



Western Slope Conservation Center: A Brief Introduction

WSSC has been a successful, long-standing local institution, still very much a grassroots organization that has the potential to strengthen its role as a key player on the Western Slope. It has a working board, ready to support a leader with the vision, entrepreneurial spirit and ability to build upon this strong foundation.

Our organization began in 1977 as the Western Slope Environmental Resource Council (WSERC), when neighbors joined to stop coal mines from dumping waste next to the river. Over the years our mission broadened to include protection of water resources, public lands and wildlife. In 2010, we merged with a sister organization, the North Fork River Improvement Association (NFRIA) that had a history of river restoration, water quality monitoring, and education, and became Western Slope Conservation Center (WSSC). We engage on issues concerning Delta County and the North Fork Valley, focusing particularly on water quality, protection of our public lands, air and wildlife, as well as education and outreach.

WSSC has many diverse conservation accomplishments to be proud of, including:

- ❖ leading a successful national fight to fend off oil and gas leasing on 30,000 acres of lands in the North Fork Valley, lobbying for a community alternative in the BLM resource management plan, and through litigation, securing a new planning process;
- ❖ developing a program funded by the coal mines that put tens of thousands of acres of lands in the North Fork Valley into conservation easements;
- ❖ pushing to keep high-power transmission lines out of the center of the valley floor;
- ❖ restoring the North Fork of the Gunnison where gravel mining had occurred, creating the Paonia River Park in its place;
- ❖ facilitating the reconstruction of many irrigation diversion dams to provide safe passage for boaters and improve water efficiency;
- ❖ building a multi-decade water quality monitoring program and baseline data set;
- ❖ securing roadless areas and wilderness character in various national forest planning processes;
- ❖ advocating for coal companies and state and federal agencies to mitigate methane escaping from existing and abandoned mines;
- ❖ developing a collaborative Integrated Water Management Plan that works with various river stakeholders to best manage the river for multiple uses;

- ❖ creating numerous educational programs for community members of all ages including our flagship Conservation Days, Mike's Hikes, River Fest, and Mountainfilm events.

We have hard-won respect from our local county government through mutual respect and persistent communication. Our relationships with Colorado state and national elected officials is strong and on-going. As an organization we have a great deal of history and momentum that has served us well through recent times of staffing transitions and the Covid pandemic.

This organization plays an integral part in protecting and preserving a relatively intact watershed across a matrix of public lands that is an important part of the Colorado river system. This nationally significant headwaters system provides livelihoods for a vibrant local organic farming community, is a key wildlife corridor and is a yet undiscovered recreation area.

Our public lands and waters are the Western Slope's greatest assets. Our livelihoods have been built on the availability of clean water, healthy forests, rich geology, and fertile soils. As our previous economies of coal mining and ranching have been supplemented by industries like organic farming, recreation, and tourism, our public lands and waters continue to support our way of life.

We are heavily engaged in public lands planning processes currently underway across the Western Slope, from BLM and USFS to Delta County. Our watershed programs range from water quality monitoring, invasive species removal and increasing recreational opportunities, as well as regenerative work to support a healthy watershed with projects such as processed based restoration.