



COLORADO RIVER DISTRICT

PROTECTING WESTERN COLORADO WATER SINCE 1937



2025-2030 Strategic Plan

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Foundational Work..... 2

Strategic Focus Areas..... 4

 Focus Area 1. Community Protection.....5

 Focus Area 2. Trusted Resource7

 Focus Area 3. Recognized Leader on Colorado River Matters.....9

 Core Services11

Conclusion..... 12

*Facilitation provided by the
Civic Consulting Collaborative*



Introduction

Established in 1937, the Colorado River Water Conservation District (Colorado River District) was created to lead in the protection, conservation, use, and development of the water resources of the Colorado River basin for the welfare of the District, and to safeguard for Colorado all waters of the Colorado River to which the state is entitled. To fulfill this mission, the Colorado River District supports and advocates for water users across 15 West Slope counties in the Yampa, White, Gunnison, and Colorado Rivers.

Mission Statement: To lead in the protection, conservation, use, and development of the water resources of the Colorado River basin for the welfare of the District, and to safeguard for Colorado all waters of the Colorado River to which the state is entitled.

Spanning over 29,000 square miles, or nearly a third of the state, the region's varied geography, ranging from high-alpine headwaters to arid canyonlands, is as diverse as its communities, economies, and the water challenges it faces. Agriculture remains the District's largest water user supporting multi-generational, family-owned farms and ranches that produce food and fiber in the form of hay, alfalfa, pasture grass, row crops, vineyards, and orchards. The rivers, reservoirs, and natural lakes provide drinking water sources and outdoor recreation opportunities that drive West Slope economies and form the natural beauty for which our state is so renowned. The District's headwaters region supports world-class ski resorts, and mining and energy production also remain essential to many regions across the District.

With approximately 65% of the Colorado River's natural flow originating in the District, western Colorado plays an influential role in the Colorado River Basin and its management of the most vital natural resource to the American Southwest. For nearly nine decades, the



Map of the fifteen-county Colorado River District, including the entire Colorado River watershed within the state.

Colorado River District has been at the forefront of Colorado water policy, advocacy, and collaboration, ensuring that West Slope communities and water users have a voice in state and interstate water matters. From its crucial role in negotiating historic agreements to ongoing legal advocacy, strategic partnerships, and infrastructure investments, the River District has adapted over the years to address the increasing demands on the Colorado River Basin and to continue serving the needs of West Slope agriculture, communities, economies, and the environment.

Hot temperatures over the last 23 years have diminished the flows of the Colorado River by 20%, and sound science tells us we should anticipate and plan for further significant reductions.^{1,2} Colorado counties from Ouray to Mesa to Moffat have experienced a more than 4-degree Fahrenheit rise in average annual temperatures since 1895.³ The impact of these hotter, drier temperatures on water supplies are real and meaningful. For every 1-degree Fahrenheit rise in average temperature, researchers project Colorado River streamflow reductions between 4% and 7%.⁴ As pressures on the Colorado River increase due to climate change, policy changes, and population growth, the River District remains committed to its mission and poised to meet these challenges through its foundational work and strategic focus areas.

Foundational Work

With these issues in mind, the District continues its work to safeguard West Slope water supplies. With a team of 25 staff members, the River District represents its western Colorado constituents in legal, technical, and political negotiations related to the water resources of the Colorado River Basin and assists West Slope communities by identifying water security threats and creating solutions including the development and maintenance of critical water supplies.

Governed by a 15-member Board of Directors, the District serves its constituents through the following teams and mission-driven work:

Financial Security and Programmatic Partnerships: The Colorado River District is almost exclusively funded through a mill levy assessed on taxable property within our District. Thanks to the passage of Ballot Measure 7A in 2020, the District secured additional tax revenue to stabilize the District's revenue

¹ See A. Park Williams et al., *Rapid intensification of the emerging southwestern North American megadrought in 2020–2021*, NATURE CLIMATE CHANGE, (2022) 12, 232–234, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01290-z>.

² Becky Bolinger et al., *Climate Change in Colorado, A report for the Colorado Water Conservation Board*, COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY, 3rd ed. (2024), <https://doi.org/10.25675/10217/237323>.

³ See National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. [CLIMATE DIVISIONAL DATABASE \(NCLIMDIV\)](https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/statewide/time-series) (2024), <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/statewide/time-series> (detailing monthly temperature data at the national, state and county levels between 1895 and 2019 for the lower 48 states).

⁴See P. C. D. Milly & K. A. Dunne, *Colorado River flow dwindles as warming-driven loss of reflective snow energizes evaporation*, SCIENCE, vol. 367, issue 6483, 1252–1255 (2020).

and create the Community Funding Partnership (CFP). With base funding of \$4.2 million each year, the CFP Program funds locally driven, multi-purpose water projects which further the District's mission and enables the District to achieve its policy goals. In addition, the CFP Program acts as a catalyst for projects to receive matching funds from other financial sources. Since its creation in 2021, the CFP Program has committed nearly \$30 million across 135 projects and leveraged over \$100 million in additional financial investments on the West Slope.

