



TATER HEAP

WESTERN SLOPE CONSERVATION CENTER
2023 ANNUAL REPORT



Photo Credit: Cinda Doughty

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Watershed Stewardship Director



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Dear Members

WSCC has much to be proud of. 2023 saw another full roster of events including Conservation Days and Riverfest. We launched a major campaign to repair severe damages to our Paonia River Park after massive spring flooding. Our advocacy efforts continued to champion protections of lands and resources throughout our watershed and beyond as major planning processes guiding management of our national forests and other public lands took center stage. We completed a host of on-the-ground stewardship projects as well as important large-scale planning projects. And thanks to you, our many members, grantors, business sponsors and donors, we ended 2023 on solid financial footing.

Though the year brought many new faces to the WSCC staff, the threads that connect us all in this work remain strong: a deep belief in knowing that what we're fighting for is worth it, and the wise hope that propels us to keep trying, step by step and day by day. There is always much to be done, and the coming year is no exception. We'll be shoring up continued, significant effort to shape land use plans throughout western Colorado. We'll be facilitating the reconstruction of the North Fork Valley's oldest in-stream irrigation diversion. We're pursuing additional opportunities for stream restoration and irrigation diversion improvement. Habitat restoration aimed at improving the health and function of ecosystems across our watershed continues to take root. And we'll continue doing one of the things we love best: connecting with all of you through it all.

I hope you have your sleeves rolled up, ready to dive in. We do!

 Hannah Stevens, Executive Director



Message from the Board

WSCC is entering our 47th year of protecting our watersheds, public lands, wildlife, and air! Our work feels more important than ever. The Board of Directors has worked hard to guide the organization through a year of transition, and we are proud to say that WSCC is thriving.

As the Interim Executive Director in 2023, I got to personally experience how this organization leads with love for this place we call home. We believe in integrity and sound science, and have strong roots in community collaboration. We are a small but mighty organization that isn't afraid to tackle the big policy issues with our advocacy work, and get our hands dirty through stewardship projects.

The heart of WSCC is and has always been our people. While you see a lot of new faces, our dedication to our mission remains the same. In September, we welcomed Hannah Stevens as our Executive Director. We bid farewell to Americorps VISTA Karen Tarnow and welcomed Lauren Swartz into the role. Ben Katz joined the Conservation Lands Foundation as their Southwest Associate Program Director, a role that maintains strong ties with WSCC. Cody Perry, a gifted storyteller, recently joined our team to lead our advocacy efforts. Jake Hartter has come back into the fold, and we just welcomed Elizabeth Stevens-Klein as our new Membership and Grants Coordinator.

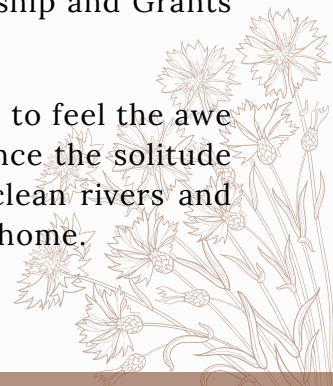
2024 is shaping up to be a banner year for WSCC!

We all choose to be involved in this work because we want future generations to feel the awe of seeing the Milky Way arcing overhead in our protected dark skies, to experience the solitude of hiking through wilderness or seeing a herd of elk, and to swim and fish in clean rivers and lakes. Together, we can continue to shape and tell the story of this place we call home.

With deep gratitude,



Kathy Swartz, Board Member



2023 BY THE NUMBERS



550

Miles Hiked over

12 Mike's Hikes



3,350

Social Media Followers

217

Volunteers



289

Students



at Conservation Days

24

Newsletters & Special

Announcements Sent



112

Water Samples
Collected & Tested



0.5

Miles of Fence

Removed



2

Films Festivals

Hosted



130

Trees and

Shrubs Planted



341

Petition

Signatures Collected

How YOU can get involved!

Join our Public Lands and Watershed
Committees

Come on a Mike's Hike

Join our Board

Become a monthly donor

Volunteer for our River Watch or Dark Skies
Monitoring Programs

Sign up for our River Park Workdays



PAONIA RIVER PARK

Community Comes Together

What a year for our Paonia River Park! High spring runoff led to heavy damage this year. With trails flooded and completely washed out in sections, and debris and loads of cobble left behind, we were faced with an estimated \$63,000 in repair costs. Thanks to special support from DMEA, the extraordinary contributions of many of you, and hours of hands-on work by The Nature Connection's Wilder Bunch, the Lions and Rotary Clubs, and dozens of students from the PK8 school, we got trails rebuilt and restored. In September, we celebrated with a willow-cutting ceremony and grand reopening of the Park and School Loop Trails. A huge thanks to all who helped.

