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Protecting the Pearson Claims

Applying Organization	The Wilderness Land Trust	Application Date	5/14/2026
Applying Contact	Kelly Conde	Status	Submitted
Record Type	Member Collective	Created By	Kelly Conde, 5/13/2026, 6:18 PM
		Create Account	<input type="checkbox"/>

Project Overview

Project Name	Protecting the Pearson Claims	Requested Amount	\$50,000.00
Project/Campaign Name	Protecting the Pearson Claims		
Type of Project	Acquisition	Project Multiple Locations	
Project Location (State or Territory)	CO	Longitude	-107.434919
Latitude	37.895390		

Organization Details

Organization Name	The Wilderness Land Trust	Primary address for organization	2 North Last Chance Gulch Helena, Montana 59601 United States
Contact Name	Kelly Conde	Contact Title	Senior Lands Specialist
Contact Email Address	kelly@wildernesslandtrust.org		
Annual Operating Budget	\$3,026,430.00	Tax Status/Organization Type	501c3 Organization
Staff Size	6	Main Phone	12082233964
Total Membership	350	Organization Website/Social Media Feed	https://wildernesslandtrust.org/
BIPOC-led	No	C-Suite Staff	

Grant Details

Awarded Amount		Awarded Date	
Funding Program			
Primary Project Type		Secondary Project Type	
Term Start Date		Term End Date	

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization	The Wilderness Land Trust's (the Trust) mission is to keep the promise of wilderness by acquiring and transferring private lands to public ownership to complete designated and proposed	Location Details	The Trust has an opportunity to acquire the Pearson claims which are 27 parcels totaling 270 acres in and around Colorado's Red Cloud Peak Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and Handies Peak
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wilderness areas or directly protect wilderness values. The Trust is the only conservation organization with a Lands Program solely dedicated to sustaining our National Wilderness Preservation System by removing the threat of industrial, commercial and residential development within the boundaries of designated wilderness, or directly in the path of future wildland preservation. Utilizing our real estate expertise, we negotiate and acquire private property inholdings from willing sellers at a fair market price before transferring the land to a federal agency where it is managed and protected as part of the surrounding public land. Since our founding in 1992, The Trust has added 614 parcels totaling 59,312 acres into public ownership.

WSA. Upon acquisition, the Trust will work to transfer the lands to public ownership. The Red Cloud Peak WSA and Handies Peak WSA of Hinsdale County contain some of the most spectacular backcountry in Colorado, with significant ecological values and both motorized and human-powered recreation opportunities. Renowned by some for the Alpine Loop Backcountry Byway, a scenic four-wheel drive road which forms the border of the Red Cloud Peak WSA, and others for their three 14ers and forty-two peaks over 13,000 ft, the WSAs include the highest land managed by the BLM, outside of Alaska. This high-elevation landscape is home to the endangered Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly, which relies on snow willow along the slopes of 14er Red Cloud Peak. The areas span the headwaters of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, the Animas, and the Rio Grande, and serve as an ecological corridor connecting the northern and southern San Juans. This swath of protected land supports roaming species including, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, moose, elk and the endangered Canada lynx. Recognized for their incredible ecological value, the combined 54,321 acres of the WSAs are included in the Colorado Wilderness Act to be designated as wilderness. The Red Cloud Peak WSA and Handies Peak WSA have one glaring issue that may be preventing their federal designation as wilderness. The WSAs are riddled with private properties, or inholdings. Recognizing the problem, the Trust is the solution. We acquired our first group of parcels in the area in 2023 and, to date, have purchased 31 parcels, totaling 292 acres. With each new acquisition, news of our work spreads and momentum builds around protecting this critical area. From this momentum came the opportunity to acquire the Pearson Claims. The Pearson Claims are in some of the most popular and ecologically sensitive parts of the WSAs. They cross the highly visited Alpine Gulch and Cataract Gulch trails, they are among the habitat of the Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly, along the Silver Creek trail leading to 14ers Sunshine Peak and Red Cloud Peak and, if developed, these 27 parcels will change the face and conservation values of the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSAs. The Trust instead is working to ensure this doesn't happen.

Final Success The success of this project starts with acquiring the 270-acre Pearson Claims, and ends with transferring them to the BLM, thereby ensuring their protection as part of the WSAs, opening the door

Impact on Climate and Biodiversity

Most of the Pearson parcels are in "more resilient" areas on The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool which measures climate resiliency. The 27 properties span from 9,000 ft to

wider for these areas to eventually become designated wilderness, and providing the public 270 acres of unfettered lands to explore.

