

## GRANT PROGRAM BACKGROUND & INFORMATION

### STEWARDSHIP IMPACT PROGRAM

<https://goco.org/programs-projects/grant-programs/stewardship-impact>

Great Outdoors Colorado's (GOCO) Stewardship Impact Program aims to improve the condition of our state's lands by advancing collaborative outdoor stewardship projects that demonstrate meaningful improvements to the ecological and recreational amenities that attract residents and visitors to numerous, diverse destinations throughout Colorado. Working in partnership with land managers, outdoor stewardship organizations, conservation services corps, corporate volunteers, or any number of individuals or entities, GOCO sees value in a coordinated approach that more comprehensively addresses a community's stewardship needs.

Colorado continues to experience recreation and climate-related impacts on our lands and natural resources. Further, Colorado's consistent population growth exacerbates these issues and accelerates the need to identify solutions to adequately steward the state's natural and recreational resources for generations to come.

Through this program, GOCO invites partners to apply for funding to:

- target a resource or location for stewardship, and scale-up from a project-by-project engagement model to a more comprehensive, prioritized effort at addressing resource stewardship needs;
- take advantage of opportunities for collaboration among stewardship organizations, land managers, and community partners;
- increase capacity of existing stewardship organizations and provide opportunities for collaboration and mentoring among organizations;
- solicit new funding sources to increase capacity and sustainability.

Proposed projects must reflect one or more of GOCO's program values as identified in our 2020 strategic plan and outlined later in this document. These values are intentionally open to interpretation and definition by our partners; how they are or could be reflected in each community is unique. And not every project will integrate multiple values. Projects that demonstrate several values, as well as projects that embody a singular value, can have meaningful impacts and significant merit.

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## GRANT CONCEPT

### Brief Project Description:

The Eagle County Outdoor Stewardship Partnership seeks to address critical stewardship needs across public lands in Eagle County. The project will expand and enhance existing stewardship programs, including the Trail Conservation Crew (TCC) and creating the Outdoor

Stewardship Crew (OSC) programs, to mitigate recreation-related impacts, improve ecological health, and engage the community through volunteerism and education. Eagle Valley Outdoor Stewardship Coalition (EVOSC) partners will utilize these crews to accomplish important and necessary stewardship projects on the ground. Through collaboration with land managers and community partners, this project will support long-term resource sustainability while fostering equitable access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

### **Project Need and Benefits:**

Eagle County's public lands continue to experience increasing recreational use, resulting in significant impacts such as trail degradation, habitat disruption, and ecological disturbance. Public lands make up over 80% of Eagle County. A majority of which is part of the White River National Forest (WRNF) which is the busiest forest in the country. In 2011 visits to the WRNF were estimated to be around 10 million and in 2022 that number increased to 18 million. While a majority of those visitors were for skiers, almost 7 million were during the summer season. Meanwhile, the WRNF's budget has decreased from \$30 million in the early 2000s to \$18 million in 2023. These visits and public lands contribute an estimated \$1.6 billion in economic impact for communities surrounded by the WRNF. So what do these numbers mean? In short, they simply don't add up. While visitation and use continues to increase, the boots on the ground to maintain natural resources decline.

Proactive and increased stewardship is critical to sustaining the Eagle County's environmental and economic vitality. The project will significantly enhance the quality of life in the community by ensuring safe, sustainable recreational access, preserving natural resources, and fostering a culture of environmental responsibility.

This project directly addresses these challenges by:

- Strengthening the **Trail Conservation Crew (TCC)** to provide 14 weeks of targeted maintenance and recreation impact mitigation projects across public lands including but not limited to Forest Service, BLM, municipalities, and county. The TCC is entering its fifth year of existence and has a history of success performing trail maintenance and stewardship projects. They build bridges, install signage, lead volunteers, decommission trails, and perform work to mitigate user impacts. The TCC does not have restrictions on whose land they operate on as long as it is land that is open to the public. The TCC will work alongside volunteers and with local partners to execute on the ground projects to improve our natural resources while maintaining our recreation experience.
  - For example, the Town of Eagle Open Space could request two weeks of the TCC's time to complete a trail reroute and social trail decommissioning project. This would reserve two of the fourteen weeks the TCC is available to support partner projects.
- Creating an **Outdoor Stewardship Crew (OSC)** to manage dispersed recreation, enforce fire restrictions, barbed wire fence removal, restoration work, watershed