Please remember to keep your dogs leashed - and encourage others to do the same. We want to keep all of our furry friends safe and happy!



A YEAR FOR BEAVERS



Beaver return to the River Park

It seems the floods also brought other changes to our Park this year. The beavers have returned and are already busy making dams. In the past, we discouraged beaver activity by caging cottonwoods and other species to allow newly constructed wetlands to get established. Now that the vegetation has grown in, we want beavers to put their ecological engineering minds to work. We will likely start to see changes in the vegetation, views, and the water's route.



Beaver Weekend

In March we partnered with Colorado Farm and Food Alliance to host an entire beaver-themed weekend. Hundreds of people attended the various events, including a screening of *The Beaver Believer* followed by a panel discussion book-signing at Paonia Books with Eager author, Ben Goldfarb, and a special talk by the author at our 2023 Annual Meeting.

PUBLIC LANDS

Public Comment Drives

Citizen engagement helps us achieve community values, ideas, and recommendations for land use in the North Fork Valley and beyond. In 2023, WSCC dug into the policy and worked to elevate and inform the public's voice in planning recommendations for:

Grand Mesa Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forest Plan	Thompson Divide Mineral Withdrawal	Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Plan
North Fork Mancos Master Development Plan	BLM Public Lands Rule	BLM Big Game Resource Management Plan
BLM Uncompahgre Field Office Resource Management Plan Amendment (UFO RMP)	BLM Oil and Gas Rule	Dolores River Canyon protections

What to look for in 2024

WSCC's grassroots advocacy will continue on a number of land use plans, and will identify and work toward new opportunities. Our vision is also trained on establishing permanent landscape protections across the Western Slope, such as efforts to nominate a new national monument around the Dolores River Canyon Country. Expect to see these campaigns, and ways you can get involved:

BLM Solar Plan EIS	BLM UFO RMP Draft EIS - expected Fall 2024	Dolores River Canyon protections
Finalization of the GMUG Forest Plan	Colorado bill to phase out oil and gas	Thompson Divide Mineral Withdrawal
Dolores River Canyon protections	GORP Act	MORE...

The North Fork In Washington, DC

WSCC, Colorado Farm and Food Alliance, and the Valley Organic Growers Association hit the big city to meet with elected officials and federal agencies. This was the 12th year that a North Fork delegation has gone to our nation's capital to put local issues in front of our elected leaders and communicate important community concerns to high-level agency staff.



A Special Visit to the North Fork Valley

In October, WSCC hosted a group from the Conservation Lands Foundation, a Durango-based organization that has supported our advocacy work since 2011. Over the course of three days,



participants - who hailed from across the nation - gained a firsthand view of the many conservation issues and opportunities facing our area. Flights by EcoFlight, a river trip by Western Slope SUP, and hikes in nearby BLM lands, and meals highlighting our farms and wineries gave visitors a deeper appreciation of the grassroots work this community does so well. It was an honor sharing our Valley with them.

COMMUNITY SCIENCE

Another Strong Year for River Watch

Our River Watch volunteer program continues to thrive! As the second oldest River Watch program in the state of Colorado, we're mighty proud! Volunteers dedicated over 300 hours collecting samples from 10 sites and analyzing the samples back at the lab. We participated in the annual River Watch training, which centered on sampling and collecting techniques, water chemistry, and invasive species in our Colorado waters.



Dark Skies Monitoring

WSCC's Dark Skies volunteer monitoring program and the data being collected across ten sites is helping establish two important new Dark Skies areas: The Town of Paonia in collaboration with Dark Skies Paonia, and the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area in collaboration with the BLM and Colorado Canyons Association.



Bromide in Our Watershed

A year-long WSCC-led study of the upper North Fork to determine where, and how, bromide was entering the watershed and affecting the town of Somerset's drinking water, is complete. Bromide is a naturally occurring element and on its own is relatively harmless. But when it undergoes treatment for domestic water use, it reacts with chlorine-based disinfectants to create byproducts with potential health risks. Find the full report here: <https://westernslopeconservation.org/watershed-assessments-and-plans/>

WATERSHED STEWARDSHIP

Restoration partnerships grow on the Gunnison River

Habitat improvement work continued at Delta County's G50 Road boat ramp along with the Colorado West Land Trust. We hosted four events with community members and students to learn about local ecology and implement restoration techniques. These included sustainably harvesting cottonwood poles for replanting, learning how to care for native wetland shrubs, exploring riparian ecological processes, and exploring seasonal hydrology. A ribbon-cutting celebration is expected in 2024, hosted by the Delta County Commissioners.



