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# TATER HEAP

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**WESTERN SLOPE CONSERVATION CENTER  
2024 ANNUAL REPORT**

Photo Credit: Lauren Swartz

# Staff



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Director*



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**JUANITA HULL-CARLSON**



**ALLISON ELLIOT**

# Dear Members

2024 was truly a year to celebrate, not just for accomplishments within our organization (it was a very positive year), but for the broader achievements we saw across a wide spectrum of public lands protections and management, drought resiliency funding, habitat stewardship opportunities, and community-wide wildfire protection planning. In the public lands world alone we saw the Thompson Divide Withdrawal approved, the Forest Service's Final Revised Land Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests was adopted, the BLM's RMPA scoping period for our field office kicked off the year in January, the BLM completed a Western Solar Plan, the Big Game Resource Management Plan, and even saw the adoption of the new Public Lands Rule. The Gunnison Gorge NCA was declared an International Dark Skies Park, and in a very significant step forward for what would be permanent protections for the North Fork Valley, we worked to secure a North Fork Watershed Mineral Withdrawal in the Gunnison Outdoor Resources Protection (GORP) Act. If passed, GORP would offer western Colorado a multitude of protections and the community-driven solutions we've been fighting for for decades.

In the realm of stewardship, we made progress on the Farmers Ditch Diversion Project. We were also awarded full funding for another multi-diversion improvement project to improve both agricultural water delivery and river health on the North Fork. On-the-ground habitat restoration work continued, and, because we didn't want to stop there, we also secured full funding to complete an in-depth, watershed-scale wildfire ready action plan for the North Fork and Smith Fork watersheds. I feel incredibly proud of all we were able to accomplish together in 2024. As we can already see, 2025 is going to stand in stark contrast when it comes to federal policy, which is already shaping up to undo many of these hard-won gains for the climate and environment. It is easy to worry--we should be worried--but we must also remember that this is what we're here for: to take action, to stand up for our environment, to take care of our world, and ultimately, to take care of each other. Complicity is not an option. Fortunately, WSCC members, partners, supporters and volunteers already know this.

In wild hope,



Hannah Stevens, Executive Director

## Message from the Board

Looking back on 2024, I can't help but feel a true sense of community and pride both within the organization and outside of it. What a great year we had!

Community came together to support public lands advocacy campaigns, such as the BLM's Resource Management Plan Amendment for the Uncompahgre Field Office, and Protect the Dolores with letters to the editor, showing up to meetings and writing comment letters. Much of this work is the culmination of over a decade of community discussions, scientific research, patience, persistence and a never-ending love for protecting this beautiful valley and watershed. We are anxious to see the results of all of this hard work. You also showed up by participating in many events, educational opportunities, boots on the ground work with our stewardship projects, River Watch and Dark Sky monitoring, and of course our beloved Mike's Hikes. Lastly, this community showed up with monetary support to help us have one of our best fundraising years ever. I am truly amazed at the long term support so many of you have demonstrated, and those of you who care so deeply. I am also so very grateful for the dedicated and hard working staff and board that make all of these things possible.

Conservation work is never done and we face many challenges in this and coming years. As you think about how you want to have a lasting and positive impact on this amazing environment that surrounds us, one that gives to each and every one of us in so many ways, I hope you will consider volunteering or volunteering in a new way with WSCC. No matter how many hours you might have to contribute or how many dollars you might have to give, it all adds up to a positive impact. Our committees (Watershed Stewardship, Public Lands, Fundraising & Events), Board of Directors (a wonderful, fun, dynamic, and caring group of people) and our many events and stewardship opportunities provide many meaningful ways to engage. I hope to see many new faces join our wonderful and supportive community in the coming year.

