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Three projects to mark Montelores Coalition's first field season in Dolores, Montezuma counties

Group established in 2024 launches pilot restoration work

By Anna Watson Journal Staff Writer

Thursday, Aug 6, 2026 5:00 AM Updated Monday, Aug. 10, 2026 4:10 PM



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Three projects to mark Montelores Coalition's first field season in Dolores, I
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Members of Montelores Coalition participate in a cleanup in May co-hosted with the Dolores Watersheds Collaborative and the San Juan Mountains Association for Colorado Public Lands Day. Montelores Coalition is a regional partnership that works to balance conservation and recreation in Montezuma and Dolores counties. (Courtesy of Montelores Coalition)



After roughly two years building partnerships and gathering local input, Montelores Coalition, a sustainable land and recreation coalition, is preparing to initiate field work.

The coalition announced three projects scheduled for mid-September through late October, marking its first season of visible restoration work for Montezuma and Dolores communities.

The projects are cleanup and trail improvements at Hawkins Preserve in Cortez, removing old fencing in Rico and continuing river restoration along the Mancos River in collaboration with Montezuma Land Conservancy.

Montelores Coalition was established in 2024 as part of Colorado Outdoor Regional Partnerships Initiative, a statewide program aiming to balance conservation and growing recreational strain on the land.

“Increased visitation to popular recreation areas, including Colorado state parks, have caused maintenance backlogs and management challenges,” reads Gov. Jared Polis’ 2020 executive order [B 008](#) establishing the initiative.

“We are at a critical juncture where we must act to ensure that our state remains a world-class outdoor destination while preserving our land, water, wildlife and quality of life,” the order continued.

Cara Gildar, executive director of Montelores Coalition, said the organization and work are valuable opportunities. The potential is two-fold, she added, allowing the group to proactively plan ahead while accounting for local priorities.

Other areas of the state experienced higher rates of tourism, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, that caused damage in outdoor spaces for which couldn’t sustain the influx of visitors, Gildar said.

“We’re in a really sweet spot where compared to the rest of the state, our visitation and recreation from locals is – and just our population is – a lot lower. So, we can direct how things unfold, which is a great place to be in,” she said.

Funding initially came from grants provided by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and now stems in part from the agency and Great Outdoors Colorado, which is supported through lottery proceeds. Last December, the state awarded \$300,000 to Montelores Coalition, one of a total of 19 awards equaling \$9.99 million awarded this grant cycle to regional partnerships. Some of that funding supported finalizing the coalition's Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Plan, a major focus and process since the coalition has formed.

“It’s interesting doing this work because everyone in this community has really strong opinions about the landscape,” Gildar said. “But one thing that I see we all have in common is wanting to take care of it and wanting to preserve this rural and more wild experience.”



Cara Gildar, executive director of Montelores Coalition, said an executive order allowed communities to “self-select” into regions and then identify their own priorities. “The thing I think is really valuable about this opportunity is this isn’t a top-down state directive – it’s an opportunity.” (Courtesy of Montelores Coalition)

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A larger value identified in the plan is directing visitors to spaces that can accommodate them, such as more infrastructure, parking or restrooms.

“One thing I hear from some people in our community is this concern of not wanting to promote a lot of growth or not wanting to become the next Moab,” she said. “I think we all share that here in this area. This is our home, and we all have our well-kept secrets.”

The coalition operates as a program under a fiscal sponsor and is built around two governing bodies. An executive committee serves as the voting body, made up of local decision-makers, including representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, municipalities, both counties, and agricultural

and tourism representatives. The group’s decisions are informed by a larger stakeholder round table that includes representatives from recreation, conservation, economic development, hunting, fishing, motor sports and rivers.

“Our intention is to have a very robust, diverse group at the table,” Gildar said. “We expect to have some hard conversations because we have different opinions, lifestyles and different perspectives.”

The coalition’s Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Plan was written largely by the round table, using existing comprehensive plans, data from interviews with community members and listening sessions. The draft was presented during public meetings held in Rico, Dolores, Cortez, Mancos and Dove Creek.

Currently, the coalition is beginning what it calls its “strike team” projects, using them both to complete on-the-ground work and to inform how future projects should be handled. Gildar said the coalition is eligible to apply for roughly \$2 million in future regional partnerships funding through 2030, making the pilot projects an early testing ground.

The first project will focus on Hawkins Preserve in Cortez, where crews are completing cleanup, invasive weed treatment and potentially some trail work. Another project near Rico will remove abandoned fencing that no longer functions and could create hazards for wildlife. That project collaborates with Rico Land Collaborative.

The third project assists in funding ongoing riparian restoration along the Mancos River corridor to the southwest involving a mile-long stretch on private land areas. Gildar said the County Road 39 restoration project is lead by Montezuma Land Conservancy and its partners.

Volunteer opportunities are anticipated for each of the three projects when scheduling is finalized. Gildar said the coalition plans to announce dates for volunteers through its website, newsletter sign-up and social media.

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