



COLORADO WEST LAND TRUST

## WATER PROTECTION PLAN SUMMARY



*Photo by Robb Reece*

### **ENSURING TOMORROW'S WATER THROUGH CONSERVATION**

The Colorado River Basin faces pressing challenges due to climate change and increasing water scarcity. This critical resource supports seven states, providing water, power, recreation, and more. The Colorado West Land Trust (CWLT), a leader in conservation since 1980, recognizes the urgent need to protect our region's water resources and ecological health. In partnership with The Freshwater Trust (TFT), CWLT has developed the Water Protection Plan—a strategic blueprint aimed at strengthening agricultural water supplies, preserving essential habitats, and enhancing watershed health throughout our communities.

This plan will serve as a guide, enabling us to efficiently identify and protect the most critical, water-secure agricultural lands and wildlife habitats, addressing the needs of our communities and providing long-term support. Following concerns facing the Colorado River Basin, this plan aims to strategically integrate land and water conservation efforts while promoting sustainable resource management practices. The Water Protection Plan is not just a response but a proactive step towards ensuring resilient and thriving landscapes for our community and future generations.

As CWLT enters its fifth decade of conservation, the Plan aims to enhance the speed, size, and impact of water conservation efforts by:



Responding to lower water levels in rivers and streams



Supporting farmers and ranchers amid growing uncertainty



Protecting and enhancing natural habitats in watersheds to sustain wildlife and agricultural communities

# Goals: Protection, Permanence, Resilience

Central to the Water Protection Plan are five strategic goals designed to:

- 1. Accelerate Land and Water Protection:** CWLT will increase efforts to protect critical areas with secure water resources, using innovative approaches like Purchase-Innovate-Protect-Sell (PIPS). This strategy involves acquiring land and water rights, supporting young farmers, and enhancing watershed health.



- 2. Enhance Resilience in Vulnerable Areas:** Implementing strategies to bolster resilience in areas with limited water security is crucial. CWLT will work to fortify these regions, ensuring the sustainability of agricultural production and protecting water.

- 3. Promote Forest Health and Floodplain Restoration:** By engaging in projects that enhance forest health and restore floodplains, CWLT aims to improve ecological functions. These efforts not only increase water availability but also safeguard communities and irrigated lands.



- 4. Preserve and Restore Natural Habitats:** CWLT will prioritize the conservation of vital habitats such as wetlands, riparian zones, and wet meadows. This focus ensures that biodiversity thrives alongside agricultural activities.

- 5. Build Collaborative Capacity:** CWLT will expand partnerships with stakeholders across the river basin to protect water resources, support agriculture, enhance watershed health, and innovate in response to challenges like aridification and global change.





# Alignment with Colorado Water Plan and Basin Implementation Plans

The five core goals of CWLT’s Water Protection Plan closely align with the objectives outlined in the Colorado Water Plan (CWP), the Colorado Basin Implementation Plan (Colorado BIP), and the Gunnison Basin Implementation Plan (Gunnison BIP). Aligning our goals with these crucial frameworks ensures that our actions contribute to broader, statewide initiatives for sustainable water use and protection.

CWLT Goals	CWP Goals	Colorado BIP Goals	Gunnison BIP Goals
<b>Accelerate Land and Water Protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use conservation easements to preserve irrigated lands ✓</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote conservation easements to preserve ag lands and water rights ✓</li> <li>Minimize the permanent transfer of ag water rights.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discourage the conversion of productive ag land to other uses ✓</li> </ul>
<b>Enhance Resilience in Vulnerable Areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan uncertainty and drought in mind ✓</li> <li>Combine water-sharing agreements with conservation easements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce and prevent agricultural water shortages ✓</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve agricultural water supplies to reduce shortages ✓</li> </ul>
<b>Promote Forest Health and Floodplain Restoration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reconnect floodplains using nature-based solutions ✓</li> <li>Create Wildfire Ready Watersheds framework</li> <li>Protect storage infrastructure from effects of wildfire, flooding, &amp; debris flow.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protect and maintain healthy forests, mitigate wildfire impacts and rehabilitate damaged forests. ✓</li> <li>Plan for forest &amp; watershed health in riparian areas and floodplains.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore where watershed restoration techniques can be used to address water quality and quantity issues that support agriculture, environmental, and recreational uses. ✓</li> </ul>
<b>Preserve and Restore Natural Habitats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance streamflows using available tools ✓</li> <li>Rehabilitate streams to improve habitat &amp; reduce erosion</li> <li>Ease participation in the Instream Flow Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protect and maintain healthy &amp; self-sustaining aquatic &amp; riparian ecosystems &amp; rehabilitate damage ecosystems. ✓</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain and water improve water quality in the Gunnison Basin (GB) ✓</li> <li>Improve baseline of native trout &amp; endangered fish populations in the GB</li> </ul>
<b>Build Collaborative Capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct planning that considers uncertainty and drought ✓</li> <li>Support planning and multibenefit projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support productive agriculture and services ✓</li> <li>Encourage &amp; ATMs as an alternative to buy-and-dry to meet growing municipal demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protect existing water uses in the Gunnison Basin ✓</li> </ul>