over 13,500 feet in elevation. In the lower elevations, the properties and surrounding public land are forested and shaded. Some of the properties, like those along the Alpine Way trail, are steep and covered in stands of spruce-fir with wide, rushing creeks running through them. Others are covered in aspen, and thick underbrush. As the landscape gains in elevation, and the vegetation becomes dwarfed, the properties and surrounding lands transition into a high-alpine tundra. Native grasses and willows dominate the properties in this landscape. Here, some properties, such as those in the Cooper Creek basin, have ephemeral water sources, others are on scree slopes, still others, such as those around Gravel Mountain, are spongy and rolling. The variation in vegetation, topography, and elevation all create a landscape resilient to climate change. Climate resiliency and biodiversity tend to go hand in hand, and it is no different here. Five of the Pearson parcels are in areas assessed by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program as a Level 4 Potential Conservation Area for biodiversity significance. Another five parcels are in critical elk summer range. All claims support critical habitat for the federally endangered Canada Lynx. The two parcels along Silver Creek support habitat for the Federally Endangered Uncompahgre Fritillary Butterfly. Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, mountain goat, elk, and moose all frequent the area, crossing through the parcels. These parcels dot a swath of otherwise protected, undeveloped land that connects the northern and southern San Juans and provides clean water to three major watersheds, the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, the Animas, and the Rio Grande. The parcels are within this area, but not a part of it. They are the holes in an otherwise unscathed canvas. If we can successfully acquire and transfer the Pearson Claims, those holes will be filled. The climate resiliency, biodiversity, and connectivity secured. The threat of development in a landscape teeming with life, removed.

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

The Pearson Claims are in Hinsdale County, which is self-described as “the most remote area in the lower 48 states”. With a permanent population of roughly 774 people and over 95% of its land falling under public ownership, Hinsdale County is one of Colorado’s most recreation-dependent economies. The Red Cloud Peak WSA and Handies Peak WSA are at the heart of that recreation. While there is no motorized use in the WSAs, the Alpine Backcountry Byway which separates the two WSAs, serves as their access point, and has approximately 450,000 visitors annually.

Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

Success starts with acquiring these lands. Once acquired by the Trust, the threat is removed. The landowner and the Trust executed a Letter of Intent which outlines both parties’ desire to complete this transaction, and the Trust completed much of our due diligence. This includes a title review, visiting all 27 parcels, and having an appraisal completed by a qualified appraiser. The appraised value for the property is \$328,421. Another critical step, which is the result of the current administration’s prerequisites for Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)-funded

From OHV touring the loop, to backpackers and mountaineers enjoying the sweeping views of American Basin, to anglers casting into the pristine waters of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, the rugged untouched scenery draws a wide range of recreationists. The Pearson Claims are in some of the most visited areas in the WSAs and permanently protecting the 27 parcels protects the scenic integrity of the area and the visitor experience. Two of the WSA's most popular trails run through the Pearson Claims: The Alpine Gulch trail and Cataract Gulch trail, both of which are an easy drive from Lake City. The Alpine Gulch trail leads to the heart of the Red Cloud WSA and is the start of the San Juan Solstice 50, a running race that brings 300 contestants to the area every year. The Cataract Gulch trail runs through the Handies Peak WSA and eventually connects to the Continental Divide Trail. This trail is part of the Hardrock 100 running race, an iconic mountain ultra-marathon that had nearly 3,000 applicants in 2026 and accepted 147 runners. Though the current landowner allows the public and the races to go through his property, there is no legal access to either trail. The success of this project will ensure that the trails and surrounding land remain open to the public and free of development.

projects, is securing written state and local support. To satisfy this requirement, the Trust met with and secured letters of support from the Hinsdale County and San Juan County commissioners, the Colorado Governor's Office, and Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper. We are currently working to fundraise the dollars needed for acquisition with an anticipated closing date before the end of 2026.

This will bring us one step closer to our final goal of transferring the lands to the BLM. The Trust and BLM have been partnering in this area since our first acquisition of land in 2023. To date, we've secured LWCF funding for 163 acres that we own in and around the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSA. This area is a high priority for BLM Colorado, and the Pearson Claims are considered the next phase of their acquisition project. Because of this, they were willing to proactively apply for Land and Water Conservation Funds for the claims even though we do not yet own them. Their LWCF application for the Pearson Claims has been approved by BLM headquarters. Still, we recognize the challenges we face in transferring these parcels. The current administration does not prioritize federal land acquisition or spending LWCF dollars. Despite this, the local and state BLM offices see the incredible value in consolidating land under one management plan and removing the threat of private development. They are committed to moving the acquisitions forward and, to date, have been able to make steps towards doing so. The LWCF funds secured this year for the 163 acres were congressionally authorized. Securing these funds provides an optimistic outlook for the next two phases of transfer and has allowed us to move forward with the transfer of the parcels. We are expected to close on this transfer to the BLM in late 2026. If the BLM secures the LWCF dollars that were applied for the Pearson Claims, we expect to transfer them in 2028. If those funds are not secured this year due to politics or shifting BLM priorities, or competing projects, The Wilderness Land Trust can hold the properties until we're able to transfer them. When barriers to transfer present themselves, The Wilderness Land Trust is designed to be able to hold the property until those barriers are removed. For the Pearson Claims, we are anticipating a delay in the transfer process. This is why, rather than seeking a loan or using revolving funds, we are working hard to fundraise "patient dollars". Right now, our main concern is acquiring properties and removing the threat of development. From there, the lands will be protected, and we can work with the strong partnerships we've built

at the BLM to transfer them. And we have the ability to continue this work, no matter what the hurdle, until it is complete.

