A COLLECTION OF PROJECTS

COLORADO WATER TRUST

SELECTED PROJECTS

Colorado Water Trust's mission is to restore flows to Colorado's rivers in need.

"REQUEST FOR WATER" AND OUTREACH

Colorado Water Trust (the Water Trust) helps rivers in need by increasing the amount of water flowing. We do that by working within Colorado's system of water laws, especially in rural parts of the state where water rights are old, valuable, and usually used for agriculture. **We look for opportunities to demonstrate innovative legal and technical tools where BOTH the water user and the river benefit. And to do that, we have to travel around the state and talk to people. In this business, trust is everything.**

The central element in our outreach program is Request for Water (RFW) which is a streamlined, online-based, confidential way for water rights owners to offer their water to a streamflow enhancement project. The ease, convenience, and confidentiality of the process are all crucial. Often water rights owners prefer to work with the private entity, the Water Trust, rather than a state agency, during the vetting stage.

The Water Trust kicks off each year with an extensive RFW outreach program from January through May. Traveling throughout the state, Water Trust staff present to water user groups, basin roundtable meetings, state of the river meetings, and conferences, to name a few. Winning "hearts and minds" is key – Colorado's opportunities to restore flows are deeply entangled in a complicated water allocation system as old as the state.

In 2018, Water Trust staff facilitated three public presentations, reaching approximately 275 participants, one state-wide webinar with 55 participants, email announcements and notices to nearly 5,000 individuals, and we recorded 759 RFW website visits. In 2019, Water Trust staff has reached even further across the state.

The value of this outreach goes well beyond the five or six projects that may come out of it each year. Gaining the trust of rights owners in rural Colorado has always been a crucial goal for the Water Trust - an unwritten one that is behind many of our decisions on where and how to work. In the long run, RFW and our other outreach programs set the stage for scaled up streamflow restoration work in the coming decades.

THE MCKINLEY DITCH: LITTLE CIMARRON RIVER

Lest anyone think working with rural water rights owners on streamflow restoration is easy, one of our more pioneering projects, on the McKinley Ditch off the Little Cimarron River 20 miles east of Montrose, has been ongoing for almost ten years now.

This project's goal is to keep water flowing through a 3-mile segment of what is often dry stream by purchasing shares (about 5.8 cfs) of senior agricultural water rights and protecting them through a transfer to instream flow use. We maintain agricultural production by using a split-season operation: water is used for agriculture during the first part of the irrigation season, then left instream when flows drop later in the season.

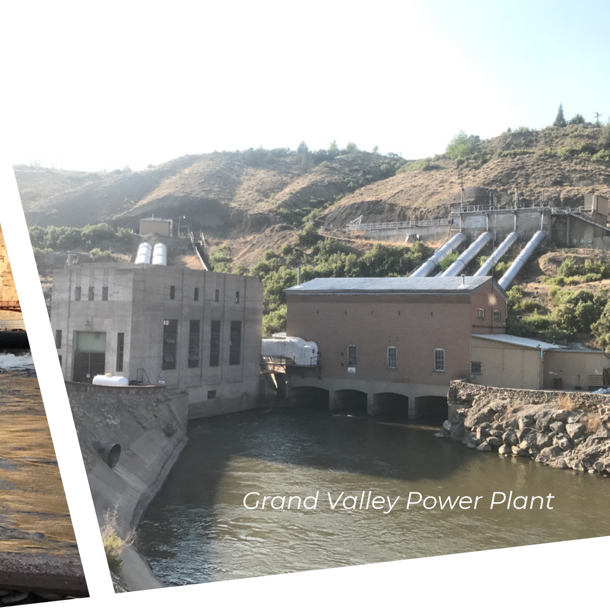
This is the first demonstration of permanent split-season operation for the purpose of streamflow restoration and agricultural production ever attempted (such transactions, called Alternative Transfer Mechanisms, are a crucial part of the state's Water Plan). Additionally, it occurs in a community of land and water rights owners that have been deeply skeptical about such projects.

Water Trust staff have been visiting this beautiful little corner of the state for years now, getting to know the other rights owners on the McKinley Ditch and the neighboring Collier Ditch, working the change-in-use through the legal system, and, soon, testing scientifically whether and how split-season irrigation can still produce a profitable crop. This is an excellent example of the Water Trust's patience and long-view: again, trust is everything and win-win outcomes are definitely possible.

