



Board Summary Report

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Agenda Date: 4/20/2026

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To: Board of County Commissioners

Through: Gini Pingnot, Director, Open Spaces

Prepared By:

Dan Payson, Open Spaces, Parks, and Trails Manager; Gunnar Zollinger, Operations Supervisor;
Sam Bahl, Natural Resource and Agricultural Specialist

Presenter: Dan Payson, Parks, and Trails Manager, Open Spaces; Gunnar Zollinger,
Operations Supervisor

Subject:

2:00 PM *Agricultural Leasing Program

Purpose and Request:

The purpose of this session is to request permission from the Board of County Commissioners to formalize an Agricultural Leasing Program, specifically the grazing operations program, within the Open Spaces Department. An Agricultural Leasing Program will offer a strategic pathway to strengthen land stewardship, honor the county's agricultural heritage and ensure long-term sustainable use and stewardship of available properties. Implementing this program will help support rural communities while also showcasing for urban communities the importance of agriculture in Arapahoe County.

Alignment with Strategic Plan: Economic Resilience and Stability - Support long-term economic resilience through responsible fiscal and investment strategies.

Background and Discussion: Agriculture production is a cornerstone to the historic and modern-day way of life in Arapahoe County. Moving east of the urban corridor, you see multi-generational farms, lush fields of winter wheat, and cattle speckled among fields and rolling hills. The Arapahoe County Open Spaces Department (ACOS) understands the importance of agriculture within the county and promotes the conservation of these historic working lands on the County's property portfolio. Formalizing the County's agricultural leasing program will help to promote conservation and sustainability on these properties to maintain this historic character.

Historically, the county has relied on informal arrangements and existing lessees from prior owners of properties - word of mouth and relationships with neighboring property owners - to facilitate farming and grazing operations on County property. While these relationships have been productive, the county has a fiscal responsibility to formalize its agricultural leasing program in accordance with modern conservation practices and best management standards. The County also has a responsibility to ensure equal opportunities within the agricultural community to access and use the County's property. Currently, Open Spaces maintains one active grazing lease with Bradbury Land and Cattle, LLC at Bijou Basin Open Space. The current lease for the Bijou Basin Open Space will

expire at the end of 2026. As staff moves into 2027 with no existing grazing leases, formalizing the leasing program will provide greater operational stability and allow for long-term, strategic land management planning.

Over the last year, Arapahoe County Open Spaces has spoken with other government entities - Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Douglas County Open Spaces, Boulder County Parks and Open Spaces, and Highlands Ranch Community Association - to assist in developing an agricultural leasing program that will enhance conservation and stewardship in Arapahoe County Open Spaces properties. All of these government entities have reviewed the County's Draft Agricultural Leasing Program documents relating to the policies and management of our agricultural leasing program and provided positive, constructive feedback. Many of these entities shared the benefits and challenges of their current lease programs, ranging from grazing in riparian areas to grazing properties with public access. They also provided operational insight based on their experience that was incorporated into the program proposal before the Board of County Commissioners. Given the Open Spaces current property infrastructure and the projected future development of specific properties like Bijou Basin, the government entities we surveyed have concluded that we are proposing a sustainable agricultural leasing program that will benefit the residents of Arapahoe County.

The proposed sites for our grazing operations will include Richmil Ranch Open Space, Bijou Basin Open Space, Kiowa Creek Annex property, and Kiowa Creek South Open Space. Each lease application will be evaluated on their proposed agricultural management plan, years of agricultural experience, and their goals of leasing the land, the details of which are outlined in the Agricultural Leasing Grading Criteria provided to each applicant.

Alternatives: Alternatives to this request include:

1. **Approve:** Formalize an Agricultural Leasing Program under the newly proposed leasing terms. Open Spaces staff is proposing an initial six (6) year term with the option of the lessee renewing twice for two (2) years at a time (maximum of 10 years under a single lease).
2. **Approve the program with adjusted leasing terms:** Open Spaces staff would adjust the years and / or renewals the Board of County Commissioners recommend.
3. **Deny program approval:** Staff will continue to manage agricultural use of Open Spaces properties as is, relying on informal selection of agricultural operators. This option would limit staff's ability to ensure an equal opportunity among interested grazers and to select lessees that align with Arapahoe County conservation and stewardship goals for the public's properties

Fiscal Impact: This program will provide financial benefits that will be used to support stewardship and management of a given property. There will be minimal expenses that would not otherwise be incurred by managing Open Spaces properties without a grazing operation. These nominal expenses can be assumed within the department's existing staff and financial resources.

Alignment with Strategic Implementation Strategies: N/A

Staff Recommendation: Staff recommends the Board of County Commissioners approve an Agricultural Leasing Program under the proposed leasing terms. Currently, staff is proposing an initial six (6) year term with the option of the lessee renewing twice for two (2) years at a time (maximum of 10 years under a single lease).

Concurrence:

Outside entities:

1. Colorado Parks and Wildlife
2. Natural Resources Conservation Services
3. Douglas County Open Spaces
4. City of Boulder Open Spaces
5. I-70 REAP (Regional Economic Advancement Partnership)