COLORADO RIVER RESILIENCE

SUBLETTE COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT RESTORATION

Credit: Michael Henn, Sublette County Conservation District

WHAT THIS PROJECT DOES

Sublette County contains wild hunting, fishing, and ranching landscapes in southwestern Wyoming that fuel an agriculture, recreation, and resource extraction economy. Here, the Sublette County Conservation District (SCCD) is working with state and federal agencies, private landowners, and conservation groups to identify, plan, and implement more than three dozen projects aimed at restoring and safeguarding streams and rangelands across the county's private and public lands. This includes wetter areas with perennial streams like Muddy Creek and drier landscapes with seasonal streamflows like the Mesa. Project partners will install over 850 structures made of natural materials to restore degraded lands, reduce current and future erosion, and slow streamflows, thereby improving soil and landscape health as well as water quality and availability. As of summer 2025, SCCD and partners have completed six projects and installed over 350 structures, with additional projects in the works for 2026 and beyond.

PROJECT BENEFITS

The Sublette County Conservation District Restoration Project has wide-reaching benefits for ranchers, irrigators, communities, and wildlife across the county. The structures installed by SCCD and partners will slow down runoff from nearby mountains, allowing water to spread out across the landscape and soak into the soil. This reduces flood risks during high flows while enhancing water availability and guarding against drought and wildfire later in the season. Improved soil moisture, denser vegetation, and reduced erosion will create more forage for livestock, increase land productivity, and improve water quality for ranchers, irrigators, and downstream water users. Additionally, restoring the area's many rangeland, wet meadow, and stream habitats will support hunting and fishing traditions in communities like Pinedale and Big Piney, supporting the outdoor recreation economy while enhancing habitat for the area's abundant and beloved wildlife, including mule deer, sage grouse, and cutthroat trout.

PROJECT DETAILS

Project Location: WY

Project Cost: ~$2M

Funding Award: ~$2M

Funding Programs: BLM National Cooperative Agreement, Pinedale Anticline Project Office, private funding

Partners: Sublette County Conservation District, private landowners, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Natural Resource Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Pure West Energy, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy

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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Scan the QR code to learn more about resilience projects in the Colorado River Basin