With deep gratitude,



Julie Sapena, Board Chair

# 2024 BY THE NUMBERS

79 Volunteers



116

Students hosted at Conservation Days



23

Cherry Days cherries crafted



7

Speakers hosted



592

Miles floated together at Riverfest



23

Grants received



205

River Watch samples collected and tested

1

New dog poop station installed in the River Park

21

Trees protected from beavers



683

Miles hiked on



15 Mike's Hikes

3,600

Social media followers

144

Petition signatures gathered



34

Newsletters and special messages sent



## How YOU can get involved!

Participate in our Public Lands, Watershed Stewardship or Fundraising and Events Committees

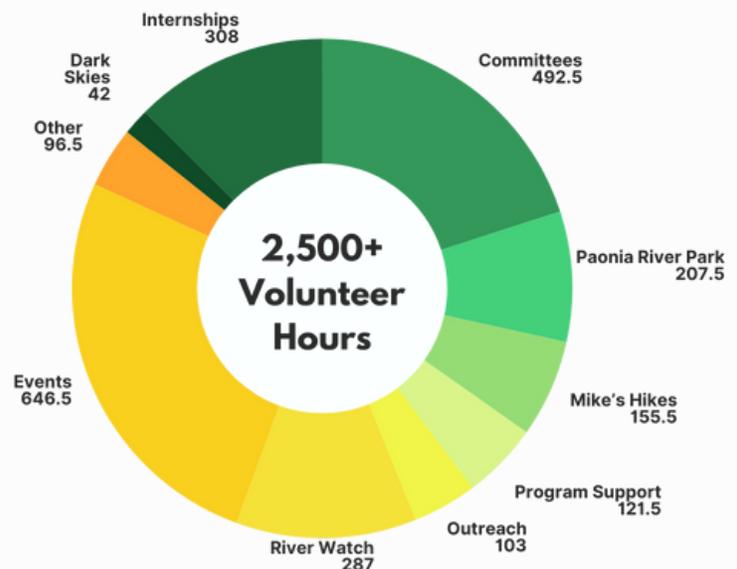
Come on a Mike's Hike

Join our Board

Become a monthly donor

Collect data for River Watch or Dark Skies

Sign up for River Park Workdays



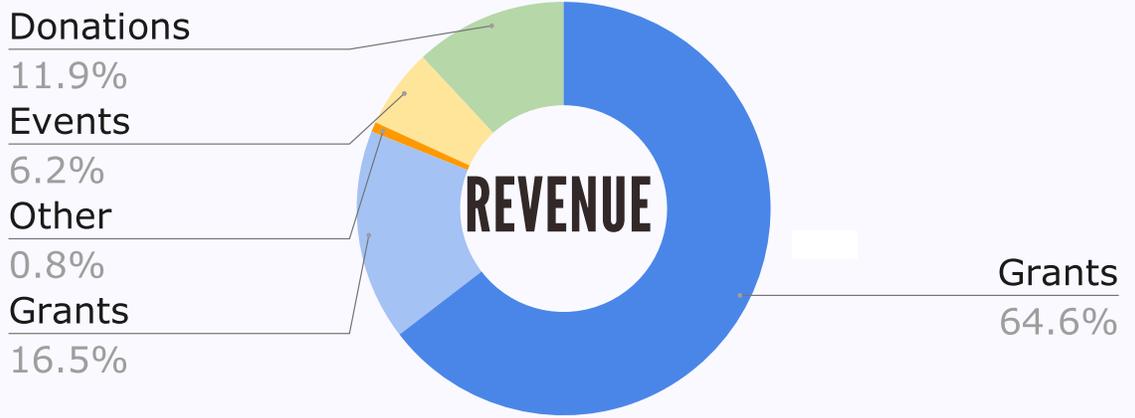
# 2024 FINANCIAL RECAP

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

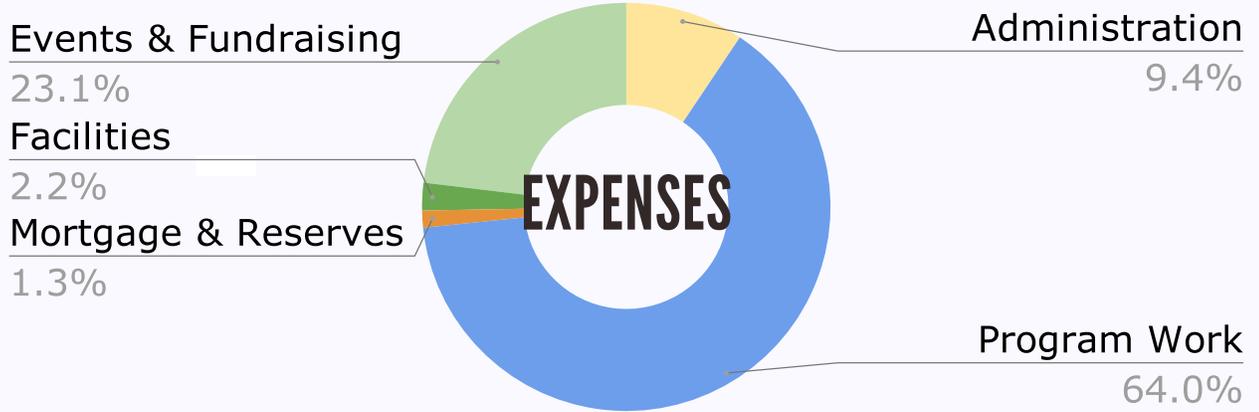
**\$556,062**

**TOTAL  
REVENUE:  
\$865,755**

**TOTAL  
EXPENSES:  
\$757,009**



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



## SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS



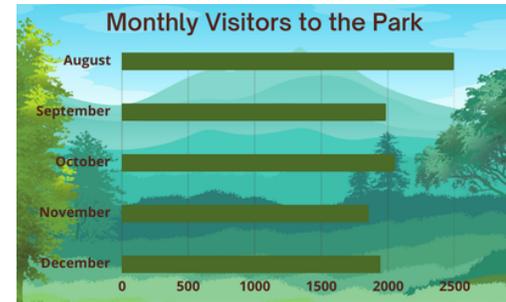
WSCC and The Nature Connection were proud to join the Safe Routes to Parks Colorado program this year. Safe Routes to Parks initiatives work to improve safety and security for people walking, bicycling, and rolling to parks and green spaces. WSCC and the Nature Connection hosted a “Walk and Roll Audit” to assess walking and biking routes between different points in Paonia and Apple Valley Park, identify pedestrian and bicycle safety hazards, and suggest collaborative solutions.

