Workshop: Land Trusts, Ag. Easements, Active Use and Conservation
Presenter: Jen Johnson, The Nature Conservancy (CO)

The Colorado Ranching Legacy Program – Developing the Next Generation of Land Stewards
In Colorado The Nature Conservancy is working to protect 500,000 acres of grasslands, the least protected landscape on earth, and to do so is working with ranchers, who for over a century have kept vast expanses of prairie intact. However, the number of ranchers and ranches in Colorado is continually declining in the face of many challenges. The average age of Colorado’s ranchers is now more than 60 years old and the difficulties of succession planning make transferring ranches from one generation to the next very difficult.

Additionally, in many parts of the state, the developmental value of ranch land far outweighs its agricultural value, pressuring many ranchers to sell to developers: Colorado ranks third in the nation for overall agricultural land lost in the last five years. Still, the principal challenge is economic. Steep entry costs and slim profit margins deter many in younger generations from returning to or starting out in the business. In order to assist in the development of the next generation of stewards vital for conserving family ranches and healthy, intact landscapes, the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Colorado State University, and The Nature Conservancy have partnered to create the Colorado Ranching Legacy Program. This educational program is designed to equip young and beginning ranchers to be innovative leaders in land management and conservation.

This program is built on the fact that long-term, profitable ranching necessitates land management focused on sustainability and careful use of resources. This overlap between a profit-oriented mindset and a conservation-oriented mindset act as the foundation upon which ranchers and conservationists can find common ground. Though not explicitly an easement-focused program, it is likely that graduates of the Ranching Legacy Program will not only be better equipped to prepare for ranch succession and act as spokesmen to both the ranching and conservation communities, but may also use conservation easements, along with other innovative conservation tools, in order to achieve their land management goals.

This program, which will officially begin in August 2009, is the first of its kind in the nation.