

Project Category

NSBF Byway Community Award: Beautification

Rancho la Luz, located near the Colorado-New Mexico border, is primarily an open ranchland and is an integral part of the southern San Luis Valley and Conejos County's agricultural landscape. The stunning pastoral landscape forms the backdrop for visitors traveling along State Highway 142, the state-designated Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway. Conservation of this property is part of the Conejos Ranchland Initiative. The Initiative aims to protect important agricultural land by conserving four of the oldest ranches and permanent settlements in Colorado.

Project Name

Rancho la Luz - Conejos Ranchland Initiative - Preserving Working Wet Meadows

Byway Name

Los Caminos Scenic & Historic Byway

Overview

The Cultural importance of Conejos County and the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway is intertwined in the landscapes along the Byway. Many of the positive attributes of the Cultural elements along the Byway are the historic landscapes that visitors will view while traveling the Byway. The Rancho la Luz, a 550 acre ranch, has maintained their historic uses for over a century and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) has ensured that a new conservation easement will protect this land from future development preserving its rural characteristics for future generations. Most of the landscapes along the Los Caminos are considered "High" to "Moderate" in scenic quality which is defined as fully intact with small scenic deviations to moderate deviations to the characteristic cultural landscapes. The proximity of Rancho la Luz along the Los Caminos allows visitors to continue to view a cultural landscape the way it would have been viewed over the last century. The character of Rancho la Luz is predominantly cultural with deviations that would be considered positive attributes on the landscape such as fence lines, grazing cattle, irrigation ditches, and farm equipment to support these activities. This easement will ensure that anyone driving along the Byway will be able to experience the surrounding landscape without future development on these lands, therefore preserving the viewshed along the Byway.

Intrinsic Qualities

The number of cultural features and landscapes along the Los Caminos continue to change and are sometimes lost as land bought and sold, sub-divided, or developed creating a loss in a cultural landscape. In the San Luis Valley land is still considered cheap or of a reasonable price which makes these landscape vulnerable to these types of changes. These events can severely impact the viewsheds along the Byway and visitors expectations who are here to enjoy landscapes, architecture, culture, traditions, heritage, and a unique way of life that is rare in other areas of the country. Most visitors who travel the Los Caminos expect to see working ranches, adobe structures, cattle, ditches, and farm implements associated with these activities. More and more these are disappearing as new developments along the Byway crop up in an effort to provide affordable housing and cheap land for industrial or commercial activities. Although commercial activities are needed to support tourism, the level of development is a delicate balance to provide economic stimulus, visitor support but also the conservation the cultural elements visitors are here to enjoy. This conservation easement brings the Byway one step closer to maintaining this ranch and the viewshed of the Byways landscape to preserving these unique and beautiful cultural elements. This project helps to encourage others to preserve their working landscapes which ultimately improves the overall scenic qualities of the landscape along the Byway.

Another intrinsic quality of the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway is the Cultural features that provide significance. This Byway is famous for the early Spanish Settlement and communities designed by the Spanish Crown, land grants, and the ancient people who traveled along this Byway. This Byway winds through come of the San Luis Valley's oldest communities built in adobe-style architecture. This Byway follows ancient trails by the first hunter-gathers, Native Tribes, and then Spanish explorers who traveled by horseback and wagon looking for land to raise families and build communities. Visitors of this area will experience life on the last frontier where settlement took many decades to achieve and many more thrive. Unique architectural features such as adobe structures, Jacals, and Moradas used by distinct religious groups that helped settle the Valley are all evident to Byway travelers and create a sense of traveling back in time

Partners

The project was initiated by John Salazar as the core conservator of Ranch la Luz. This cultural and historical ranch was settled over 150 years ago and John and Mary Lou Salazar bought much of the property back to keep the ranch intact.

Additional partners include the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Rio Grande Basin Implementation Plan, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Doing an easement is a large undertaking and CCALT worked with the land owners as the primary partner and helped raise the funds in order to compensate for the portion of the land that would have been potentially subdivided or water rights sold off. Rancho la Luz has an important water right that sustains agriculture and wildlife habitat along the Conejos and San Antonio Rivers that run through the middle of property. GOCO that helped provide additional funding for the conservation easement and the NRCS helped with matching funds. The complex process of ownership and a dual appraisal with the restrictions and without the restrictions can take years and the partners helped sustain the project providing support for both the process and financially. In addition, County Commissioners provided support and the Colorado Parks and Wildlife stepped in to identify the importance of for preserving important wildlife habitat along the Conejos and San Antonio Rivers and maintaining the presence of water for specific species. The Colorado Rio Grande Basin Implementation Plan helped identify the important water right and the importance of keeping irrigation rights on working ranches of the San Luis Valley.

Byway Best Practice

This project contributes to the visitor experience by providing an intact cultural landscape that preserves the characteristic landscape along the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway. The preservation of these landscapes provides a quality experience in a unique location of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. This designation also encourages visitors to stop and stay along the Byway to explore the landscapes and learn about the history. The conservation easement on Rancho la Luz is will preserve the "sense of place" that makes the Los Caminos Byway a unique experience for visitors wanting to have a cultural experience and visualize what life would have been like for the earliest Spanish settlers.

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Key to Success

The long term commitment and the amount of diligence and work that went into the project with all the partners has secured a national significant regionally cultural ranch. The ranch has a long history with the Salazar family, but also within the San Luis Valley that highlights cultural farming practices along the Byway. The partnerships help keep momentum on the project, as these types of easements can take years. The landowners commitment to purchase missing parcels of land to keep the ranch intact is a testament to the love and connection they have for the land and the commitment to keep this ranch unchanged for over 150 years. A conservation easement is a permanent commitment that will preserve the scenic and cultural qualities of this landscape along the Byway forever.

Additional Information

Contact Information

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Project Year(s):

2020

Website

[Los Caminos Antiguos — Colorado Department of Transportation \(codot.gov\)](http://codot.gov)

Photographs

