MONTEZUMA LAND CONSERVANCY

Fall 2025 | Issue 54

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A Letter from the Executive Director

This fall, as the days shorten and the fields yield final harvests, I find myself reflecting on the profound truth that conservation is not simply about protecting acres—it is about cultivating a legacy of care and connection. At Montezuma Land Conservancy, we continue to grow our community engagement programs, Tribal initiatives, and conservation efforts with a deep appreciation for the relationships that connect people and land. Each step forward we make alongside landowners, and our community partners is made possible by your generosity and your belief that together we can shape a more just, resilient, and hopeful future.

This year, we celebrate the permanent protection of the Hackley conservation easement—land that will continue to sustain families and community for generations. At Fozzie's Farm, our new high tunnel is bursting with life, feeding excited mouths and the vision of future farm space for young producers and community. And through our Indigenous partnerships, we are reminded daily that the future of conservation requires reciprocity, reconciliation, and bold systems change.

Your support is what turns these aspirations into reality. You make possible the quiet moments of awe, the courageous leaps towards a different future, and the enduring protection of the places we love and call home. Thank you for walking with us at the edges where possibility takes root.

With dedication and gratitude,

Travis Custer, Executive Director

Braiding Land and Story

Reimagining Conservation in Ute Homelands

MLC's Traditional Harvest Project with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe was one of five projects featured in Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access & Return, a national report released in 2025.

Crew members with the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps install post-assisted log structures on the Mancos River as part of the Road 39 Restoration Project.

"My children, I will call you Utes, and you shall roam these beautiful mountains. Be brave and strong."

As told in their creation story, the Ute people trace their beginnings to these lands—the mountains, rivers, and valleys that have sustained them for centuries. Originally, thirteen Ute bands moved throughout present-day Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Wyoming as hunter-gatherers, traveling with the seasons and resources. Skilled hunters and, later, renowned horsemen, the Utes became known for their resilience, adaptability, and deep relationship to the land. Today, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe (UMUT), descendants of the Weenuche band, make their home at the base of Sleeping Ute Mountain in Southwest Colorado, and in White Mesa, Utah. Their cultural traditions, most notably the Bear Dance in spring and the Sun Dance in summer, continue to connect people to place through prayer, song, and ceremony.

It is here, in Ute homelands, that Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) has worked for nearly three decades, protecting habitat, open space, and working lands across Southwest Colorado. Over the past several years, the organization's mission has expanded to embrace a more community-centered vision—one that prioritizes partnership with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, acknowledges the historic exclusion of Indigenous voices in conservation, and commits to a process of healing and reconciliation. This work is not about replacing one story with another, but about braiding them together, creating something stronger, more resilient, and more whole.

That vision came to life in 2022 with the launch of the Traditional Harvest Project, developed alongside Tribal partners and rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Through partnerships with private landowners, the project is restoring access to ancestral lands, allowing tribal members to harvest traditional plants for food, medicine, and ceremony. At the same time, it works to heal ecosystems by addressing the impacts of climate change on keystone species through dedicated restoration efforts. By prioritizing intergenerational knowledge-sharing, cultural protocols, and Tribal sovereignty in decision-making, the project restores connections to the land while strengthening community bonds and collaboration. Through transportation support, stipends for community harvest leaders, and continued efforts to fund restoration and land access projects, the Traditional Harvest Project advances a future in which traditional homelands remain accessible, Tribal leadership is affirmed, and conservation is guided by respect, reciprocity, and relationship.

James Calabaza with Trees, Water & People (left) and Jesse Ramirez of Ramirez Natural Resource Stewardship (right) discuss restoration work plans at the Road 39 Restoration Project site.

Post-assisted log structures (PALS) installed on the Mancos River help to slow runoff and improve riparian habitat.

A National Example

MLC's work with the UMUT is part of a growing movement across the country that is reshaping the way conservation organizations think about land, history, and community. At the heart of this shift is the recognition that Indigenous peoples—whose stewardship sustained these landscapes for millennia—must be recentered in conservation efforts to more effectively guide projects and outcomes. The recently released *Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access & Return* report echoes that message, documenting national initiatives that seek to rebuild relationships between Tribes and their ancestral lands. Among the report's five featured case studies is MLC's Traditional Harvest Project.