The partners improved cyclist and pedestrian safety by installing temporary planter boxes to delineate a bike and walking path for the entrance of Apple Valley Park. Edge lines were painted on the shoulders of the street using a newly purchased road striper. Wayfinding signage marking trailhead parking was installed along with a trailhead sign designed in collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), further supporting recreational access.

# PAONIA RIVER PARK

## Our Well-Traveled Trails

In August, we installed a trail counter to measure usage of the River Park. It's clear the River Park is a well-traveled and well-loved space for our community to connect with nature, listen to the river, find tranquility, and enjoy a walk. We thank all our visitors for keeping furry friends leashed to ensure a positive and safe experience for all people and wildlife. And we thank our dedicated volunteers for maintaining this community space for all.



## Firefly Research & River Watch Inspire Youth to Consider Careers in Conservation

This year we were happy to host recent high school graduate Noah Steinberg for a three month long summer internship in our office.



Noah came to us with an interest in animals and the environment. He started by researching and writing a blog about this year's discovery of fireflies at the River Park. Noah also helped steward the River Park, participated in River Watch, and wrote a blog post about his experience.

## Chronolog Captures our River Over Time



## A Year of Community Fun!

*An informed and engaged community is at the core of WSCC's mission and we take that seriously--by having fun and providing learning along the way.*

- Two nights of sold out shows for Mountainfilm on Tour: Paonia
- A great day-long program of learning outdoors through our annual Conservation Days field trip, provided to all Delta County 3rd grade students.
- A full weekend of fun in the sun celebrating and floating the river for our 22nd Annual River Fest.
- A sweet Cherry Days festival with WSCC winning the group float competition!
- A Winter Speaker Series highlighting an array of experts in science and conservation.



