



Parks & Open Space

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PARKS & OPEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

TO:	Parks & Open Space Advisory Committee
DATE/TIME:	Thursday, Apr. 23, 6:30 p.m.
LOCATION:	Virtual Meeting

AGENDA ITEM:	Update to the Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm Management Plan
PRESENTER:	Marni Ratzel, Resource Planner
ACTION REQUESTED:	Information only

Boulder County Parks & Open Space (BCPOS) is in the initial planning phase of an update to consider refinements to the management plan for Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm (CHPRCF). While overall management of the open space is successful, there are several resource management issues and conflicts that need to be addressed.

In the fall of 2019, an internal, multi-disciplinary project team began working to identify topic areas to focus on in the plan update. The proposed framework and schedule for the plan update was shared for public input in March. At the POSAC meeting, staff will present these materials and stakeholder feedback for POSAC discussion and input.

Background

Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm (CHPRCF) is a multifaceted open space property. Management involves the wide variety of resource activities that achieve the department's mission *to conserve natural, cultural, and agricultural resources and provide public uses that reflect sound resource management and community values.*

Beginning in 1980, BCPOS purchased CHPRCF primarily to preserve an open space buffer and maintain an active producing farm. It is located along Highway 287 and Dillon Road and encompasses approximately 1,124 acres. The property borders the City and County of Broomfield to the south, City of Louisville to the northwest, and City of Lafayette to the north.

BCPOS has leases for an agricultural operation and the Birds of Prey Foundation. Historically a dairy farm, the property is now used to raise irrigated and dryland crops, and livestock. There are agricultural lands of local, state, and national significance. Since the early eighties, the Birds of Prey Foundation rehabilitation center has operated flight cages on the east side of the property and an intensive care unit facility on the west side along 104th Street. There also are currently four operating oil & gas wells on the property.

CHPRCF is one of the few open spaces managed for agricultural purposes that also provides public access. A public trail system includes Rock Creek Regional Trail that traverses through the middle of the property and Stearns Lake Trailhead offers fishing and picnic facilities. In 2019, the property was visited by over 75,000 recreationalists who primarily enjoy hiking/running, biking, and fishing as well as watching wildlife.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are the most apparent and readily observable small mammal species on CHPRCF. They are an important species in the property's grasslands that have attracted burrowing owls, bald eagles, and other raptors to nest on this open space. The open space offers native short-grass prairie, three designated Critical Wildlife Habitat areas, a Habitat Conservation Area, and a 40-acre burrowing owl "preserve." The Rock Creek and Buffalo Gulch riparian corridors run through the property, and wetlands are concentrated at Stearns Lake and the south end of the property known as the Parrot's Beak.

In 1998, the entire property was listed as a Boulder County historic landmark. There are seven prehistoric sites and 18 historic sites on the property that include numerous historic agricultural buildings and the Goodhue Farmhouse.

Management Plan Update

The purpose of the management plan update is renew the vision, goals, and objectives, allowed uses, and implementation strategies for the property. These will be based on an in-depth review and evaluation of areas of concern, opportunities, and constraints for existing uses, and resources to guide an options analysis for achieving a better balance among these activities. Public sentiment and the goals and policies of the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan and other relevant planning documents also will help inform a staff recommendation on refining management direction. The updated plan will document and guide future work plans and budget allocations.

As part of the initial planning process, and to guide future management direction, staff developed the following draft vision statement and project goals.

Proposed Vision Statement

Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm is a working landscape of farming, ranching, irrigation features, and reservoirs, intertwined with critical wildlife, wetland, riparian, and grassland habitats, that preserves its distinct history and provides regional trail connectivity and recreational amenities for current and future generations

Proposed Plan Goals

Preserve & Enhance

- Critical wildlife habitats
- Unique stands of shortgrass prairie
- Wetlands and riparian areas
- Historic/archaeological resources

Maintain

- Agricultural production and associated water rights

Provide

- Compatible recreational use

The project team also has identified several proposed topics to focus on in the update as detailed below. A summary description of each topic including areas of concern, opportunities to explore, and constraints to consider is outlined in Attachment A.