These efforts point to a future where Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and cultural practices guide conservation. Within this landscape, the MLC-UMUT partnership illustrates what it means to move beyond acknowledgment into authentic relationship. Too often, conservation groups stop at symbolic gestures—simply issuing land acknowledgments or inviting Tribal leaders to events—without shifting power or resources that influence programs or projects. MLC's evolving work with the UMUT represents a different path: one grounded in reciprocity, accountability, and the understanding that Indigenous knowledge and community members must lead these efforts for long-term sustainability and impact. Through initiatives like the Traditional Harvest Project, the Tribal community and leaders define priorities and guide stewardship in ways that honor cultural protocols, while MLC provides support and capacity. By investing deeply in relationship rather than transaction, MLC and the UMUT are redefining what conservation can mean—not just in Colorado, but across the country.

Partnership & County Road 39 Restoration

As the Traditional Harvest Project has grown, so have the partnerships that drive it. Among the most significant is the collaboration with Trees, Water & People (TWP), a nonprofit with decades of experience working alongside Indigenous communities to advance climate resilience and ecological stewardship. To meet the complexity of this work, in 2025, MLC and TWP welcomed Wyatt Wilson in a shared staff role as the Cross-Cultural Programs Coordinator. In this joint position, supported by the combined resources, networks, and expertise of both MLC and TWP, Wyatt further bridges the two organizations, expanding capacity while ensuring Tribal priorities remain at the center of their collective work.

The power of this collaboration is visible along County Road 39 (CR 39), where MLC and its partners are restoring a mile of riparian habitat on the Mancos River. Over the past two years, crews have planted willow, cottonwood, chokecherry, and buffalo berry seedlings to stabilize riverbanks and reestablish culturally significant plants for harvest. The CR 39 project site is a living classroom, where restoration is guided by Tribal priorities and cultural protocols, and multiple partners have come together to accomplish incredible outcomes. The results are clear: healthier habitat, stronger floodplain function, and renewed access for the UMUT to engage in traditional harvesting practices.

Equally important has been the project's role in investing in people—especially Indigenous youth and young adults. For two summers, crews from Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps and Southwest Conservation Corps have been hired to carry out the restoration work including building post-assisted log structures (PALS) to

slow water, replenish floodplains, and reduce erosion. Their contributions go beyond ecological restoration; they represent cultural stewardship, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and skill-building that strengthens future Indigenous leaders. With support from TWP, Mountain Studies Institute, Ramirez Natural Resource Stewardship, Great Outdoors Colorado, and the Catena Foundation, the CR 39 project embodies what community-centered conservation can look like: ecological restoration braided with cultural revitalization and youth empowerment. In this way, MLC and its partners are not only restoring a river—they are restoring capacity, identity, and community resilience that will remain with the people for generations.

An Eye Towards Tribal Sovereignty

At the heart of this work is a principle that cannot be compromised: respect for Tribal sovereignty. For too long, conservation efforts across the country have sidelined Indigenous governance, reducing Tribal involvement to consultation rather than leadership. True partnership requires more. It requires recognizing that Tribes are sovereign nations, with their own governance systems, cultural protocols, and priorities for the future. In practice, this means projects are guided by Tribal decision-making, cultural values shape restoration strategies, and resources flow in ways that strengthen, rather than diminish, autonomy. For MLC, this commitment is not abstract—it is lived practice. From the design of the Traditional Harvest Project to the restoration work along CR 39 to the shared role with TWP, the guiding thread has been to uphold sovereignty as the foundation of partnership. By centering Tribal authority and knowledge, these projects restore ecological systems while advancing the broader work of healing and reconciliation.

Looking Forward

The movement for Indigenous land access and return is reshaping conservation across the country, and the work unfolding in Southwest Colorado is part of that larger story. The *Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access & Return* national report highlights initiatives that redefine conservation by centering Indigenous leadership and sovereignty. The partnership between MLC, UMUT, and TWP is one example of this shift in practice. Projects like the Traditional Harvest Project and the CR 39 restoration show that land rematriation is not simply about acres on a map—it is about renewing cultural lifeways, restoring ecological balance, and creating spaces where people and land thrive together.

Wyatt Wilson, MLC's Cross-Cultural Programs Coordinator (center), takes a break with Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps members at the Road 39 Restoration Project in the Mancos Valley.

It is a vision rooted in respect, reciprocity, and resilience—where conservation is no longer defined by what is set aside, but by what is restored.