# WATERSHED STEWARDSHIP

## Wildfire Ready Watersheds

- This year, the Western Slope Conservation Center secured funding to undertake a Wildfire Ready Action Plan (WRAP) with support from many local stakeholders. WRAPs are aimed at protecting watershed resources from post-fire hazards. WSCC's goal is to use the WRAP to prioritize funding for future projects that protect at-risk assets from future wildfires and enhancement of watershed health as a whole.



## Smith Fork LTPBR Study

In 2024, WSCC began Phase II of the Smith Fork Creek Watershed Resiliency Project to advance ecological enhancements within the upper Smith Fork watershed through a study of Low Tech Process Based Restoration (LTPBR) techniques. This study developed a fine scale methodology for determining appropriate LTPBR project locations and is working with interested stakeholders to implement 2-3 pilot projects in the identified priority areas. The location, type, and number of pilot projects will be selected according to the needs of specific sites and based on landowner interest.

## Farmers Ditch Diversion Improvements

WSCC's work continued this year on a project to improve the North Fork Farmers Ditch Diversion. Final engineering plans and construction bids were completed. The redesign will include a fish passage, a safe boating route, and more water left in the river during peak irrigating season while still ensuring a full decree of water for agriculture. Colorado Parks and Wildlife plans to install a pit-tag antenna array that will be deployed to help track migration of Colorado's famed 3-species fish (Flannelmouth Sucker, Bluehead Sucker, and Roundtail Chub).

# PUBLIC LANDS

This year we witnessed huge progress on efforts to protect public lands on the Western Slope and across the West. With the North Fork watershed at the heart of our work, our public lands campaigns reached from the Utah border, up into the headwaters of the Gunnison Basin, over McClure Pass into the Roaring Fork, and across the expansive Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests. By working collaboratively with partners, businesses, and impacted communities we've been able to build strong, effective coalitions committed to protecting for future generations the natural resources we all depend upon. Many of these efforts have been ongoing for years, if not decades, and we remain committed to securing lasting protections for our area.

## BLM UFO RMP

WSCC submitted an updated North Fork Alternative Plan for consideration in the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) Resources Management Plan (RMP) amendment. Following over a decade of community input, the North Fork Alternative proposes limiting oil and gas development near agricultural lands, water resources, and community assets.

