

ADDRESSING DROUGHT MITIGATION IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO



Credit: Carrie Padgett, Southwestern Water Conservation District

WHAT THIS PROJECT DOES

The Southwestern Water Conservation District (SWCD) Water Conservation and Infrastructure Partnership is a robust collaboration led by SWCD and involves over 30 entities throughout southwest Colorado. This partnership focuses on increasing the capacity in southwest Colorado for resilience projects by bundling partner projects together to improve funding access and address some of the most pressing and damaging impacts of drought on the region. On behalf of the Partnership, SWCD has created a bundle of 17 multi-benefit projects that restore ecosystems and habitats impacted by drought, improving community welfare, resilience to flood and wildfire, recreational access, and bolstering economic benefits. The projects will restore over 1,335 acres of riparian ecosystem and reconnect over 200 miles of river. Six basins will receive funding to help mitigate drought. This initiative is supported by 37 different federal, state, and local agencies representing local and regional water agencies, environmental organizations, Tribal Councils, and other stakeholders. While funding for this effort was awarded in January of 2025 through the Upper Basin Environmental Drought Mitigation (B2E) Funding allocated through the Inflation Reduction Act, funds have been placed on hold with no contracting since the award date.

PROJECT BENEFITS

With diminishing water availability in the West due to drought, there is an ongoing need to protect water while maintaining the economic viability of local communities. Projects identified for inclusion in the bundle share the purpose of drought mitigation through multi-benefit projects. Activities like bank stabilization, invasive species removal, fish passage and habitat connectivity, erosion control, and wetland restoration improve the availability of water to downstream water users — including farmers, ranchers, and rural Colorado towns and cities — and ensure communities are prepared for drought impacts, including low-water years, wildfires, floods, and other risks. Additionally, restoration helps address degraded

PROJECT DETAILS

Project Location: CO-3

Project Cost: \$29,314,932

Funding Award: \$25,603,230 in federal funds; \$3,711,932 in non-federal match funds

Funding Programs: Upper Basin Environmental Drought Mitigation (B2E) Funding (currently on hold); matching cash and in-kind funds from state, Tribal, water district, and non-profit partners

Partners: Southwestern Water Conservation District, Animas Watershed Partnership, BLM, CO Parks and Wildlife, Mancos Conservation District, Mountain Studies Institute, National Forest Foundation, RiversEdge West, Webber Ditch Company, Upper San Juan Watershed Enhancement Project, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, among others

water quality due to wildfire sediment and overwhelmed water infrastructure, improving drinking water for those in southwestern Colorado. Finally, much of the region's heart and soul is tied up in agricultural heritage and recreational access to healthy, flowing rivers; the restoration activities identified in this bundle preserve the social and economic values of the region for generations to come.

PROJECTS INCLUDED IN THE BUNDLE

DOLORES RIVER RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP

This project includes removing invasive species, planting native riverside vegetation, increasing floodplain connectivity, and restoring the Dolores River within the Spring Creek watershed. Native vegetation and floodplain connectivity will improve the riverside's ability to hold water, combating drought and mitigating the impacts of wildfire. Removal of invasive species will also bolster water quality and protect water treatment facilities, safeguard crops and nearby agriculture, and further reduce fire risk while supporting fish habitat. It is coordinated and planned through the Dolores River Restoration Partnership, a 15-year-old public-private collaboration to restore the main stem of the Dolores River.

ANIMAS HEADWATERS WETLAND & STREAM RESTORATION

In partnership with the Animas Headwaters Ecological Action Division, this project will restore 10.5 acres of fens and four acres of wetlands along the Animas River headwaters. Using an approach known as low-tech process-based restoration, partners will use natural materials such as hay and wooden posts to restore the stream, protect the site from current and future erosion, and reestablish critical fens and riverside wetlands that support groundwater recharge, boost water retention, and combat drought and decreased river flows. Excessive plant materials will also be removed to support fen and wetland health. As a headwaters project, this effort will also address water quality issues from legacy mining, which are exacerbated by drought during low-flows.

WEBBER DITCH DIVERSION RESTORATION & FISH PASSAGE

This project will reconstruct the Webber Ditch Diversion to improve water delivery for agriculture and create a permanent fish passage. The current diversion prevents upstream movement and hinders downstream movement of fish and other aquatic species in the Mancos River and tributaries, while inefficient water delivery hampers agricultural production. Partners anticipate using roughly 600 tons of boulders to create the fish passage, stabilize the diversion grade control and downstream channel, and prevent upstream bank erosion. In line with three other fish passage and habitat connectivity projects in the bundle, this effort will help fish species thrive in the face of drought, higher temperatures, and reduced river flows.

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