improvements, trailhead management, river put-in/take-out management, and clean-up across multiple jurisdictions. This OSC would support and be modeled after the existing Front Country Ranger (FCR) program. The FCR consists of seasonal Forest Service employees and interns working on Forest Service lands only. This expansion would add four additional crew members and the ability for them to work on neighboring public lands such as BLM, municipalities, and county. Lands, open space, and infrastructure managed by these agencies are in need of a crew to support projects and management.

- For example, the Eagle Valley Land Trust could request one week of the OSC's time to support a barbed wire fence removal project in Brush Creek Ranch & Open Space. This would reserve two of the fourteen weeks the OSC is available to support partner projects.
- Utilizing the [Eagle Valley Outdoor Stewardship Coalition \(EVOSC\)](#) partners to identify and implement recreation stewardship projects, restoration and habitat improvement projects, a diverse range of stewardship projects, and further expanding community involvement. EVOSC partners include land managers and other local non-profits such as Eagle Valley Land Trust, Eagle River Coalition, Wilderness Workshop, and more. Through this partnership, these partners would be able to reserve the TCC and/or OSC to execute a wide range of stewardship projects that may include recreation mitigation, habitat improvement projects, noxious weed management, watershed restoration, and other public land and environmental initiatives. These projects would be implemented by the partners, supported by volunteers, and the TCC or OSC as requested.

### **Collaboration and Implementation:**

The project will be implemented through a collaborative, community-driven process led and managed by Eagle County Open Space and the VVMTA. It will be informed by our partners and through our Regional Partnership Initiative, Eagle County Community Wildlife Roundtable (CWR). The CWR's current state is working towards completing our first phase conservation and wildlife plan which will be followed by our second phase of a recreation assessment. We anticipate having these plans finished by late 2026. We are currently restructuring the CWR to include an overall full roundtable which is informed by committees focusing on wildlife/conservation, recreation/stewardship (EVOSC), education, and outdoor equity. While the CWR has made significant progress and is moving in the right direction, the urgency to begin implementing projects on the ground now is necessary. The CWR is 18-24 months away from focusing on the project implementation phase.

This project serves as a pilot for broader stewardship efforts, aligning with the CWR's long-term vision for recreation management, stewardship, and conservation efforts. By demonstrating successful implementation and measurable impact, the initiative will serve as a foundation for future funding opportunities and partnerships, ensuring continued stewardship growth beyond the grant period. It will be a catalyst to pull people together to move forward the CWR and our community efforts.

To identify, prioritize, and implement projects, regular EVOSC partner meetings will occur and be led by partners and/or CWR facilitators. All projects will strongly encourage community involvement through volunteer opportunities. This will engage diverse participants in stewardship activities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for local trails, open spaces, rivers, and wildlife. This collaborative model ensures efficient resource allocation, long-term stewardship sustainability, and strengthened community relationships.

The project is also grounded in a commitment to equity and inclusion. Efforts will be made to elevate underrepresented voices and remove barriers to participation by leveraging the collective strength of all partners' DEI initiatives. This includes offering diverse volunteer opportunities that cater to all skill levels and backgrounds. Through the CWR's outdoor equity committee we would conduct outreach and engagement initiatives to involve local communities in project visioning and implementation. And we would ensure projects take place on a mix of federal and non-federal lands to provide equitable access to public outdoor spaces.

In conclusion, by strengthening the TCC, creating the OSC, and leveraging the collective reach and impact of EVOSC partners, we will start to tip the scales and stop continually playing catchup to manage and improve our natural resources. This proposal presents a strategic, collaborative approach to stewardship that aligns with GOCO's program values of resource conservation, outdoor stewardship, equitable access, and community vitality. We look forward to partnering with GOCO to enhance the sustainability of Eagle County's outdoor recreation spaces.