- Farm operations
- Water
- Visitor access and accessibility
- Historic buildings, cultural, and paleontology resources
- Wildlife, riparian, and wetland habitat areas
- Grassland restoration
- Prairie dog management
- Birds of Prey Foundation operations
- Standard Operating Procedures

An aim of defining what is desirable and achievable for the management of any given resource is to consider the impacts on other resources. This framework is intended to ensure each aspect of the property is provided and maintained through balanced, sound, informed, and sustainable land management practices.

Planning Process

The initial scoping process for the management plan update began in the fall 2019 with an inter-disciplinary team that discussed existing resources and management conditions to identify issues, opportunities, and constraints. After incorporating stakeholder feedback, the team will complete an options analysis to develop staff-preferred management actions for a formal 30-day public review period, followed by board review and adoption, currently scheduled for summer/fall 2020.

Public Input

BCPOS has convened stakeholder meetings with the agricultural operations tenants and the Birds of Prey Foundation to gather their input on what is working well and on areas for improvement. An interagency meeting also was held with representatives from the City and County of Broomfield Open Space Department.

In March, BCPOS hosted an open house and comment period to share information and gather feedback on the initial scoping of the management plan update. These included the plan goals, objectives, and vision statement; project timeline and process; topics to focus on in the plan update; and what is working well, areas for enhancement, and opportunities and constraints to consider in developing redefined management direction.

Information shared at the open house included a staff [presentation](#), [posters](#), and [maps](#). These materials and an online comment form were posted on the [project web page](#) on March 9. The direct link to the project web page is www.boco.org/chpplan.

Topics raised at the open house during the question & answer portion included prairie dog management, oil & gas resources, and trail detours/closures. Additionally, a total of 12 stakeholders submitted comments on or before Monday, March 30, which were considered and incorporated into the presentation for this POSAC meeting. Comments are still being collected and may be reviewed by POSAC members [here](#).

Most stakeholders who submitted written comments shared feedback related to several of the proposed topic areas, with almost all mentioning a desire of achieving a better balance among uses, and particularly among farm operations, recreational access, and wildlife, especially prairie dogs. Some community members shared that they value wildlife as a higher priority than agricultural and recreational uses, while others would like to see better management of prairie dogs to restore native grasslands. Another theme was the desire to keep regional trail access open during wildlife closures as it is a critical regional connector trail.

Proposed Plan Update Topics

- ▶ Farm operations
- ▶ Water
- ▶ Visitor access and accessibility
- ▶ Historic buildings, cultural and paleontology resources
- ▶ Wildlife, riparian, and wetland habitat areas
- ▶ Grassland restoration
- ▶ Prairie dog management
- ▶ Birds of Prey Foundation operations
- ▶ Standard Operating Procedures



Topic: Farm Operations

Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm is comprised of over 400 acres of irrigated cropland and 490 acres of rangeland. Crops include small grains, pumpkins, and specialty fall gourds/Indian corn, alfalfa, and grass for hay and pasture. A highlight is the fall U-Pick-Em pumpkin patch and corn maze.



Areas of Concern

- ▶ Suitability of farm headquarters site and historic buildings for modern farm operations
- ▶ Interaction between farm operations, trails, natural resources, and riparian areas
- ▶ Effectiveness of current fencing in keeping livestock contained
- ▶ Seasonal wildlife closures impact farm operations
- ▶ Some MOA designated land is being farmed as dry cropland

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Potential change in land designation of 40-acre prairie dog preserve to cropland
- ▶ Consider improved shop, equipment storage, and livestock handling facilities
- ▶ Potential to improve irrigation facilities
- ▶ Refine fencing and gates to improve livestock grazing management

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Historic buildings, cultural, and paleontological resources
- ▶ Existing trails, including the Rock Creek Regional trail
- ▶ Existing prairie dog colonies
- ▶ Critical wildlife, riparian, and wetland habitat areas

Topic: Water

Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm has a diverse set of water rights including on-farm storage and several miles of riparian corridors. Two fully operational reservoirs provide water to irrigate agriculture and support ongoing farm operations. One of these, Stearns Lake, also serves the needs of multiple resources including a dedicated wildlife habitat preserve, recreational fishing, and wildlife viewing opportunities.