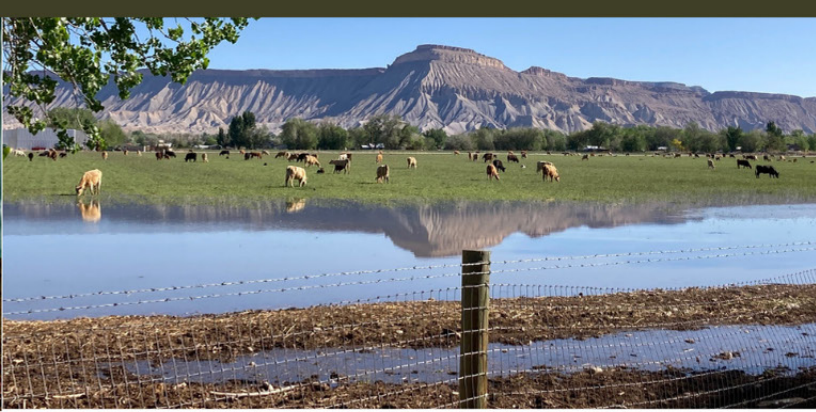


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## IMPLEMENTATION: BRINGING THE PLAN TO LIFE

Implementing the Water Protection Plan involves a process tailored to the unique needs of priority geographies and diversions. Here's how we'll make the plan work:

### **Building Capacity and Partnerships:**

To effectively implement the plan, CWLT will focus on building capacity and strengthening partnerships. This includes:

- **Expanding Staff:** Hiring additional staff with water management and conservation expertise.
- **Forging New Partnerships:** Collaborating with local farmers, ditch companies, irrigation districts, and other stakeholders to achieve shared conservation goals.
- **Funding:** Combine private and public funds to support our conservation projects.

### **Identifying Key Areas for Conservation:**

CWLT will work to identify geographic priorities based on water availability, high-value cropland, and wildlife habitat. This will help effectively target conservation resources to achieve maximum impact.

- **Evaluate Water Security:** Assessing how water is used in key areas by analyzing water records and the priority of water rights, identifying where to focus our protection efforts.
- **Examine Soil and Crop Value:** Identifying high-value cropland based on soil productivity and the economic importance of the crops grown, helping efforts support the most productive and economically significant lands.
- **Assess Habitat Quality:** Evaluating the ecological importance of areas by examining the presence of critical habitats, biodiversity, and the health of ecosystems, prioritizing regions that contribute significantly to wildlife conservation.

### **Implementing Protection Efforts:**

With a clear plan for water security and conservation, we're ready to take action. This includes:

- **Land and Water Acquisitions:** Using our innovative approach to buy, protect, and sell important land and water resources.
- **Conservation Easements:** Creating flexible agreements to permanently protect land while allowing for adaptive water management.
- **Resilience Building Projects:** Working on projects like forest health, fire prevention, and floodplain restoration to improve water supply and protect agriculture and habitats.

**Monitoring and Adaptation:** We continuously monitor and adjust our strategies to stay flexible and respond to new information and changing conditions, ensuring long-term conservation success.

### **Supporting Our Efforts**

Successful implementation of the Water Protection Plan depends on the support of our community. Through your contributions and engagement, we can apply new insights, tools, and finance strategies, increasing the pace, scale, and effectiveness of our conservation work, creating lasting benefits for the communities we serve. Together, we can safeguard Colorado's precious water resources and ensure a vibrant future for agriculture, wildlife, and communities on the West Slope.