Legal, Policy and Advocacy: While most of the state's water supply originates within the District, its population accounts for less than 10 percent of statewide votes. This political and economic imbalance requires a vigilant and collaborative presence before state and federal decision-makers and, when necessary, litigation in the appropriate courts. The District's ability to protect its future well-being has been evident across landmark agreements, negotiations, and legal protections throughout its history with a more recent example being the execution of a purchase and sale agreement to buy the Shoshone Water Rights and advance a long-standing water security priority.

Technical Advocacy and Engineering: The District employs a team of engineers and water resource specialists that engages in engineering, research, science, and advocacy to represent constituents and ensure that the District's decision-making is informed using the best available science and data. Examples include leading and supporting studies and data collection efforts that result in more accurate water forecasting and operations. The team also supports stakeholders by participating in West Slope basin roundtable meetings and providing leadership on technical issues, such as water quality and water management matters across the District.

Assets and Water Rights: The District owns and controls water supplies available for contract to help water providers meet local demands. The District owns and operates water storage at Wolford Mountain Reservoir and Elkhead Reservoir and controls significant water supplies in Eagle Park Reservoir and Ruedi Reservoir. Through its Enterprise, the District operates a robust water marketing program providing water security for both consumptive and non-consumptive water users. These water supplies provide multi-purpose water storage that supports agriculture and livestock production, provides water for power production, enhances river flows, and provides significant water to protect the four threatened and endangered fish in the Upper Colorado River system. The success and creativity of these operations have been evident on the Yampa River where, in 2021, strategic releases from Elkhead Reservoir supported downstream farmers and ranchers at risk of being administered while also improving river health.

Communications and Engagement: The District engages with our constituents and community leaders through a multi-platform communication program to provide essential education and outreach regarding the importance of water in the arid West, the challenges facing the District, and locally led solutions. This includes engagement with the media to ensure that District priorities, achievements, and challenges reach a broad audience. The District hosts a series of in-person State of the River events and an Annual Water Seminar to bring communities together to discuss the most pressing water issues facing

the region. District team members frequently present to small and large audiences throughout the District and the Colorado River Basin.

Finance and Administration: To effectively serve our constituents and uphold our mission, the River District operates with transparency, fiscal responsibility, and a commitment to public trust. We are dedicated to being responsible stewards of taxpayer funds, ensuring that resources are strategically allocated to address the most pressing water challenges across the District. Our financial decisions are made with long-term sustainability in mind, recognizing that tax revenues fluctuate over time. Through the responsible management of our Enterprise Fund, we continue to maintain a self-sustaining approach to our water resource operations.

Fulfilling the River District's mission requires a team of dedicated and highly skilled professionals. To attract and retain top talent, we are committed to fostering a supportive work environment that enables employees to thrive and innovate. We will continue to prioritize interesting and challenging goals, competitive compensation, work-life balance, and professional growth, recognizing that the success of the District is directly tied to the success of our employees.

Strategic Focus Areas

With a clear vision and a commitment to our constituents and communities, the Colorado River District is well-positioned to protect water on the West Slope for the benefit of current and future generations. The District is committed to continuing our successful work described above, however, to intentionally advance our mission, the 2025-2030 Strategic Plan identifies three strategic focus areas:

1. Community Protection;
2. Trusted Resource; and
3. Recognized Leader on Colorado River Matters.

For each of these focus areas, we outline the long-term outcome, a description of the 5-year strategic initiative and associated goal, and tactics to implement the initiative. These strategic initiatives provide focus but do not detract from the need to continue to advance our core services, which is why the plan also includes specific initiatives and goals to advance the River District's core services and staff retention.



Focus Area 1.

Community Protection

Long-term Outcome

The Colorado River District collaboratively protects and enhances the water security of West Slope communities.

Foundational Work to Continue

- Utilize the Community Funding Partnership to fund community-driven, multi-purpose water projects, and leverage the Program to further the District's mission and strategic priorities.
- Finalize the Purchase and Sale Agreement for the Shoshone Water Rights to protect and enhance water security.
- Engage with local entities to understand community-specific needs, values, and projects.
- Provide and build staff expertise and resources to support local issues and projects throughout the District that align with the River District's mission and strategic priorities.

Strategic Initiative 1.1

In partnership with community stakeholders, the Colorado River District will identify and advance unifying projects within each of the Colorado, Gunnison, White, and Yampa River Basins that deliver basin-wide benefits to secure the long-term vitality of communities in those basins.