Integrated Water Management Plan Complete



Our long-running Integrated Water Management Plan project is complete! For over 8 years, WSCC and North Fork Water Conservancy District have partnered to engage a broad spectrum of water users to assess existing river conditions and identify multi-purpose river projects on the North Fork. The effort produced two comprehensive assessments followed by a Phase II implementation project. Highlights include: assembling the North Fork stakeholder group; re-design and implementation of the Stewart Mesa Ditch Diversion, and re-design of the North Fork Farmers Ditch Diversion; a prioritized list of future projects that will benefit water users and the health of the North Fork.



Restoration on the Smith Fork Creek

Our work along Smith Fork Creek to improve riparian ecosystem health through Low Tech Process Based Restoration (LTPBR) techniques continues. These low-cost temporary structures are designed to improve wetland habitat, improve hydrologic function and boost forage for pasture and wildlife. On the horizon: continue work with interested landowners; complete a robust spatial analysis to identify high-potential sites along the Smith Fork; and implement additional on-the-ground projects.

Trail Days in our National Forest

WSCC joined the USFS stock crew and Darby Prendergast from XK Bar Ranch to journey into the West Elk Wilderness in August and September. Volunteers completed several miles of trail maintenance clearing brush, moving trees, and widening the trail. Fortunately, the horses carried tools, gear, and even dinner fixings, making the work just a little bit easier.



2023 FINANCIAL RECAP

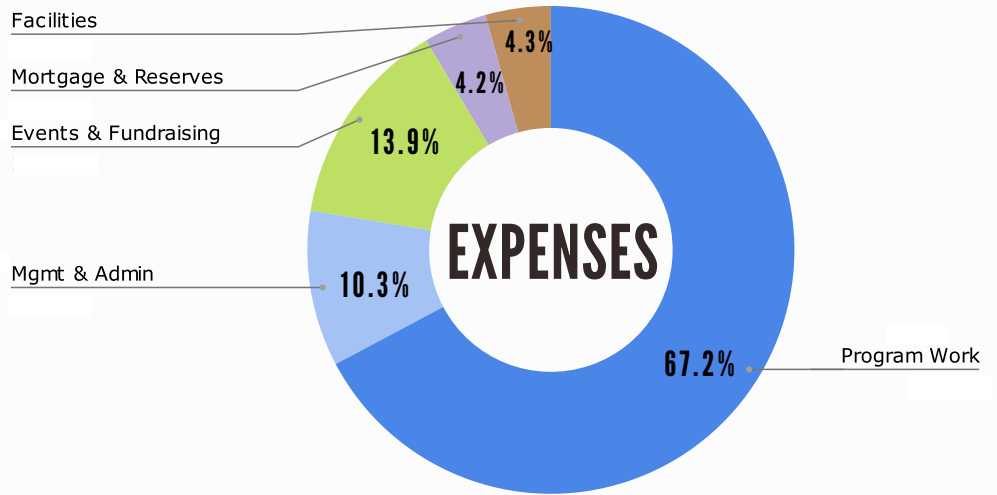
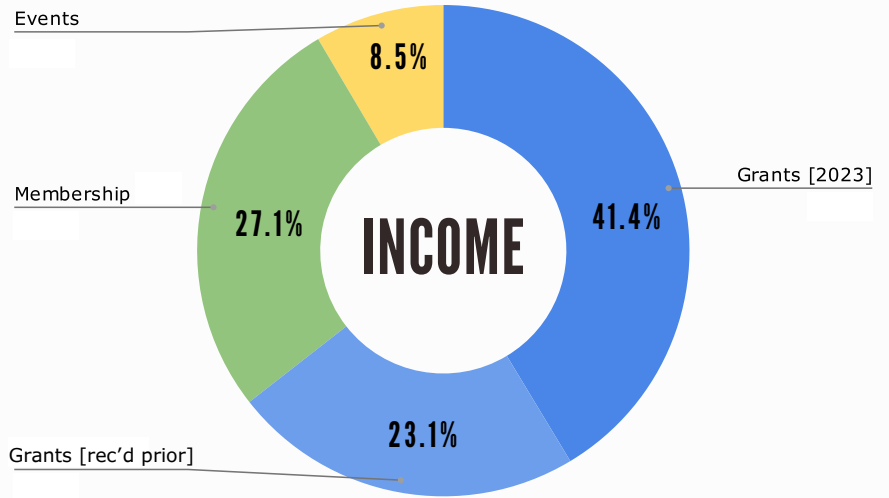
**PASSTHROUGH
GRANT DOLLARS
INVESTED IN
LOCAL
COMMUNITIES:**

\$213,792

**TOTAL REVENUE:
\$455,159**

**TOTAL EXPENSES:
\$442,577**

***NOTE: THESE NUMBERS ARE
UNAUDITED ESTIMATES**



WSCC Receives a \$1.59 million Bureau of Reclamation Grant Toward Farmers Ditch Diversion Reconstruction

First constructed in the late 1800s, the North Fork Farmers Diversion is one of the oldest, and most senior, irrigation water diversions on the river. The new design will provide improved



ability to deliver irrigation water, increase safety for boaters and reconnect upstream and downstream sections of the river to provide important aquatic species passage and connectivity. Additional funding for this \$2.3 million project is being provided by many project partners, and construction is expected to begin in fall 2024.

