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AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS: Salazar Establishes 558th National Wildlife Refuge Unit in Colorado's Sangre de Cristo Mountains

*Donation of nearly 77,000-Acre Easement by Louis Bacon
Establishes Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area*

DENVER, Colo. -- Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar today announced the formal establishment of the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area as the nation's 558th unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System, thanks to the donation of a nearly 77,000-acre conservation easement in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains bordering the San Luis Valley by noted conservationist Louis Bacon.

"Following in the footsteps of our greatest conservationists, Louis Bacon's generosity and passion for the great outdoors is helping us to establish an extraordinary conservation area in one of our nation's most beautiful places," Secretary Salazar said. "This newest treasure in our National Wildlife Refuge System links together a diverse mosaic of public and private lands, protects working landscapes and water quality, and creates a landscape corridor for fish and wildlife unlike any place in the world."

Bacon, a longtime advocate and proponent of landscape and wildlife conservation, is donating a conservation easement on nearly 77,000 acres of his 81,400-acre Trinchera Ranch. Today's action builds on his previously announced intention also to donate a perpetual conservation easement on the 90,000 acre Blanca Ranch, bringing the total amount of permanently protected land to nearly 170,000 acres. When completed, the two easements will represent the largest donation ever to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). The Blanca Ranch easement donation is expected to be finalized later this year.

"We are too quickly losing important landscapes in this country to development-- and I worry that if we do not act to protect them now, future generations will grow up in a profoundly different world," said Bacon. "This motivates me and is why I am proud to place Trinchera Ranch, Blanca's adjoining ranch, into a conservation easement forever protecting it with the US

Fish and Wildlife Service. I am also honored to help Secretary Salazar and the US Fish and Wildlife Service create the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area in Colorado's San Luis Valley. It is an area widely known for its cultural, geographic, wildlife and habitat resources, and this conservation area provides another opportunity to conserve it in perpetuity."

Trinchera Blanca Ranch is the largest contiguous, privately owned ranch in Colorado and features breathtaking vistas of high desert shrubs and mountain grasslands, combined with alpine forest and alpine tundra. The area stretches up to the top of one of the highest peaks in Colorado, Blanca Peak at 14,345 feet above sea level. It falls in the center of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, the longest mountain chain in the United States, and borders the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness near Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve.

Joined by Service Director Dan Ashe and Dan Pike of Colorado Open Lands, Salazar and Bacon signed the conservation easement on the Trinchera Ranch to formally establish the new refuge. They also signed a memorandum of agreement to complement an existing Colorado Open Lands easement agreement already in place on the property.

Colorado Open Lands will jointly monitor and support the conservation efforts with the Service. The agreement marks one of the first cooperative arrangements of its kind among the federal government, a private land trust and a private landowner.

"Trinchera is such a spectacular property and the creation of the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area allows us to protect this landscape, something that is truly special," said Colorado Open Lands Executive Director Pike. "It has been an honor to hold the conservation easement on Trinchera for nearly a decade. We look forward to being able to share best practices with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and are extremely excited about this innovative collaboration in land conservation."

"We're excited to see the results of this collaborative conservation effort come to fruition, thanks to the generosity of Louis Bacon and the strategic and inclusive planning efforts that serve the conservation needs of fish, wildlife and plants across the San Luis Valley landscape," said Director Ashe. "The Service has been working with landowners in the San Luis Valley on a locally-led voluntary cooperative partnership effort to conserve wildlife habitat and keep working lands working."

Costilla County Commissioner Crestina Martinez, noted photographer and author John Fielder, and Executive Director of Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts John Swartout also joined today's signing ceremony.

"Mr. Bacon's donation of this incredible conservation easement is welcome news for Coloradans who treasure this area and can now rest assured that it will be protected for generations to come. I want to commend him for the example he is setting for other landowners in Costilla County and across the state interested in protecting the wildlife and natural resources that sustain our local economies and way of life," Udall said. "This announcement reflects a first-of its kind partnership in this part of Colorado, where a private landowner and a federal agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, have made a shared commitment to conservation of one of the most pristine private landholdings in the southern Rockies. It has been said that we don't inherit the earth from our parents — we borrow them from our children. The establishment of the Sangre de

Cristo Conservation Area ensures that this scenic gem will be here for future Coloradans to enjoy.”

Under President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors initiative to establish a 21st century conservation and outdoor recreation agenda, the Interior Department has spearheaded a series of voluntary partnerships with landowners to conserve rural landscapes while ensuring ranching, farming and other traditional ways of life remain strong. Conservation easements are only acquired from willing landowners.

These initiatives include new units of the National Wildlife Refuge System, such as the Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area in Kansas, the Dakota Grassland Conservation Area of South Dakota and North Dakota, and the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area in Montana.

For more information about the Service’s partnership work in the San Luis Valley or the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area, please visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Mountain-Prairie’s homepage at: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>.

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