The Little Cimarron River at the McKinley Ditch push-up dam

The Little Cimarron River below the McKinley Ditch

The Grand Valley diversion dam in De Beque Canyon



Grand Valley Power Plant

THE 15-MILE REACH: COLORADO RIVER

Most of the Water Trust's projects are small in volume of water, but big in potential impact because they prove a vital concept: **that restoring streamflow with the help of senior water rights can be a win-win if done in a voluntary, compensated, scientific, and collaborative way.** This one is big in both volume and impact.

The 15-Mile Reach is a section of the Colorado River just upstream of its confluence with the Gunnison, its largest tributary in the state. It also happens to be home to four endangered fish species, and several times each year (not only in the summer and fall, which makes it somewhat unique) it runs very low. People have been trying to restore the 15-Mile Reach for years.

Enter the Grand Valley Power Plant ("GVPP"), built in the early 1930s and operated by the Grand Valley Water Users Association and Orchard Mesa Irrigation District, two rights holders whose ditches, among others, divert water from the river upstream of the 15-Mile Reach. The GVPP is uniquely situated at the head of the 15-Mile Reach. Continued operation of the GVPP is vital because its senior water rights pull water down from headwater tributaries that cannot be consumed by intermediate ditches. But little work has occurred on the GVPP since its construction and upgrades are badly needed.

Through an extensive negotiation process, the Water Trust and the two user groups signed an agreement this year, whereby water secured by the Water Trust from upstream sources may be delivered to and used in the GVPP. Once run through the plant's turbines, producing clean hydropower, the water will be released back into the 15-Mile Reach. The Water Trust will contribute a portion of the total costs to rehabilitate the GVPP in exchange for the five-year agreement.

The benefits of this project are many: not only will the project support endangered fish and produce clean energy, but it will provide essential funding to keep the aging plant in operation and generate additional revenue for the operators. It also proves a crucial point: where there's a will there's a way, and if parties are willing to work together to find a solution that helps both the river and the users, they can usually find one. A fair bit of money also helps.

The 15-Mile Reach project could be the largest by volume of water ever attempted by the Water Trust. At full operation, it could put up to 5,000 acre-feet of water back in the Colorado River each year it's implemented.


Ames Howard's Fork Diversion

AMES HYDROELECTRIC GENERATING PLANT: HOWARD'S FORK OF THE SAN MIGUEL RIVER

This project is a prime example of how the Water Trust works with diverse partners to find available water in locations that need restoration the most.

Constructed in 1890 to power the Gold King mine, Ames was the world's first generating station to produce and transmit alternating current. Owned and operated by Xcel Energy, the plant to this day provides power to nearby residents and businesses.

When Xcel Energy decided to decommission one of the plant's associated penstocks, the company saw a unique opportunity to restore streamflows to a reach of the Howard's Fork that has been dewatered for decades. **They called the Water Trust.**

The Water Trust is working to protect up to 28 cfs in the Howard's Fork of the San Miguel River to support the ecology of the river.

COATS BROTHERS DITCH: TOMICHI CREEK

The Coats Brothers Ditch diverts water from the west side of Tomichi Creek to irrigate the Kruthaupt Ranch, in the heart of Colorado ranch country near Gunnison. In average and dry streamflow years, Tomichi Creek experiences localized dry ups, which present barriers to fish migration.

This project is a temporary, split-season, compensated, instream flow lease. Working with Colorado Trout Unlimited and the CWCB, the Water Trust partnered with the Kruthaupt family ranch to share the Coats Brothers Ditch between irrigation and instream flow uses.

During years when the lease is implemented, the Kruthaupts will use the water rights for irrigation of hay meadows and pasture grass. But in July or August, they will cease diversions, and the CWCB will use the water rights to protect up to 12.3 miles of instream flows in Tomichi Creek.

The Coats Brothers Ditch short-term lease for instream flow was implemented last year, returning 202.7 acre-feet of water in 2018 alone to Tomichi Creek during extreme low-flow conditions.

Thank you for your support and interest in our work across Colorado. We look forward to sharing more about our projects with you.