This work offers a vision for the future of conservation. By investing in relationships, honoring sovereignty, and empowering youth and communities, MLC and its partners are shaping a model that others across the nation are learning from. It is a vision rooted in respect, reciprocity, and resilience—where conservation is no longer defined by what is set aside, but by what is restored. The path forward is clear: sustained partnership, guided by Indigenous leadership, has the power to heal histories of exclusion and create a future where people, culture, and land are braided together once more.

To read the full *Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access & Return* report (including MLC's case study starting on page 54), visit montezumaland.org/traditional-harvest-featured-nationally/.

To support the continuation and growth of this important work, please consider donating to MLC.

The Hackley Place

A Family's History of Protecting the Mancos Watershed

In late March 2025, Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) completed its 95th conservation easement, on a property on Chicken Creek owned by the Brown/Reddert family—a family with deep roots and long ties to the area. The project, one that was nearly ten years in the making, will protect a vital piece of the Mancos watershed for generations to come.

Known by the family as the Hackley Place, this 720-acre ranch is bordered on three sides by San Juan National Forest Lands and protects nearly two miles of this public land boundary. The project was high on the list for conservation priority due to its heritage as a multi-generational ranch, its buffer to the iconic Chicken Creek Nordic Trail system, and its preservation of contiguous wildlife habitat from the Chicken Creek drainage to surrounding public lands. With a healthy mix of Ponderosa Pine forest, rolling meadows, irrigated pastures, and over 17 acres of wetland, this newest conservation easement will play a vital role in protecting the broader watershed.

This project builds upon years of conservation work and a longstanding vision to protect historical agricultural land and wildlife habitat throughout the Mancos watershed. It was back in 2002 that the family first conserved land through an easement with MLC, protecting 437 acres of land along the East and West Mancos Rivers. Now, with the Hackley Place conserved as well, this one visionary family has conserved a total of 1,157 acres of land protected in partnership with MLC.

For Ryan Brown, on behalf of the Brown/Reddert family, *"The Hackley Place on Chicken Creek has been a part of our family's Reddert Ranch for generations. My brothers and I used to ride there with our grandfather from our home on Echo Basin Road. We'd camp and fish, check on the yearlings, and discover signs of ancient peoples, homesteaders, and lumbermen. It was an adventure I repeated with my own two boys when they were young. The property supports the many uses of the adjacent San Juan Forest public lands; cattlemen pass through our place on the way to and from their allotments, timber thinning goes on across the private/public boundary, elk find spring habitat in the meadows, hikers enjoy the views in summer and fall from the Chicken Creek Trails, and Chicken Creek Nordic skiers pass by in winter. It's for all these reasons that our family thinks preserving this property as a transition and gateway to public lands is important not only for us, but for the future of the community."*

MLC would like to extend a special thank you to the Brown/Reddert family and their spouses and children for their steadfast dedication to landscape-scale conservation in the Mancos watershed over multiple generations, as well as to project funder Keep It Colorado, and the many other local landowners who have worked with MLC to conserve nearly 50,000 acres of important landscapes in Southwest Colorado.

Landowners in Montezuma, Dolores, and San Miguel Counties interested in more information about conserving their land in partnership with MLC are always encouraged to contact our Conservation Director, Austin Easter, at austin@montezumaland.org, to chat about easements and how your special place in our landscape can add to a growing legacy of conservation for generations to come.

Fozzie's Salsa Festival

A Celebration of Harvest & Community

This summer, Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) celebrated our first harvest in the new high tunnel at Fozzie's Farm. In addition to several rows containing eggplant, okra, cucumbers, and green beans, the pride of this year's harvest was our many-rowed salsa garden. Heirloom tomatoes, tomatillos, jalapeños, and serranos were some of the many varieties grown from seeds to fruiting and flowering abundance by our Farm Manager, Tanner Besse, four summer apprentices, and numerous community visitors. By late summer, we were fortunate that the literal fruits of our labor had begun to manifest into a colorful culinary cornucopia.

> "Most fun our family has had together in a while."
> –Salsa Fest Attendee

The successful growing season raised the familiar question faced by many a home gardener: what to do with such a sudden abundance of produce? It had long been our intention to share our harvests with our community and to incorporate this into our educational offerings, but how best to do so? From that humble inquiry, Fozzie's first Salsa Festival was born. With the goal of making it an event for the whole family, we selected a Saturday in September and set forth trying to fill as many seats at the table as we could. Given the cultural connection of an event highlighting the foods and traditions of Mesoamerica, as well as MLC's commitment to providing programs that include our local Spanish-speaking community, we began planning a bilingual event and partnered with some community organizers within the Latino community to help spread the word.