Key Decision Makers

Transfer of the Pearson Claims depends on the LWCF. Under the current administration, all BLM LWCF projects must have state and local support. Of the decision makers we worked with, the Hinsdale County Commissioners were the least likely to give their support. While, on principal, the county commissioners are supportive of conservation, Hinsdale County is 95% public lands. Their tax base is already small, and they are concerned about it dwindling even more with every transfer of private lands to public hands. All the support we've secured by the county commissioners have come after conversations on the phone and over zoom and eventually presentations at public meetings. At the end of the day, the Hinsdale County commissioners recognize and value the fact that the protected land in their backyard is what drives their economy and they are supportive of thoughtful ways to further protect that land. With the remote nature of the Pearson Claims, after much discussion, we gained their support. With county support, state support was granted. All our work in and around the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSAs have the written support of the Hinsdale County commissioners, Governor's Office, Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper and, for the Pearson Claims, the San Juan County commissioners.

The other key decision maker is, of course, the Bureau of Land Management. The local and state BLM offices have made it clear that the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSAs are priorities to their lands acquisition program. And while there currently is uncertainty within the agency, our work in this area continues to be prioritized and funded. We have three phases of project work in the area. The first phase of 17 parcels has secured congressionally approved Recreation Access dollars and should transfer by the end of the calendar year. The second phase of 14 parcels and the third phase, the 27 Pearson Claims, have been approved for funding by BLM headquarter leadership.

Working With Business Community

The primary way that engagement from the business community would help support our work is through public engagement and support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and public lands. Public support of public lands and the Land and Water Conservation Fund ensures that both remain secure. That security is critical to our work to transfer private lands to public hands using LWCF dollars. The Trust would benefit from any connections member companies have to the Hardrock 100 race and local outdoor retailers. The more individuals and businesses that vocalize their support, the less likely it'll be that they are threatened.

Elevate Voices

The primary way that we directly work with historically underrepresented groups is by working with tribes through our Lands Program. One of the first steps of due diligence when initializing a lands project is to determine the tribe that historically called the land home and if that tribe is still present and active in the area. We then reach out to the tribe,

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

1. Acquire the 270-acre Pearson Claims and thereby remove the threat of developing and fracturing the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSAs landscape.
2. Forever secure public access to the Alpine Gulch Trail and Cataract Gulch Trail through the Pearson Claims acquisition.
3. Secure the LWCF

dollars needed to transfer the Pearson Claims to the BLM.

invite them on a site visit, and learn as much as we can about the cultural significance of the property from their perspective. We try to incorporate their perspective and management preferences into how we manage the property while also elevating their story through our communications. Sometimes, this looks like writing a cultural and management plan for the property that is eventually passed to the agency for their reference. Other times, it is opening up the property for their internal study. We are still learning and working towards being better partners with the tribes. We attend trainings and have one board member from the Navajo tribe who is providing input on ways we can grow. To date though, we have been unsuccessful in engaging the Ute tribe, which historically lived in and around the Pearson Claims.

Our engagement with the local community is focused on engagement with the County Commissioners and those who attend their meetings. A first step in developing a project in Hinsdale County is to approach the County Commissioners to gain their support. This includes a public presentation at a commissioner meeting. At that meeting, anyone from the public can provide feedback. The support we have from the County Commissioners reflects the desire from this small community to protect and conserve their incredible backyard. We also engage with the local newspaper. Our projects consistently get coverage in Lake City Silver World. This news coverage is the driving force behind the momentum we've gained in the area. Locals read about our work, spread the word, and new projects emerge.

TCA Funding Plan

Membership companies that make up The Conservation Alliance are vital partners in the work of The Wilderness Land Trust, helping to support our successful track record with wilderness land acquisitions and transfers in California and Washington State to date. Financial support from The Conservation Alliance to cover due diligence and staff time for the Pearson Claims will be critical in allowing the Trust to seize the opportunity to buy the property while available and prevent development before it's too late. The Conservation Alliance is savvy, seeing the big picture in landscape conservation, acknowledging the shifting foundation under our current administration and supporting efforts that take time to assemble the puzzle pieces. Patient support from a group with this level of understanding will allow us to work within this uncertainty to dedicate staff time and resources to acquiring the Pearson

Confidential Items

No



Claims, protecting them from the threat of development.

Other Relevant Application Details

We appreciate The Conservation Alliance's consideration for contributing funding to this project. The momentum we've built in the area over the last three years will not last. We are taking advantage of it now to protect as much land in the Red Cloud Peak and Handies Peak WSAs as possible. With the acquisition of the Pearson Claims, we will have removed 75% of the private inholdings in the Red Cloud Peak WSA and 38% in the Handies Peak WSA.


