewardship organizations indicated that the short-term and project-based funding practices of public land managers presented challenges in identifying support for necessary indirect services, such as volunteer outreach and recruitment, education and training.
- Insufficient Funding and Staffing -- The majority of volunteer stewardship organizations, whether they were local, regional or statewide, reported challenges concerning adequate funding (59%) and staffing (60%) levels.

## STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS FOR OUR PUBLIC LANDS

The statewide assessment and gaps analysis underscores the common goals that public land managers and outdoor service organizations share in building collective responsibility and stewardship of public lands. The analysis also suggests that current challenges in public land management represent a “new normal” (i.e., funding uncertainties, population growth in Western states and complex issues facing our ecosystems), and that in this climate, new perspectives and practices can be cultivated between volunteer stewardship organizations and public land managers to meet existing and emergent public land management needs.

While public land managers reported relying on a wide variety of sources of volunteer labor, they comparatively underutilized volunteer stewardship organizations. At the same time, public land managers tended to have overwhelmingly positive views of volunteer stewardship organizations, and volunteer stewardship organizations appear poised to support public land managers in a number of identified areas of need. The study identified a number of factors that, if appropriately addressed, could improve the partnerships between public land managers and volunteer stewardship organizations, leverage overall capacity for outdoor volunteer engagement and support mutual goals of caring for Colorado’s lands.

- Lacking Awareness Regarding the Organizational Assets of Volunteer Stewardship Organizations -- Findings suggested that public land managers, overall, are not aware of the many contributions that volunteer stewardship organizations provide to the public agencies (i.e., volunteer development, outreach, fundraising, marketing and training) beyond convening volunteers for a specific project.

- Insufficient Capacity to Fully Utilize Volunteer Stewardship Organizations – Public land managers reported strong interest in increasing future use of volunteer stewardship organizations as a source of volunteers. This, however, was often seen as another responsibility for which public land managers had too little time. Collectively, public land managers tended to overlook how leveraging the capacities of volunteer stewardship organizations could help support meeting other organizational needs, such as volunteer management.
- Concentration of Public Land Management Partnerships -- While the study documented the work of individual volunteer stewardship organizations with many different public land management agencies throughout the state, it found that volunteer stewardship organizations tended to partner with some public land management agencies more than others. For example, 66.7% of all surveyed agencies had had projects with the U.S. Forest Service, whereas 27.8% had had projects with the National Park Service or 24.4% with the Colorado State Forest Service.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflective of study findings and the statewide assessment process, a number of recommendations were generated and refined with key stakeholders.

### REINFORCE THE CAPACITY OF VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

#### *Geographic and Service Niche Gaps*

- Conduct regional assessments of volunteer stewardship organizations and their capacity to meet the needs of public lands agencies in both geographic coverage and service niches.

#### *Partnerships*

- Build collaborative relationships between regional and statewide volunteer stewardship organizations in order to leverage resources and respond to local needs.
- Grow networks statewide to help bring greater visibility to the role of volunteer stewardship organizations in protecting Colorado lands.

### *Training*

- Survey and document existing volunteer training capacity in the state.
- Develop additional training resources as needed to ensure accessibility by less populated and under-resourced areas of the state.
- Design trainings that meet a range of volunteer interests and levels of commitment in terms of duration and prerequisites.

### *Funding*

- Work collaboratively to research and solicit public and private funding that benefits all partners and reduces competition among volunteer stewardship organizations.

## STRENGTHEN VOLUNTEER SKILLS AND LONG-TERM INVOLVEMENT

### *Volunteer Database*

- Assess and track volunteer skills, interests and training, so that volunteers are deployed to projects that match their skills and interests.

### *Volunteer Recruitment*

- Promote job skills that volunteers can develop through their work with volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Target individuals interested in careers in public land management or volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Broaden recruitment strategies to include family volunteer events, population-specific mentoring programs, and volunteer projects that engage the residents for whom the site has significant meaning.
- Integrate volunteer acknowledgment into all programs.

## STRENGTHEN COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES AND VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

### *Engagement of Volunteer Stewardship Organizations in the Planning, Priorities and Work of Public Land Managers*

- Share agency priorities and long-term plans with local, regional and statewide volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Identify roles that volunteer stewardship organizations can play to support public land management needs.

- Include volunteer stewardship organizations in planning and coordinating volunteer projects on public lands.

#### *Public Land Management Processes, Rules, and Agreements*

- Educate volunteer stewardship organizations regarding funding rules.
- Create a toolkit to assist volunteer stewardship organizations in understanding and meeting public agency administrative requirements.
- Identify and publicize best practices regarding formal agreements between public land management agencies and volunteer stewardship organizations that cover legal requirements while maintaining simplicity and reflecting long-term partnership interests.

#### *Create Pipeline of Volunteers to Work on Public Lands*

- Leverage university connections to create links between natural resource degree programs and volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Recruit and engage volunteers who are ready to help address emergent needs on public lands (e.g., planning, species and habitat monitoring, trail assessments) that extend beyond traditional boot-on-the-ground, hands-in-the-dirt volunteer projects.

#### *Statewide Education and Training*

- Convene regional and statewide roundtables of volunteer stewardship organizations and public land management agencies to promote collaboration and efficiency.
- Create trainings that meet the needs of public land management agencies, volunteer stewardship organizations and their volunteers.

## ENABLE ADMINISTRATIVE AND FUNDING APPROACHES THAT ARE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

- Invest in the direct and indirect services of volunteer stewardship organizations.
- Explore new funding arrangements that support program development in addition to project-specific activities.
- Examine partnership opportunities that leverage the volunteer training, recruitment and management capacities of volunteer stewardship organizations to benefit public land management agencies.
- Simplify contracts and agreements to promote efficiency and streamlined reporting requirements.

## CONCLUSION

Through the hard work and generous donation of time by many individuals who care about the current condition and future of Colorado's precious outdoor resources, this study has achieved several aims:

- Assessment of the current conditions facing both Colorado public land managers and volunteer stewardship organizations in their respective efforts to care for the state's outdoor resources
- Examination of the opportunities for improving collaboration between public land managers and volunteer stewardship organizations in advancing the care for the state's public lands
- Engagement of a broad swath of public land management agencies and volunteer stewardship organizations in taking part in the assessment, generating greater awareness of issues and developing recommendations that will promote the goals of both entities.

With the conclusion of this study, the Colorado Outdoor Stewardship Coalition (COSC) is now tasked with implementing action steps that will make a significant difference in outdoor stewardship in Colorado. Through the release of the report, the COSC will share its findings and recommendations with its members, other volunteer stewardship organizations, public land management agencies, decision makers and other potential stakeholders around Colorado. Members of the coalition may also share the findings and recommendations with the general public in regional meetings around the state in the coming months to provide an even deeper understanding of the regional issues facing volunteer stewardship organizations and public land managers.

The study confirms the growing need to discover new ways in which volunteer stewardship organizations and public land managers can more effectively partner and the heightened urgency of enhancing and strengthening volunteer capacity within both entities to meet Colorado's future stewardship needs. The recommendations laid out in this report offer an initial roadmap for volunteer stewardship organizations and public land managers as they chart a course for more cost-effective and efficient collaborations and partnerships, offering a viable, long-term strategy for caring for our public lands.