When the day of the event finally rolled around, it brought with it monsoonal clouds promising rain. Ten minutes into our four-hour event, the downpour began. Thankfully, here in Southwest Colorado, rain is rarely seen as anything short of a blessing, and we were pleased to see so many undeterred and smiling attendees. While some of our outdoor activities would need to be moved inside our classroom, and the grill placed underneath the awning, this seemed to only increase the close-knit feel of a community gathered in celebration of harvest—one of humanity's foremost rituals dating back at least 10,000 years. After welcoming everyone to Fozzie's, we ventured

out to the high tunnel and encouraged folks to pick as much produce as they could carry, not only vegetables for salsa making but anything that was ripe and ready for them to take home. One of our attendees, whose family had emigrated from Japan, was delighted by our modest crop of Japanese eggplants, the seeds for which he had been unable to find the previous Spring.

Arms heavy, we headed back inside, many of our young learners vibrating with excitement at the opportunity to smash all these plant parts into a mishmash of familiar salsa. Following a demonstration by some local salsa *maestras* using a traditional molcajete, we began roasting some of the peppers, tomatillos, and garlic and chopping our homegrown cilantro and store-bought limes. A palpable excitement filled the air as we all began experimenting with our own creations, taste-testing as we went along. For our youngest participants, for whom garlic, peppers, and onions remain an unacquired taste, we set up an art station where they could paint rocks which will serve as the markers for varying crops within the high tunnel.

Once folks had perfected their salsas, we lined them up on the table and took turns blind taste-testing and submitting our votes for the best creation. The crowd favorite and title of Salsa Champion 2025 went to MLC's Cross-Cultural Programs Coordinator, Wyatt Wilson, who took home the coveted chili-pepper apron and a year's worth of bragging rights. The carne asada came off the grill shortly thereafter, accompanied by rice, beans, and summer squash; the perfect meal to complement the many varieties of salsa contributed by our participants. All of this—the rain, the food, the friendly competition, the youth art project, and, most important, the people—made for an incredibly memorable afternoon, and an event we hope to repeat in years to come. As one attendee shared with us later, "Our family enjoyed this event so much! Freya spent Sunday afternoon [the day after Salsa Fest] making salsa to take to her teacher and her friends. We enjoyed using the beautiful produce you gave us to make salsa for dinner. Most fun our family has had together in a while."

It is late in the harvest season now and the last of our produce has made its way to local food pantries and into the hands and bellies of local elementary students who visited the farm this fall on field trips. On those days we would roast the veggies in the morning before the students arrived and let them mash them up using the same pestles and mortars we obtained for the Salsa Fest. Together, we spoke about water and where it comes from, the farm-to-table process, the cultural importance of food, and how it shapes our land and our lives. At the end, we add a squeeze of lime, a pinch of salt, and pass some chips. Who knew learning could be so delicious?

To help further support MLC's agricultural work, community programming, and outdoor educational efforts through donations or volunteer service, please reach out to our Community Programs Director, Nick LaPalm, at nick@montezumaland.org, for more information.

Six Quick Facts About Conservation Easements

Conserving your land is always a big decision. Yet there is one thing that all landowners who have done so have in common: they love their land, they know it is part of their legacy, and they have a commitment to the future of our community. Here are a few key points to consider if you or someone you know is interested in land conservation.

For further information, please visit our website montezumaland.org or call us at 970-565-1664.

1. Ownership Retained
You retain your private property rights and can sell, lease, or pass your land on to your family.

2. Voluntary
Farm, ranch, or wildlife conservation easements are voluntary and do not require public access.

3. Tax Benefit
In Colorado, you can receive up to 90% of the easement value in state tax credits.

4. Tailored to You
Each conservation easement is unique to the land it conserves and to your vision for your property.

5. Flexible
Farming, ranching, hunting, recreational uses, and a limited number of house sites and/or property divisions may be permitted.

6. Estate Planning Benefit
Conserving your land can help with your estate planning, reduce your estate taxes, and allow for a transition to the next generation.

