CARLY JOHNSON/COURTESY OF RIGHT

Emma Gilmore welcomes the community to her family's ranch, protected through Great Outdoors Colorado funds to the Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's Rio Grande Initiative, in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy.

Sparking the Connection

On a brilliant September afternoon, 10-year-old Emma Gilmore, granddaughter of Gilmore Ranch owners Tom and Pat, climbed up onto the old wooden hay trailer. A favorite local band had set up their sound system, and young Emma took up the microphone to welcome 150 members of her community to her family's ranch. With the stunning beauty of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range and golden fall colors behind her, she thanked them for supporting the local land trust, which had helped to conserve her family's 1,000-acre working ranch along the Rio Grande River in Colorado.

Later that afternoon, the long-time director of the local homeless shelter made a donation to the land trust, realizing that the agricultural jobs that his clients rely upon are also supported by the conservation efforts to keep working land and water intact in his community. The Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust's first "Headwaters Hoedown" attracted an impressive array of local folks and visitors—ranchers and artists, bankers, business people and congressional aides, water experts and teachers, science fair winners and 4-H winners—ranging in age from 36 hours old to 96 years. The gathering represented what a concerted focus on 'community engagement' can produce: a diverse group of people coming together in celebration of conservation of the land and water they depend on for their life and work.

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