



*Dedicated to Ensuring the Resiliency, Protection and Enhancement
of Water Resources in Colorado's Headwaters Regions*

Building a Coalition to Preserve and Enhance Colorado's Vital Water Resources

*"Here is a land where life is written in water."
— Thomas Hornsby Ferril*

BACKGROUND

As Colorado's first poet laureate recognized, water is the state's most precious resource. The Statewide Water Supply Initiative has documented that Coloradans' water usage will likely outstrip available supplies by 2030. Predictions are that Colorado's population will have increased 53 percent between 2000 and 2030. By 2040, approximately 8.5 million people will be living in Colorado, compared to 5.5 million in 2016.

Meanwhile, multiple scientific reports document the acceleration of climate change. Colorado is already experiencing its effects with decreased snowpack, earlier annual snowmelt and runoff, and more frequent and severe droughts and wildfires. These factors highlight the urgent need to develop water resiliency in the state by restoring, preserving and enhancing water resources in order to ensure Colorado continues to have adequate supplies of clean water.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) created *Colorado's Water Plan* at Gov. John Hickenlooper's behest with input from hundreds of stakeholders and over 30,000 public comments. The plan recognizes "the critical role watershed health plays in ensuring Colorado's water future." The importance of watershed systems cannot be underestimated in the face of climate change and population growth, and this is most effectively addressed at the source – the headwaters regions. *Colorado's Water Plan* acknowledges these conditions and supports collaborative efforts to increase water storage, preserve healthy waterways and watersheds, and enhance existing water resources. Wetlands, aquifers, streams and springs are the headwaters sources crucial to the perpetual well-being of stream and river ecosystems. They supply



These healthy headwaters feature wetlands, riparian vegetation and meandering, multi-threaded stream channels. Scientific evidence clearly shows that healthy headwaters are essential to maintaining freshwater resources.

organic matter and dissolved oxygen essential to maintaining durable ecosystems, fisheries, water quality and year-round streamflow. Intact headwaters areas also benefit municipalities downstream by keeping sediment and pollutants out of their water supplies.

NEED

Known as The Headwaters State, Colorado has 156 named rivers that originate in its headwaters regions. Seventeen of these river basins exceed 10,000 square kilometers (3,900 square miles). These rivers and their tributaries ultimately flow into the Colorado, Platte, Arkansas and Rio Grande rivers, providing life-giving water for Colorado as well as downstream states on both sides of the Continental Divide. Population growth produces steadily increasing pressure on and demand for this indispensable resource. At the same time, a warming atmosphere and climate instability significantly threaten the sustainability and quantity of this crucial resource. Likewise, mineral extraction and devastating wildfires threaten these watersheds and their plethora of ecosystem services.

Without robust headwaters ecosystems producing the water that sustains Front Range cities, farming and ranching communities, mountain towns, outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat for

hunting and fishing, tourism and a wide array of economically significant industries, Colorado will be hard-pressed to maintain a vigorous economy in the years to come.

A SOLUTION

Colorado Headwaters, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is building a unique coalition representing a variety of sectors and interests specifically to address watershed health issues in the state's headwaters regions. A number of citizen groups throughout Colorado are working in various watersheds to improve degraded wetlands and restore damaged streams, and Colorado Headwaters brings decades of experience to the issues necessary to bridge existing gaps through a high-visibility campaign, which includes:

- Political and policy engagement.
- Public outreach and education.
- Media exposure.

No other initiative has established a broad-based, multi-sector stakeholder collaboration around the imperative of preserving and improving the source of Colorado's most vital resource. The focus of the coalition is to both initiate and support projects and policies concentrated on augmenting the resiliency of water quality and quantity, including wetlands and aquifers. Wetlands play a pivotal role in re-charging aquifers, where water can't evaporate. Aquifers also steadily supply water to Colorado streams and rivers, providing baseline stream-flows during drought conditions.

Unfortunately, there is not a formal wetlands program in Colorado. Wetlands work is spread across many different entities. Fortunately, the [Colorado Natural Heritage Program](#) (CNHP) is endeavoring to make the coordination of various entities more official through their [Wetland Program Plan](#) project. The Colorado Headwaters-initiated coalition will support and complement this effort at multiple levels – with boots on the ground, community outreach, public education and economic assessments.

The CNHP provides an excellent source of timely information and applied science that can be leveraged to strengthen our water security. For example, the program's [digital wetland](#)



Headwaters streams are Colorado's lifeblood, yet this South Platte tributary exemplifies the types of ecological damage that threaten our water supply with excessive evaporation, inadequate aquifer recharge, poor water quality and soil degradation.

[mapping tool](#) can be used to assess on-site the condition of multiple wetlands in Colorado and target projects that will produce the best return on investment.

This leading-edge effort is imperative and timely, with proven experience at the helm in implementing environmental initiatives involving multiple stakeholders. The coalition will bring together Colorado organizations, businesses, individuals and various entities and interests along with philanthropists and decision-makers. By working collaboratively to apply the elements of watershed well-being spelled out in *Colorado's Water Plan* and expanding upon it through collaborative innovation, we can help safeguard our communities, our way of life and our landscape as well as defend against climate change. Through the coalition's "ecosystem of collaboration," it will encompass a unique array of assets to develop strategies, projects and initiatives dedicated to "restoring, protecting and enhancing" the single most important resource upon which Colorado's economic well-being and quality of life fundamentally depend.

The coalition's long-term commitment is to work closely with the Governor's Office, the Department of Natural Resources and the Colorado General Assembly to formalize the above-stated on behalf of the water security future of Colorado.

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