5-Year Goal

By December 2030, the River District will build consensus within each basin that identifies keystone projects and programs to protect existing and reasonably foreseeable future water uses and flow regimes to secure the long-term vitality of our communities.

Tactics

- A. Develop a Roadmap and Data Framework:** Develop a planning roadmap and framework supported with a review of foundational data and an analysis of existing and future threats to water supplies. This effort will guide the remaining tactics.

- B. **Identify Existing Partnerships and Stakeholders:** Identify and engage partners within each basin to explore current collaborations, interests, and gaps in basin representation.
- C. **Identify Current Projects and Programs:** Identify current long-term water security projects and programs within each basin by relying on local partners for insight on basin priorities and projects.
- D. **Prioritize Keystone Projects:** Collaborate with local stakeholders to identify and prioritize critical water projects and programs that protect existing and reasonably foreseeable future uses and flow regimes that support the vitality of our communities.
- E. **Build Consensus:** Build consensus on identified keystone projects and/or programs, while expanding stakeholder groups or advocacy efforts, where needed.
- F. **Initiate Implementation:** Identify and implement initial actions and opportunities to leverage the Community Funding Partnership to advance the identified keystone projects and/or programs.





Focus Area 2.

Trusted Resource

Long-term Outcome

The River District's data and analyses are sought after and utilized by constituents and policy makers across the Colorado River system as a comprehensive and trusted resource to guide decision making related to West Slope water issues.

Foundational Work to Continue

- Provide education and outreach opportunities through the News Drop, State of the River event series, Annual Water Seminar, and other communication tools and events.
- Maintain an active leadership presence at regional stakeholder meetings and in-person interactions with partners and constituents.
- Maintain a state and federal legislative presence and represent West Slope water interests in alignment with River District mission and policies.
- Continue funding water-related data collection, modeling, decision-support and forecasting tools on the West Slope (e.g. USGS monitoring stations, Colorado River Risk Study modeling, decision support tools, soil moisture networks, Airborne Snow Observatory snowpack data).

Strategic Initiative 2.1

The Colorado River District will direct, facilitate, and support the development and acquisition of accurate, foundational data and analyses to understand West Slope water availability and use for the benefit of our constituents and fulfillment of our mission and strategic initiatives. The Colorado River District will provide accessible, timely and impactful research, data, and information to a broad audience including public officials.


5-Year Goals

By December 2030, CRD triennial polling and social media/website analytics indicate that the CRD is a primary resource for Colorado River data and information for CRD constituents and elected officials, resulting in a significant increase in awareness of the River District and our constituents' understanding of Colorado River issues.

By December 2030 (or earlier as may be appropriate), CRD will identify data gaps within existing technical data and analyses needed to support the Community Protection and Recognized Leadership Focus Areas, and engage appropriate consultants or leverage the CFP Program to complete the identified studies.

Tactics

- A. **Water Center Partnerships:** Partner with West Slope focused and based academic water centers to develop a robust body of accurate, timely data regarding Colorado's use of Colorado River water.
- B. **Data Acquisition and Development:** Explore additional data collection efforts and technical studies to inform and further Strategic Initiatives.
- C. **CFP Support for Research:** Through partnerships with local water users, communities and other interested parties, conduct and leverage the CFP Program to support proactive research development on fundamental West Slope water issues.
- D. **Water Resources Library:** Develop and maintain a technical water resources database on West Slope water issues and provide appropriate access to the public on or through the District's digital outlets.
- E. **Accessible Tools:** Develop and implement accessible tools and mediums to reach the public, elected officials, and other policy makers.
- F. **Education Partnerships:** Increase sponsorship and financial support for other entities and educators where interests align (e.g. West Slope academic institutions, local watershed coalitions, agricultural organizations, trade groups and non-governmental entities whose missions overlap with River District mission) to educate constituents on Colorado River issues and inform and excite them about CRD mission.
- G. **Policymaker Engagement:** Develop a programmatic approach to work with policymakers at the local, state, and federal level to ensure they are equipped with foundational, accurate, and timely information regarding West Slope water interests and River District policy priorities.



Focus Area 3.

Recognized Leader on Colorado River Matters

Long-term Outcome

The Colorado River District remains a recognized leader on Colorado River system matters.

Foundational Work to Continue

- Maintain strong relationships with local, state, and federal elected officials.
- Maintain strong and strategic relationships with mission-aligned NGOs working on regional or Colorado-specific issues.
- Advise the State of Colorado in Big River negotiations and advocate in ways that prevent or mitigate negative impacts on West Slope communities.

Strategic Initiative 3.1

Interstate Focus: The Colorado River District will consult with water users and engage with the State of Colorado to help achieve federal and interstate programs that reduce the risk to West Slope water users and communities presented by drought, system use imbalance, and legal uncertainties.

