

UNCOMPAHGRE MULTIBENEFIT PROJECT



Credit: Hannah Holm, American Rivers

WHAT THIS PROJECT DOES

This project, which broke ground in spring 2025 and was completed in fall 2025, restores a mile-long section of river between Ridgway and Ouray, CO, supporting aquifer recharge, agriculture, and native riverside vegetation in the river corridor. The project — which is supported by local landowners and water users, American Rivers, the Colorado River District, the state of Colorado, and the Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership, among others — involves updating and stabilizing the Ward Ditch headgate and ditch to improve the reliability of deliveries for irrigation. The project also will improve habitat for fish in a degraded stretch of river and reconnect the river to its floodplain to better absorb high water and filter out heavy metals and other pollutants before they reach Ridgway Reservoir downstream. The project will also plant native trees and remove invasive species.

PROJECT BENEFITS

This project has wide-reaching benefits for area irrigators, downstream water users, and the local riverside habitat. It also provides an excellent model of the kind of multi-benefit project that can enhance drought resilience in the Colorado River Basin. Headgate improvements will ensure efficient delivery of water for irrigation, and lower the cost of accessing water while improving water management in the area. Additionally, enabling the river to flow onto its floodplain during spring runoff will allow the local aquifer to recharge and strengthen the health of riverside vegetation. Improving the river's connection to its floodplain will also help reduce the amount of pollutants from any upstream wildfire that could wash into Ridgway Reservoir, mitigating contamination of downstream water supplies. Allowing the river to spread out onto its floodplain at high water will also intercept some pollutants from upstream mining runoff, preventing them from reaching the reservoir and making their way into drinking water. The project will create self-sustaining habitat restoration while avoiding increases in the elevation or extent of the 100-year flood to protect safety and property. Finally, enhanced riverside vegetation and better in-stream habitat will support native fish species, create attractive habitat for pollinators, and improve access to recreation for Uncompahgre-area residents and visitors alike, benefitting local tourism.

PROJECT DETAILS

Project Location: CO-3

Project Cost: \$1.6 million

Funding Award: \$1.2 million from WaterSMART, \$400,000 from state, local, and other partners

Funding Programs: USBR WaterSMART, CWCB Water Plan Grants, Water Supply Reserve Fund, Colorado River District, Ward Water Group, American Rivers

Partners: American Rivers, Ward Water Group, Colorado River District, Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership

PROTECTING THE COLORADO RIVER AND THE COMMUNITIES THAT DEPEND ON IT

The Colorado River is a resource for 40 million people. It provides drinking water, as well as critical food and energy production. It's an engine for local economies, an irreplaceable habitat for native birds, fish, and wildlife, and an essential part of the Western way of life. But it's on the brink of collapse.

The river is over-allocated, and its two largest reservoirs have fallen to roughly one-third capacity. Decades of drought and rising temperatures threaten the reliability of future water supplies in Colorado River Basin states, putting crucial infrastructure in jeopardy and increasing risks to communities from natural disasters like wildfires and floods.

INVESTING IN THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN'S FUTURE

In order to ensure that the Colorado River can continue to be a reliable source of clean water for communities and agriculture throughout the Basin, we need long-term, sustainable state and federal funding for strategies that make the river more resilient, conserve water, and protect communities from increasingly severe fires, floods, and drought.

HOW TO CREATE A MORE RESILIENT COLORADO RIVER BASIN



Improve forest health using management and restoration strategies designed to protect the forested areas in the Colorado River Basin, such as thinning overgrown areas, removing invasive plant species, and conducting prescribed burns.



Restore wetlands, high-elevation mountain meadows, and riverside habitat to help improve the health of rivers and streams across the Basin, reduce sediment in downstream reservoirs and water infrastructure, improve water security, and enhance forage. Strategies include implementing wood and rock structures to slow river flows, reestablishing native plants, and replenishing groundwater to help protect clean water supplies and restore degraded rivers and streams.



Increase agricultural efficiency and enable farmers to develop strategies that work for them, like supporting on-farm water conservation methods, alternative crops that use less water, and investing in infrastructure upgrades like lining canals.



Boost municipal water conservation by expanding what is already working, like water-efficient plumbing and appliances, leak detection systems, water reuse, replacing thirsty lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping, and incorporating water planning into urban development and growth decisions.

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