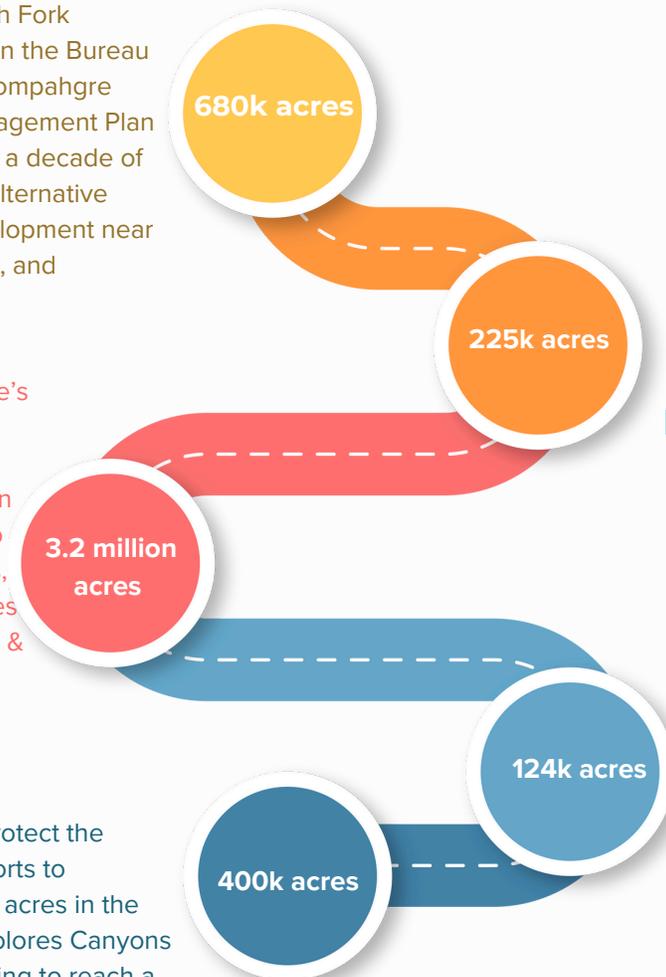
## GMUG Forest Plan

In July 2024, the US Forest Service's (USFS) Final Revised Land Management Plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests went into effect. Thanks in part to our efforts, the final plan includes 68,000 acres of new Recommended Wilderness & 823,000 acres of Wildlife Management Areas.

## Protect the Dolores

As a member of the Coalition to Protect the Dolores, WSCC has supported efforts to designate approximately 400,000 acres in the Dolores River watershed as the Dolores Canyons National Monument. Work is ongoing to reach a consensus proposal for the long-term protection of one of the most biologically diverse, but unprotected landscapes left in Colorado.

## Total Acres of Land Impacted



## Thompson Divide Withdrawal

In April 2024 the Thompson Divide was administratively withdrawn from oil, gas and mining for the next 20 years. The Thompson Divide Administrative Withdrawal comprises approximately 225,000 acres of public lands between the Roaring Fork and North Fork Valley.

## North Fork Valley Mineral Withdrawal

In September 2024, with WSCC's and Delta County's support, Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper introduced the Gunnison Outdoor Resources Protection Act or the GORP Act. Within the GORP Act the North Fork Valley Watershed withdrawal would permanently protect from oil and gas development much of the BLM land on the valley floor, including Jumbo Mountain and the Paonia springs. Oil and gas restrictions would also apply to several Roadless Areas on the Grand Mesa. Overall, the GORP Act would protect more than 700,000 acres in the Gunnison Basin.



WSCC also worked on the: BLM Western Solar Energy Plan, BLM Colorado Big Game RMP amendment, BLM Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Plan implementation, BLM Public Lands Rule, Colorado Energy and Carbon Management Commission rulemakings





## The North Fork Goes to Washington, DC

This year WSCC once again participated in a delegation, along with Colorado Farm & Food Alliance, and the Valley Organic Growers Association, to bring issues, ideas, and perspectives from the North Fork to legislators and decision makers in Washington, DC. Meetings with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the White House Council of Environmental Quality, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation were productive and built upon the history of insights and campaigns the delegation has brought to these leaders over the years, ensuring the North Fork has a voice to represent the needs and concerns of our community.

# COMMUNITY SCIENCE

## Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area designated an International Dark Skies Park!

Big news! In August of 2024, the Gunnison Gorge NCA was designated as Colorado's eleventh International Dark Skies Park. This designation was the culmination of years of dedicated work by the BLM, Colorado Canyons Association, and WSCC's Dark Skies volunteers. Thank you for all your work to make the Gunnison Gorge sky shine!

The Town of Paonia was also designated a Dark Skies Community in 2024 thanks to the dedicated work of the Dark Skies Paonia group. WSCC hosts a Dark Skies meter in the River Park to take readings of the local sky and support these efforts.

**Fun fact:** With the Gunnison Gorge NCA designation, there is now an unbroken swath of Dark Skies parks along the Gunnison River, alongside Curecanti NRA and Black Canyon of the Gunnison Nat'l Park



## RIVER WATCH



WSCC's River Watch program turned 23 this year! Volunteers spent 300 hours collecting and testing water samples from sites along the North Fork and its tributaries. We're proud to have the second oldest River Watch program in Colorado and a team of community members who are passionate about monitoring and protecting our waters.