5-Year Goal

By December 2030 (or earlier as may be required), the River District will advocate for federal and interstate programs, including the post-2026 operational guidelines for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, that reduce risk to Colorado's water users and West Slope communities.

Tactics

- Strategic Partnerships:** Identify and create strategic partnerships with entities throughout the Colorado River Basin whose interests align with reducing the risk of curtailment and other potential negative impacts on West Slope communities.
- Decision-makers relations:** Strengthen relationships with key interstate decision-makers.
- Staff Engagement:** Increase staff participation in key interstate programs, boards and/or commissions.
- Communicate:** Communicate the impact hydrologic shortages and reduced water supplies have on West Slope communities and water users.

- E. **Advocate:** Advocate for hydrologic shortages to be recognized in future operations of the Colorado River and for modeling to incorporate hydrologic scenarios that anticipate the likelihood of a hotter and drier future.
- F. **Compact Curtailment Guidance:** To facilitate prudent planning by water users and local communities, advocate for the State of Colorado to clarify administration of water rights for any potential compact curtailment scenario.
- G. **Colorado River Storage Project Act (CRSPA) Reservoir Release Guidance:** Advocate for clear guidelines on CRSPA initial unit releases that reduce risks of negative impacts to West Slope communities.

Strategic Initiative 3.2

Intrastate Focus: In tandem with the District's interstate efforts, the Colorado River District will engage with the State of Colorado, West Slope communities and water users to design a Colorado River basin conserved consumptive use (CCU) program for statewide implementation which includes protections that avoid disproportionate negative economic or environmental impacts to any single subbasin or region within Colorado while protecting the legal rights of water rights holders.

5-Year Goal

By 2030, to the extent that a conserved consumptive use program is operating within the state of Colorado, such a program will include enforceable protections that avoid disproportionate impact to West Slope communities.

Tactics

- A. **Technical Work to Avoid Disproportionate Impacts:** Engage in and produce technical work which supports program design concepts to avoid disproportionate negative economic or environmental impacts to any single subbasin or region within Colorado while protecting the legal rights of water rights holders.
- B. **State of Colorado Partnership:** Develop and improve partnership with the State of Colorado regarding program design concepts to avoid disproportionate negative economic or environmental impacts to any single subbasin or region within Colorado while protecting the legal rights of water rights holders.
- C. **Elected Official Engagement:** Inform and engage with elected officials and leaders on the West Slope regarding the complexity and impact of such programs to water users and communities in addition to the impact of hydrologic shortages and year-to-year variability of water supplies.
- D. **Pilot Projects:** Partner with local water users and the State of Colorado to consider pilot projects designed to inform program design concepts and identify necessary infrastructure improvements required to operate a successful conserved consumptive use program.
- E. **Market Structure and Program Design:** Cooperate with allies and stakeholders at all levels to advocate for the adoption of a market structure and program design that protects West Slope water users, the agricultural industry, and vibrant communities.



Core Services of the River District

Long-term Outcome

The Colorado River District will continuously evaluate organizational capacity and resources to maximize our effectiveness in accomplishing our mission and strategic initiatives while respecting our taxpayer's investments in the District.

Foundational Work to Continue

- Continue the safe and efficient operation and maintenance of District-owned infrastructure and assets.
- Through coordinated efforts with partners, continue to provide reliable sources of water for West Slope uses.
- Continue efficient and accurate financial and administrative operations of the District.
- Continue to prioritize staff retention through offering a competitive compensation package and desirable workplace environment.

Tactics

Some of the tactics that the District will deploy include the following:

- Financial planning and revenue projections:** Consistently maintain and update both short-term and long-term financial planning and revenue scenarios for all funds to support strategic initiatives and projects and operations, and to be able to adapt to changes in the financial climate.
- Stewards of public funds:** Continue to implement measures to be wise stewards of taxpayer resources.
- Operation and maintenance planning:** Evaluate and enhance long-term Operation and Maintenance plans for all River District infrastructure and property assets.
- Technology for efficiency:** Explore and implement new or improved technology to enhance workflows and efficiencies.
- Staff capacity:** Proactively plan for and implement measures to assure staff retention and recruitment and identify areas that expand opportunities to find temporary staffing solutions during peak work periods.

Conclusion

The Colorado River Water Conservation District's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan provides a roadmap for the future, focusing on community protection, serving as a trusted resource, and enhancing its leadership on Colorado River matters. These strategic initiatives, underpinned by a commitment to organizational capacity and fiscal responsibility, will guide the District in its mission to protect, conserve, and develop the water resources of the District for the benefit of western Colorado communities and the state as a whole. Through collaborative partnerships, data-driven decision-making, and proactive engagement, the River District is well-positioned to address the complex water challenges facing the region and to protect West Slope water for current and future generations.