YOU MAKE WHAT WE DO POSSIBLE

Thank you to our 2023 grantors, project partners, and business sponsors

A Plus Carpet & Air Ducts
Agilent Technologies
Alpine Bank
Amazon Smile Foundation
American Rivers
Aspen Ski Resort
Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund
Berg Harvest Farm and Mercantile
Big B's Delicious Orchards
Black Canyon Audubon Society
Blue Mesa Yarn
Blue Sage Center for the Arts
Cedar Keshet Fine Art
Chrysalis Brewery
Clear Fork Cider
Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment
Colorado Food and Farm Alliance
Colorado Healthy Rivers Fund
Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Colorado Premier Partners Realty - Patti Kaech
Colorado River Water Conservation District
Colorado Rural Water Association
Colorado Water Conservation Board
Colorado Watershed Assembly
Conservation Lands Foundation
Dark Skies Paonia
Delta Brick & Climate Company
Delta Conservation District
Delta County Fresh
Delta County Memorial Hospital
Delta-Montrose Electric Association
Dependable Lumber
Desert Rat
Desert Weyr
Don's Market
Double J Disposal
Earthbound
Empowered Energy Systems, LLC
Farm Runners
Finnigan Millworks
First Colorado National Bank
Fly Fisher's International
Forever Our Rivers Foundation
Four Seasons Investment Advisors
Friends Of Youth And Nature
Gambles Work Wear

Grand Mesa Outdoors
HEST
High Country News
Huck and Penny LLC
Kampe Foundation
Kevin Parks Insurance Agency, Inc
Kids Pasta Project
KÜHL
KVNF
Lamborn Mountain Farmstead
Lehman Images LTD
Lucille Lucas Gallery
Maison De Saison
Maki Foundation
Mighty Arrow Family Foundation
National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance
Natural Investments LLC
Needle Rock Ditch Company
Nicholoff Summit Construction LLC

Paonia Soil
Pickin' Productions
Pittsburgh Foundation
Rain Dance Ranch
Root & Vine Market
Roundup Riders of the Rockies
Rubicon Coffee
Seek Outside
ShadeScapes Americas
SK Bikes
Shaffer Real Estate
Smith Fork Farm
Solar Energy International
Somerset Domestic Water District
Stoik Beer Company
Studio Black Rose
Summit Canyon Mountaineering
The Environment Foundation - Aspen Snowmass
The Hitching Post Hotel and Farm Store
The Holder Family Foundation
The Kroger Co
The Learning Council
The Local Nomad
The Nature Connection
The New-Land Foundation, Inc
The Yarrow Taproom
Tink, Peter, & Ladybug LLC
Todd Enterprises, Inc
Town of Paonia
US Fish and Wildlife Service - Hotchkiss National Fish Hatchery
US Forest Service Paonia Ranger District
Valley High Dispensary LLC
Vortex
Welfelt Fabrication
West Elk Community Fund
West Elks Wineries
Western Colorado Community Foundation
Western Colorado Realty
Western Conservation Foundation
Western Slope SUP
Western Water Partnerships PBC
Wild Sage Natural Burials
Wilderness Workshop
Wisehart Springs Inn
Wolcott Family Foundation
WSCC Trailblazer Donors
Yoka Design LLC



THANK YOU



YOU ARE THE WSCC

*We could not do our work without the support of you, our members, partners, and friends.
To learn more about WSCC, visit westernslopeconservation.org.*



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Deep within the West Elk Wilderness lies a humble mountain of little renown. Upon its picturesque slopes rest the talus shards of laccolithic history. Its crystalline and fragmented crown demands that hikers maintain careful balance, lest they lose their footing and fall on the broken rocks below. There is a unique symmetry to its profile, an appealing balance and stability. It's almost as if the contents of some great sack had been emptied upon the landscape to form a perfect pile of...potatoes. And so, our annual newsletter is named for this wild and untamed mountain: The Tater Heap.

Based in the North Fork Valley, the Western Slope Conservation Center builds an informed and engaged community to protect and enhance the lands, air, water and wildlife of the Western Slope.

WESTERN SLOPE
CONSERVATION
CENTER