Big News: More Outdoor Opportunities for Local Kids and Families

MONTEZUMA INSPIRE COALITION

We have some exciting news to share! Our community just received a major boost from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) to help kids and families spend more time outside and stay connected to nature.

The Montezuma Inspire Coalition was awarded $2.1 million through GOCO's Generation Wild movement. This support means we can expand outdoor opportunities right here at home—things like jobs and internships, school field trips, summer programs, and reducing barriers such as cost and gear. Our vision is simple: we want every child in Montezuma County to have the chance to discover just how fun and rewarding it can be to get outside.

We're also excited to celebrate our friends at the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, who received $900,000 to launch their own Generation Wild program! Led by the Tribe's Recreation Department, this program will feature culturally rooted activities, multi-generational experiences, and a focus on connecting youth and families with both the outdoors and traditional practices.

MIC partners will continue working alongside the Tribe, offering programs like mountain biking with High Desert Devo, exploring the Dolores River with Dolores River Boating Advocates, leadership and team-building at Medicine Horse Center, and of course visits to Montezuma Land Conservancy's Fozzie's Farm.

Together, these investments mean more kids and families will get outside, learn from each other, and deepen their connections to the land we share. We're grateful to GOCO for believing in our community and investing in the future of our youth.

Montezuma Land Conservancy is a proud member, and the fiscal sponsor, of the Montezuma Inspire Coalition.

What is Generation Wild?

Generation Wild is a statewide movement created by Great Outdoors Colorado to get kids and families outside more often. The program supports local communities with resources, activities, and partnerships that make the outdoors accessible to everyone. Whether it's hiking, fishing, biking, gardening, or just exploring the neighborhood park, *Generation Wild* is about creating fun, safe, and welcoming ways for kids to connect with nature—and build healthy habits for life.

With Gratitude

Montezuma Land Conservancy's community-centered conservation work is only possible because of the generosity of our community of supporters. It is your passion plus action that makes our community a special place to live, work and play for today, tomorrow and generations to come. THANK YOU for your belief in MLC and our mission. Together, we are changing lives through land conservation by connecting people to place, forever.

The following pages list the supporters who are a part of our special giving circles. The full 2025 donor list will appear in our Spring 2026 edition.

Please notify our office of any errors or omissions.

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Through automatic monthly contributions, Sage Supporters help ensure a sustainable source of funding that keeps MLC's work moving forward all year through. Those supporters listed with a ***** are additionally a part of MLC's prestigious Centennial Circle, having made 100 or more gifts over their many years of Sage Support.

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MLC's Legacy Giving Circle

MLC's Sandstone Circle is a collection of forward-thinking donors joined together by their commitment to leaving a lasting legacy that will ensure MLC's community-centered land conservation work will remain strong for generations to come. The following donors have chosen to support MLC through a significant legacy gift, as part of their financial or estate planning.

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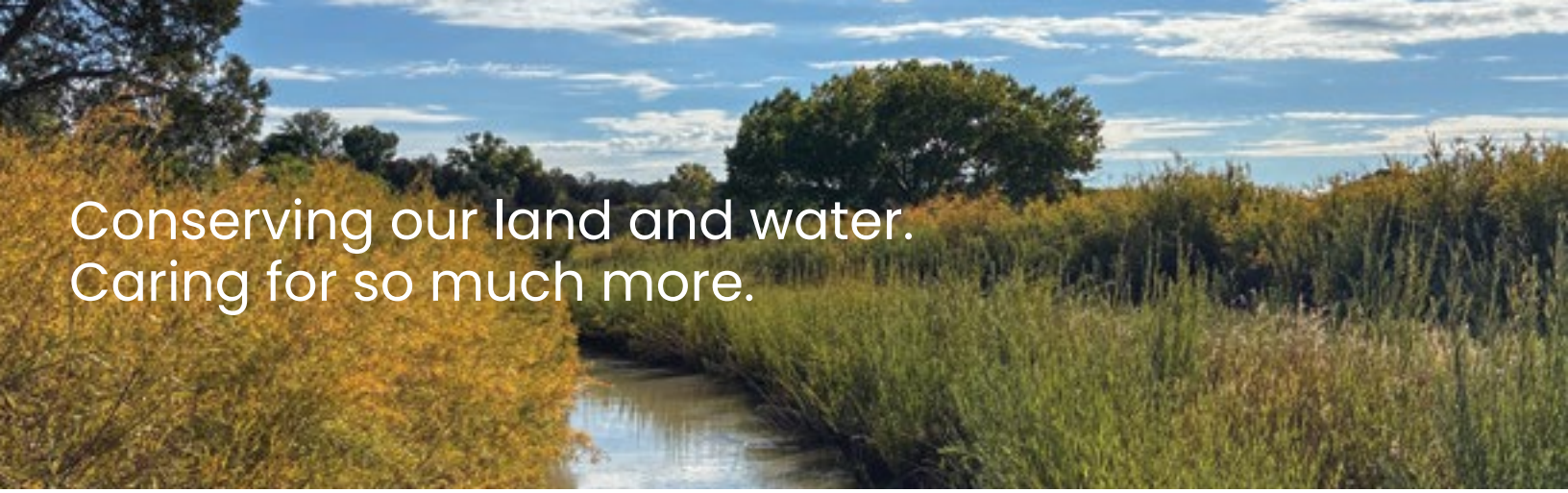

