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Remaining portion of Taylor Ranch sold

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August 3 - The remaining two-thirds of the 77,500-acre Taylor Ranch above San Luis, Colorado's oldest town, has been sold for an undisclosed price to Western Properties Investors, officials confirmed Monday.

The sale, which caught local and state officials by surprise, isn't expected to immediately end what has been a sometimes bloody feud over access to the ranch, known locally as La Sierra, or The Mountain Tract.

The question of access for purposes of hunting, fishing, grazing and wood gathering has been before local, state and federal courts for much of the last 39 years. The question of continued logging on the ranch, which local residents say is endangering the watershed for several small hamlets and San Luis, is also before the courts.

After four years of ultimately futile negotiations with the state of Colorado, the Taylor family sold 23,800 acres, or roughly the southern third of the ranch, to Jaroso Creek Ranch for an undisclosed amount of money in 1997 "to relieve the family of the burden of estate taxes and other debts," Zachary Taylor said at the time.

One of the owners of Jaroso Creek is Lou Pai. Denver attorney Keith Tooley, whose firm represents both Jaroso Creek and Western Properties Investors, declined Monday to further identify Pai or say whether Pai or others involved in the first purchase are also involved in acquiring the rest of the ranch.

Documents of the sale on file at the Costilla County Courthouse in San Luis speak of hunting, grazing, mineral and water rights, but county Planning Director Arnold Valdez said it would take a lawyer some time to determine what the sale means for pending lawsuits.

Tooley declined to speculate but did say that the new owners of the ranch "want to be good neighbors. ... That is one of their goals. They want to take their time and think things through and be good neighbors."

The ranch began making headlines in 1960 when Jack Taylor Jr., a North Carolina lumberman, bought it, fenced it and hired armed guards to prevent neighbors from entering the ranch to hunt, fish, gather wood and graze their cattle, as their ancestors had done.

Taylor, who once had his ankle shattered by an angry gunman's bullet, went to court and won judicial approval to ban trespassers from his property.

However, ongoing legal appeals of that ruling have clouded title to the ranch, preventing a quick sale to timber, mineral, recreational or other developers. Jack Taylor and Apolinar Rael - who sued the Taylor Ranch for access - have died, and Taylor's son Zachary had been trying to sell the ranch.

In an effort to resolve the dispute and save the sprawling, historic ranch, then-Gov. Roy Romer created the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant Commission in 1993. Its goal was to find ways to finance the purchase and management of the Taylor Ranch.

At the time, Romer declared that the ranch had important wildlife, recreational, open space and other natural values and was of "unique historical and cultural significance to the people of Colorado ... and in

particular to the descendants of the original Hispanic settlers of our state."

However, no state funds were ever committed.

Romer's and Zachary Taylor's emissaries conducted on-again, off-again negotiations as the state sought to find an equitable price. In 1994, Taylor asked \$30 million for the full ranch; the state offered \$15 million. By 1997, Colorado officials said the state wouldn't pay more than \$20 million.

At one point, Taylor offered to sell the state about 32,432 acres of the northern portion of the ranch, including 14,047-foot Culebra Peak, for about \$12 million, but various problems foiled the deal, and the effort died with Romer's departure from office.

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