



A HIPCAMP CASE STUDY

Creating safe, clear, and accessible regulations for low impact camping in Chaffee County, Colorado.

How an outdoor recreation mecca and agriculture-based county wrote first-of-its-kind legislation to create economic development opportunities for rural landowners.

Executive Summary

In October 2022, the Chaffee County Commission passed into law first-of-its-kind regulations to allow for “commercial camping on private lands.” This new ordinance, adopted as part of the county’s land use code update, creates an administrative permitting option for agricultural and agritourism operators to host small-scale recreational paid camping on their properties. The county partnered with a diverse coalition of stakeholders to move this issue forward as a way to support rural land ownership, expose visitors to agricultural ways of life, ensure the growing outdoor recreation economy benefited the historic agricultural community, and take pressure off of Chaffee County’s public lands to the benefit of wildlife, recreational users, and the environment more broadly.

Opportunity

Chaffee County, also known as “the Heart of the Rockies,” is an outdoor enthusiast’s dream. With the highest density of 14,000 foot peaks in the USA and the most-rafted stretch of river in the country (Browns Canyon National Monument on the Arkansas River), year-round tourism and outdoor recreation are the backbone of the area’s economy. However, as an historic agricultural and mining community, Chaffee has noted in multiple community-wide studies that multi-generational farmers and ranchers often feel at odds with the burgeoning outdoor recreation community and constant stream of visitors who are denuding grazing areas, damaging fences to access trailheads, and so on. Similarly, 70% of lands in Chaffee County are public lands; increased visitation, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, has put unsustainable pressure on public lands and is pushing campers farther and farther into the backcountry, threatening conservation efforts and wildlife habitat.



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The idea of low impact camping on private land arose through multiple avenues simultaneously as a potential multi-pronged solution to these varying problems. The Chaffee Board of County Commissioners, a bipartisan group of three elected officials, decided to take up this idea as part of their county-wide land use code update in 2022. Their aim was to allow rural and agricultural landowners the option to host small-scale sustainable camping on private property, in turn diverting camping pressure on public lands while creating an opportunity for landowners and agricultural users to benefit from the outdoor recreation economy and share a piece of rural and agricultural life with the public.

A community coalition works together on policy details

Over the course of a year, over fifty community leaders came together to work out the details of what eventually became known as the “commercial camping on private land” ordinance. These partners included:

- **Ranchers, farmers, and agricultural organizations**, including the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, Chaffee County Cattlemen’s Association, and Colorado Land Link.
- **Land managers, outdoor recreation advocates, and environmental groups**, including the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association, Envision Chaffee County, the Chaffee County Heritage and Historic Byway Commission, and local representatives from the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.
- **Local business leaders**, including the Chaffee County Economic Development Corporation, outdoor recreation outfitters, real estate developers, and more.

These community members got together to share information through coalition meetings, advisory meetings with the land planning staff and consultants, and in public hearings with the county commission and planning commission through both written and public comment. This community collaboration led to the creation of a land ordinance that meets the community’s economic development needs while protecting neighborhood feel and rural values.

The final policy: results and outcomes

After multiple rounds of hearings by both the planning commission and the Chaffee County Board of Commissioners, the commissioners unanimously approved the new “commercial camping on private land” ordinance in October 2022, which went into effect February 1, 2023. Below is a summary of the new policy:

Permitting requirements: Administrative application and review managed by the county planning department. Higher levels of review required for commercial and rural commercial recreational zones, if located in undisturbed or highest quality wildlife habitat, in a wildlife migration corridor, or within 300 yards of the Scenic and Historic byway.

Acreage minimum: 5 acres

250

properties can now apply for the new permitting for agritourism camping.

This is how the government is supposed to work – with businesses, landowners, and the public sector coming together to create innovative solutions to community needs,” said Executive Director of the Chaffee County Economic Development Corporation Jake Rishavy. “The EDC is proud to have supported this effort to build new financial opportunities for landowners while protecting the environment and our community values. I hope this will serve as a model for other counties across Colorado and the nation on how to support rural communities in the face of growing interest in outdoor recreation.

- Jake Rishavy, Director of the Chaffee County Economic Development Corporation

Zoning requirements: Allowed in all zones except for industrial. Primary use of the property must be agritourism or agriculture-based.

Campsite density: Up to 5 campsites for properties under 100 acres, and up to 10 campsites for properties over 100 acres.

Water and bathroom access: Dry camping is allowed. Sewage must be disposed of off-site.

Property ownership: Properties must be owned by a Chaffee County resident; does not need to be a primary residence. Property managers must be within a 60-minute drive radius when campers are present.

Setbacks:

- 50 feet from property lines
- 100 feet from dwellings on adjacent property
- 50 feet from ditches or floodplains and 100 feet from edges of streams, rivers, or wetlands to protect major game migration through this specific high-desert landscape

Types of camping allowed: Vans, RVs, and tent sites allowed. Alternative structures including canvas tents, yurts, and cabins will be discussed by the county commission at a later time.

Creating economic development and conservation opportunities in Chaffee County

Chaffee County, Colorado includes approximately 250 properties that can now apply for a cost-efficient, clear, and accessible permit to host low-impact campers on their properties. The regulations provide clear guidelines for landowners and set expectations, which makes this land use safer for everyone. If even 50% of these landowners decide to host 2 campsites each, the community will benefit in the following ways:

- Landowners stand to make anywhere from \$5,000 to \$25,000 a year in secondary income that will support their conservation efforts, land ownership, and protect open spaces for years to come.
- The county, should they pass a lodging tax, stands to gain nearly \$100,000 annually in transient occupancy taxes
- Campers who partake in private land camping are likely to spend over \$3,750,000 in local businesses within Chaffee County
- Campers are likely to be diverted away from sensitive public lands campgrounds and dispersed campsites, allowing for conservation gains in wilderness areas

If you are interested in learning more about how low impact camping on private land could fit into your county's land use code, reach out to policy@hipcampa.com



It's never been harder to make a living off the land," said Chaffee County Commissioner Keith Baker. "If we want to protect our agricultural and rural heritage in Chaffee, we must be creative. Expanding economic opportunities for rural landowners in Chaffee by allowing for well-regulated, small-scale private land camping is a huge win for our community. This first-of-its-kind land use will reduce pressure on public lands, create new revenue streams for the ag community, and support our outdoor recreation economy. I'm proud to have worked with the many stakeholders who collaborated to make it a reality.

- Keith Baker, Chaffee County Commissioner