# YOU MAKE WHAT WE DO POSSIBLE

*Thank you to our 2024 grantors, project partners, and business sponsors!*

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Afton's Garden Center  
Alpacka Raft  
Alpine Bank  
American Rivers  
Aspen Skiing Company's Environment  
Foundation  
Aspen Skiing Company  
Backcountry Goods Trading  
Berg Harvest  
Big B's Delicious Orchards  
Black Bridge Winery  
Blue Mesa Yarn  
Bruz Beers  
Bureau of Land Management  
Bureau of Reclamation  
Cedar Keshet Fine Art  
Cirque Boutique & Gallery  
Clear Fork Cider  
Colorado Canyons Association  
Colorado Department of Public Health and  
Environment  
Colorado Farm and Food Alliance  
Colorado Parks and Wildlife  
Colorado River Water Conservation District  
Colorado School of Clinical Herbalism /  
Elderberry's  
Colorado State University  
Colorado Water Conservation Board  
Colorado Watershed Assembly  
Conservation Lands Foundation  
Dark Skies Paonia  
Delta Brick & Climate Company  
Delta Conservation District  
Delta County Board of County  
Commissioners  
Delta County Tourism Board  
Delta-Montrose Electric Association  
Dependable Lumber  
Desert Weyr  
Don's Market  
Eagle Claw  
Eagle River Brewing Company  
Earth Friendly Supply Co.  
Earthwell  
El Pomar Foundation  
El Pomar San Juan Regional Council  
Empowered Energy Systems, LCA  
Fall Creek Enterprises LLC  
Farm Runners  
Farmers Ditch Company  
First Colorado National Bank

Friends of Youth and Nature  
Gambles Work Wear  
Gear Junction  
Heart of the Dragon  
HEST  
High Country Printing & Graphics  
High Country Shopper  
Hill People Gear  
Hydrascape Stickers  
Kampe Foundation  
Kevin Parks Insurance Agency, Inc.  
KUHL  
Kula Cloth  
KVNF  
Lamborn Mountain Farmstead  
Liz Bucy Practitioner  
Longmont Community Foundation  
Maki Foundation  
Minnesota Canal & Reservoir  
Company  
Mountain Harvest Festival

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance  
Neighborly Neighbors  
New Venture Fund - Colorado River  
Sustainability Campaign  
Nicholoff Summit Construction LLC  
North Fork Pool, Park & Recreation District  
North Fork Valley Creative Coalition  
Odisea, LLC  
Old Moon Acres LLC  
Ombraz  
Optibike E-Bikes  
Orchard Valley Farms  
Pack Shack  
PACT Outdoor  
Paonia Breadworks  
Paonia Farm and Home  
Paonia Pilates  
Paonia Realty  
Paonia Soil Co.  
Paonia United Brewing Company  
Paonia Youth Center  
Patagonia  
Pickin' Productions

Rain Dance Ranch  
RE Max Mountain West  
Refinery Paonia  
REI  
River Watch  
Robin Arthur Art Gallery  
Root and Vine Market  
Rose Community Foundation  
Roundup Riders of the Rockies Heritage &  
Trails Foundation  
Rubicon Coffee  
Safe Routes to Parks  
Seek Outside  
ShadeScapes Americas  
Shish KaBikes  
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Simple Shelter, LTD  
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The Kenney Family Foundation  
The Learning Council  
The Nature Connection  
The New-Land Foundation  
The Pittsburgh Foundation  
Thread + Metal + Stone  
Three Swallows Foundation  
Tincup Whiskey  
Todd Enterprises, Inc.  
Town of Paonia  
TurtleBox  
US Environmental Protection Agency  
US Fish and Wildlife Service - Hotchkiss  
National Fish Hatchery  
US Forest Service - Paonia Ranger District  
Valley High LLC  
Valley Organic Grower's Association  
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Wellspring Vitality  
West Elk Books  
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Western Colorado Community Foundation  
Western Colorado Realty  
Western Conservation Foundation  
Western Slope SUP  
Wild Rye  
Wisheart Springs Inn  
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Zenzen Gardens  
Zephyros Farm

**THANK  
YOU**



# YOU ARE WSCC

We could not do our work without the support of you, our members, partners, and friends.



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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.

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***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 