Conserving our land and water. Caring for so much more.

With your support, together we are caring for:

Our past – by preserving our histories through land conservation and storytelling
Our future – by engaging and inspiring the next generation through conservation
Our culture – by protecting the rural, Indigenous, agricultural, and recreational traditions that define our region
Our community – by making conservation about more than land, but about our connections to both land and each other

The work that MLC does every day would not be possible without our community of supporters. Every day, your contributions make a lasting impact on the lands and communities of Southwest Colorado. Whether it's through annual membership, monthly Sage Support, planned giving, or one of the other many ways to give, you help us make a difference. If you or your family desire to leave a lasting investment, please visit our "Ways to Give" page on our website for more information, or call our office at 970-565-1664 to start the conversation.

WAYS TO GIVE

Sage Support
Through ongoing monthly contributions, Sage Supporters help sustain our work all year through. It is so easy to become a member or renew your support. Just visit our website at montezumaland.org/donate to set up an automatic, recurring monthly gift through our Sage Supporter program, or a one-time gift.

Sandstone Circle - A Legacy Giving Circle
One of the easiest ways to leave a legacy gift is through a Beneficiary Form Designation. When you leave a gift via your will or estate planning to MLC, you leave a lasting impact on our community that will live on for generations. If you choose to leave a planned legacy gift of any kind to MLC, please let us know so that we may thank you in your lifetime.

Donations of Real Estate
A donation of property can be considered a tax-deductible gift and may be an opportunity to further support the mission of conservation, land access, or community-centered programs. Landowners considering a gift of real estate are encouraged to reach out to us to discuss their visions for the property and ways in which it may support MLC's mission now, or in the future.

Gifts of Stock
Gifts of stock, bonds, or mutual funds are a great way to support MLC and can additionally help a donor avoid capital gains taxes or receive an income tax deduction. Simply contact us for our account info and authorize your broker to transfer shares to Montezuma Land Conservancy.

IRA Qualified Charitable Distribution
Donors over the age 70 ½ can make donations directly from their IRA accounts to Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) without having to pay income taxes on the money. Simply speak with your IRA account administrator about making a transfer to earn tax benefits and support MLC.

In-Kind Gifts
We are in need of large items like working vehicles, trucks, and farm tools and equipment. If you have items related to our work that you no longer need, please contact us to discuss if our wish list matches your old, unneeded items.

Support MLC While You Shop
MLC participates in the City Market Cares Program. You can help MLC while you shop for groceries simply by setting your City Market shopper account to donate to MLC. Your purchases automatically result in quarterly donations to us.

Conservation Partner Business Membership
Would your business or organization like to join our amazing group of Conservation Partner Businesses? Annual financial sponsorships to MLC come with promotional perks that get your name out in front of conservation-minded individuals and show them that your business values community-centered conservation just like they do.

"We began supporting MLC when their focus was on keeping open space and agriculture as parts of our community. We have continued to support and participate because MLC maintains the effort to conserve properties while creating new ways to keep conservation a part of our collective conversation. We, along with MLC, support a future where a conservation aware population includes people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds, and a landscape that lets everyone enjoy southwestern Colorado's beautiful views, outdoor activities, and agricultural heritage."

–Jack & Patricia Burk, landowner partners & Centennial Circle supporters

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