Irrigation infrastructure



Stearns Lake dam



Buffalo Gulch ponds

Areas of Concern

- ▶ Adequate water rights to store water in existing ponds at Buffalo Gulch
- ▶ Significant Sedimentation in Buffalo Gulch ponds
- ▶ Aging Stearns Lake dam
- ▶ Water use recording infrastructure is insufficient and accuracy is variable
- ▶ Inefficient water conveyance and irrigation infrastructure
- ▶ Concern for water quality due to storm water flows and grazing practices

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Potential Stearns Lake increased storage, dam spillway, and structural improvements
- ▶ Potential to increase efficiency of water delivery and yield of water rights
- ▶ Potential modification of diversion structures in Rock Creek and Buffalo Gulch
- ▶ Research off-stream livestock watering opportunities
- ▶ Potential to improve oversight of diversion structures/water conveyance in creeks

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Water laws and restrictions on types of use of existing water rights
- ▶ Difficulty developing wells without major inputs and modifications
- ▶ Potential loss of habitat due to increased efficiency of conveyance and irrigation

Topic: Visitor Access and Accessibility

Renowned for wildlife-watching, the open space offers year-round opportunities for visitors to enjoy. The fairly flat terrain makes it a great place for families with young children to explore. Park visitors hike and ride trails, fish at Stearns Lake, and watch the seasonal changes of the working farm. The Goodhue Farmhouse provides a meeting place for local governmental agencies and nonprofits that partner with Boulder County government.



Areas of Concern

- ▶ Seasonal wildlife closures of the regional trail
- ▶ Detours do not meet multi-use trail standards
- ▶ Demand for improved access and parking from Brainard Rd.
- ▶ Capacity of parking and lack of equestrian parking at Stearns Lake trailhead
- ▶ Difficulty for visitors to distinguish trail corridor from farm access roads
- ▶ Capacity of infrastructure to handle growing pumpkin patch visitation
- ▶ Trail erosion and damage due to standing water at select locations
- ▶ There is no access to Mary Miller trail for groups using the Goodhue Farmhouse.

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Potential to relocate portions of the regional trail or build new trails
- ▶ Formalize new trailhead(s) from Brainard Rd.
- ▶ Modify trail surface to address erosion and standing water
- ▶ Improve wayfinding and informational signage
- ▶ Explore watchable wildlife opportunities for the public
- ▶ Improve ADA access to public buildings, Stearns Lake, and trails
- ▶ Improve fishing infrastructure at Stearns Lake
- ▶ New 104th Street connector trail from Stearn's Lake to Coal Creek regional Trail
- ▶ Coordinate with Broomfield on a connection to U.S. 36 bikeway/RTD Park-n-Ride.

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Need to balance recreational opportunities with protection of sensitive and important natural and cultural resources (leopard frogs, raptors, critical wildlife, prehistoric, historic sites)
- ▶ Unknown/changing location(s) of seasonal closures for nesting birds
- ▶ Existing agricultural operations, including irrigation infrastructure
- ▶ Rock Creek regulatory floodplain risk
- ▶ Additional cost for new infrastructure construction and on-going maintenance

Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

Topic: Historic Buildings, Cultural, and Paleontological Resources

There are 25 known cultural resource sites on the property. These include seven prehistoric sites (three open camps and four isolated finds) and 18 sites including Rock Creek Farm/Stearns Dairy, Dwight Nelson Farm, Goodhue Ditch segments, Burlington Northern Railroad segments, Sunnyside coal mine, and several isolated finds. Additionally, three dinosaur fossil fragments were collected on property.

Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

Areas of Concern

- ▶ Stewardship of historic buildings
- ▶ Backlog of historic building maintenance projects
- ▶ Age and completeness of cultural resource data
- ▶ Extent and significance of paleontological resources is unknown
- ▶ Goat Hill archaeology site extent and significance is unknown
- ▶ Rock Creek stage stop station location is unknown
- ▶ Lack of resource monitoring
- ▶ Presence of non-operational equipment and debris near farm buildings affects aesthetics

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Raise awareness of historic resource values and increase stewardship
- ▶ Amend a historic building maintenance schedule
- ▶ Complete cultural resource survey and paleontology resource assessment for entire property
- ▶ Establish an adaptive management approach
- ▶ Complete archaeology assessments for the Rock Creek stage station and Goat Hill sites
- ▶ Nominate entire property to National Register of Historic Places

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Cultural and paleontological resource survey incomplete
- ▶ To date, only 39% of the property (385 acres) surveyed



Triceratops frill fragment



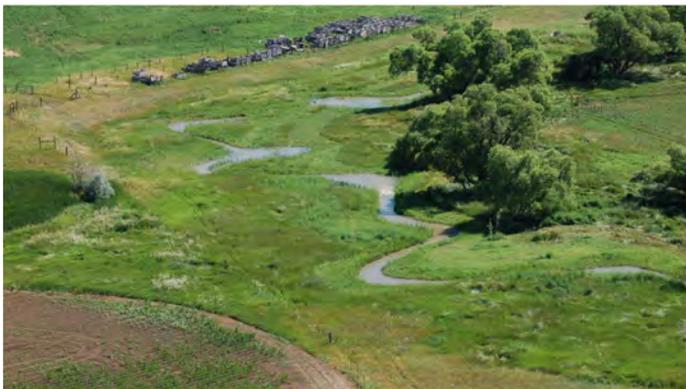
Hadrosaur vertebrae



Topic: Wildlife, Riparian and Wetland Habitat Areas

Bird species diversity is high. Many raptor species use the property for nesting including Swainson's hawk, red-tailed hawk, great-horned owl, and American kestrel. Most notably are the presence of nesting burrowing owls, a state-threatened species of greatest conservation need and Boulder County **program** priority species of special concern. A bald eagle pair has been present since 2012.

An estimated 25 acres of wetlands and 6.1 miles of riparian corridors exist on the property. Between 1998 and 2011, the department invested substantial time and money towards two wetland and five stream restoration and stabilization projects. Since 2019, a resident beaver family is using Rock Creek within the planning area. Critical wildlife habitats are designated for northern leopard frogs. Also, active prairie dog colonies are present on the property.



Issues

- ▶ Proximity of regional trail to burrowing owl and eagle nests, causing disturbance to nesting
- ▶ Degradation of restored riparian areas with livestock grazing and prairie dog expansion
- ▶ Mature and mid-age trees dying along Rock Creek and Buffalo Gulch
- ▶ Increased stormwater runoff from neighboring development into creeks
- ▶ Increasing population of noxious weeds along riparian corridors
- ▶ Glacier Park wetland has diminished in size due to changes in hydrology
- ▶ Lack of diversity in some wetlands

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Consolidate, preserve, or increase large contiguous habitat area for wildlife
- ▶ Additional restoration and planting along riparian corridors
- ▶ Improve fencing in riparian areas
- ▶ Water quality sampling to examine vegetation health in riparian areas
- ▶ Construct off-stream watering infrastructure for livestock
- ▶ Monitor beaver activity
- ▶ Introduce prescribed fire as a control method for cattails

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Balancing natural resource preservation, public access, and agricultural operations

Topic: Grassland Restoration

Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm has over 490 acres of rangeland that is presently degraded and could benefit from restoration. Currently there are over 64 acres of significant natural communities—including two riparian communities and a blue grama native grassland community. Two past projects have restored native grassland buffers along Buffalo Gulch.



Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

Areas of Concern

- ▶ Extensive bare ground and loss of soil
- ▶ Lack of perennial grass cover
- ▶ Several invasive weed species
- ▶ Prairie dog and cattle grazing impacts to grassland vegetation and ground cover
- ▶ Old data for existing conditions (from 2003 and 2008)

Opportunities to explore

- ▶ Restore perennial plant species
- ▶ Clarify tenant vs. BCPOS responsibilities for weed management
- ▶ Re-inventory wetlands and significant natural grassland communities
- ▶ Assess and refine fencing locations
- ▶ Establish best management practices
- ▶ Mitigation of prairie dog population densities to restore ground cover of perennial grasses

Constraints to consider

- ▶ Challenges of managing prairie dog populations
- ▶ Lack of available forage for grazing outside of riparian areas
- ▶ Existing weed density

Topic: Prairie Dog Management

Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

The property contains a designated 99-acre Habitat Conservation Area and an additional 862 acres designated as Multi-Objective Areas with prairie dog active colonies.



Areas of Concern

- ▶ Prairie dog impacts to significant vegetation communities, native grassland, pasture grass, farm crops, ground cover, and riparian corridor understory
- ▶ Prairie dog encroachment from 40-acre preserve onto surrounding No Prairie Dog designated croplands
- ▶ Prairie dog encroachment from open space onto adjacent private lands
- ▶ Prairie dog burrows encroaching onto trails

Opportunities to Explore

- ▶ Potential to consolidate and preserve/increase large contiguous habitat area for prairie dogs
- ▶ Potential to reduce density of current population to improve vegetation condition
- ▶ Consider creating riparian corridor buffers to protect from disturbance
- ▶ Maintain population of prairie dogs to support local bio-diversity

Constraints to Consider

- ▶ Balancing natural resource preservation, public access, and agricultural operations

Topic: Birds of Prey Foundation Operations

The Birds of Prey Foundation is a non-profit wildlife rehabilitation organization that operates on portions of the Carolyn Holmberg Preserve at Rock Creek Farm property under a lease agreement with BCPOS. These operations include the intake, rehabilitation, and release of injured birds of prey and captive propagation of species. Rehabilitative flight cages are located on the east side of the property along Rock Creek and their intensive care unit is housed on the west side along 104th Street.



Areas of Concern

- ▶ Birds of Prey Foundation flight cages are located within the floodway on east side of property.
- ▶ Birds of Prey Foundation is interested in expanding facilities on the west side of the property.

Opportunities to explore

- ▶ Potential to expand Birds of Prey Foundation facilities, off South 104th St.

Constraints to consider

- ▶ Leases and other real estate agreements
- ▶ Utility easements and other contractual obligations including oil & gas operations
- ▶ Floodplain regulations

Topic: Standard Operating Procedures

Attachment A: Topic Summary Descriptions

BCPOS has developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to define the process carried out in communicating and coordinating a change to regular operations or use. The development and use of SOPs are an integral part of a successful quality system as it provides individuals with the information to perform a job properly and facilitates consistency in the quality and integrity of a product or end result.



Areas of Concern

- ▶ BCPOS coordination with tenants and advance notice for seasonal wildlife and trail closures
- ▶ Tenants coordination with BCPOS resource teams and advance notice on operational changes that may be considered significant changes or projects

Opportunities to explore

- ▶ Review protocols on use of historic buildings
- ▶ Review protocols on seasonal wildlife closures
- ▶ Review protocols for mitigating potential impacts to cultural resources and paleontology
- ▶ Improve agency and stakeholder partnerships with proactive coordination
- ▶ Create Ag Operating Plan for property in conjunction with management plan.

Constraints to consider

- ▶ Lease agreements
- ▶ Conservation easement agreements