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Large Carbondale area ranch gets conservation deal

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A deal to preserve the 611-acre Cold Mountain Ranch owned by Bill Fales and Marj Perry in the Crystal River Valley was given preliminary approval by the Pitkin County commissioners on Wednesday.

The county board voted 5-0 to approve an open space master plan and to buy a conservation easement on the ranch for \$7.5 million, which will protect 160 acres on a mesa above the ranch and 451 acres on the valley floor a mile up from the Carbondale town line.

The Pitkin County Open Space and Trails board had earlier approved the master plan and agreed to spend \$5.1 million from the county's open space and trails fund toward the purchase. The remaining \$2.4 million for the easement is coming from Great Outdoors Colorado as part of the \$5 million Crystal Watershed Legacy Program.

The conservation easement will cover almost 609 acres of the ranch's 611 acres, as a 2.3-acre parcel next to the Crystal River will be given to the county for recreational uses as part of the deal.

The underlying county zoning on the ranch would have allowed for a maximum of 20 new single-family homes to be built, and a likely buildout of 12 homes, according to Cindy Houben, the county's director of community development, who signed off on the master plan for the ranch.

When asked if \$7.5 million was fair compensation for the ranch, with its big direct views of Mount Sopris, Fales replied, "Much, much more important to us than the dollar value is knowing that the land will be forever available for ranching."

Fales and Perry have raised cattle on the property together for more than 35 years and Marj Perry grew up on the ranch. In 2006, the Perry family sold 1,180 acres of nearby ranchland for \$27.25 million, including 302 acres to Tom Bailey between River Valley Ranch and Cold Mountain Ranch on the west side of Highway 133.

The Fales/Perry ranch property has been in agricultural production since 1881, just a year after the Utes were forced out of most of western Colorado.

About 200 acres of the property is now irrigated pastureland on both sides of Highway 133 and about a mile of the Crystal River runs through or alongside the property. About 40 acres of the downstream end of the ranch is inside Garfield County.

The ranch owns water rights in three irrigation ditches, adding up to 24 cubic feet per second of water. Those very senior water rights are included in the deal and can't be severed from the land.

The Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust will hold the conservation easement along with Pitkin County. The trust is also a partner with Pitkin County in an 4,773-acre conservation easement on

Jerome Park west of the ranch.

Fales helped start the Cattleman's Trust in 1995 and is the current president of the board. He also spent 13 years on the county's open space and trails board before stepping off in 2006.

On Wednesday, the county commissioners endorsed the Cold Mountain Ranch deal at first reading and they are expected to vote for a second and final time either later this month or early next month.

"Thank you for working so hard on this," Commissioner Rachel Richards told Fales and Perry after the vote to approve the deal.

The deal, which took at least a year to work out, includes the right to build two new 5,750-square-foot homes on the ranch inside two new building envelopes. Fales and Perry want to leave those homesites to their two daughters, who are now 19 and 22 years old. Those building sites, or the future homes, cannot be sold separately from the bulk of the ranch. However, a third potential building site or future home on the edge of the property could be sold separately, but then only one new home could be built on the ranch proper.

"You just don't know what the future is going to hold and that gives us flexibility," Fales said of his daughters' plans.

Also as part of the deal, the family can also expand their current main residence up to 5,750 square feet. And they can build another single-family home and attached caretaker unit — that together do not exceed 5,750 square feet — in a location alongside Highway 133 where today there is a small white ranch house.

"We were really adamant in maintaining the viability of the ranch going forward and obviously with housing in this market that is really tough," Fales said of the option to build what he envisions as employee housing.

Fales praised the new county open space master plan program that allowed his family to both create a conservation easement and to clearly determine the future development potential of the property.

"That's the beauty of the program," Fales said. "You know that the rights you reserve are in fact real rights."

Dale Will, the county's director of open space, believes the conservation easement will do more than just protect a working ranch.

"Lying less than one mile from Carbondale's town boundary, Cold Mountain Ranch is Pitkin County's best opportunity to effectively stop Carbondale from sprawling south along Highway 133 into Pitkin County," Will wrote in a Jan. 14 memo to the commissioners. "There is one unprotected ranch that lies between Carbondale's urban developed area Cold Mountain Ranch. Conserving Cold Mountain Ranch will assure that Carbondale will not grow past the county line."

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