



#### The Nature Conservancy in Colorado

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The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

ON THE COVER Colorado's peak wildflower season near Crested Butte, Colorado © Ethan Herrold/TNC Photo Contest 2019 THIS PAGE TOP TO BOTTOM Carlos Fernández © Lauryn Wachs/TNC; Bison © TNC

#### FROM THE DIRECTOR

### Dear Friends,



with partners,

communities and

decision-makers across the state.

The science is clear that we must act now to halt catastrophic climate change and biodiversity loss. What we do between now and 2030 will determine our future.

So much can occur in a single lifetime. Three-quarters of the carbon dioxide emissions driven by humans have occurred since 1950. We have seen

a nearly 70% decline of birds, amphibians, mammals, fish and reptiles globally since just 1970.

While these changes to our planet have happened rapidly, we know that we also have the power to act quickly for positive change. Together, we can find a way to a brighter future.

We are leveraging our work to have broader impact, including through forest and fire management collaboratives and water projects in Southwest Colorado that will restore river flows for threatened fish and ecosystems. Through it all, we are building on our legacy of conservation and evolving and expanding our approach to better reflect the perspectives and needs of more Coloradans.

Although the challenges may seem daunting, we are increasing the speed and scale of our work to meet them. For example, through our Catalyst Fund, we supported six innovative projects in Colorado that led to new partnerships and big impacts—just in the first year of funding!

You are key to making this all happen. Your support powers our work to make a difference for people and nature. Thanks to you, we can continue to build the strategies and partnerships that



Sincerely,

Carlos E. Fernández. Colorado State Director







### Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Nature Conservancy in Colorado is on a journey to embed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) throughout the work we do and the way we operate. Our goals of addressing the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are only achievable with meaningful collaboration and partnerships. This year, we have made important progress toward the goals in our DEI Action Plan, such as investing in and inspiring a new generation of conservation leaders, diversifying our Board of Trustees, and embedding equity into conservation projects.

The following are a few examples of accomplishments that highlight our changing culture.

- We welcomed Lorelei Cloud, a member of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and Ernest House, Jr., a member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, to our Board of Trustees. Their commitment to conservation, leadership development, tradition, and cultural perspectives will help ensure that we are elevating Tribal voices in our work. This year, Lorelei was honored as one of three trustees from around the world to receive TNC's Nature's Advocate Award in Washington, DC..
- We launched the Colorado Conservation Fellowship Program, a two-year program designed to provide early-career professionals with the opportunity to explore and gain experience in conservation careers. We are

- excited to welcome the first cohort of fellows, Jacob Cook Garza, Anna Sofia Vera, and Andrea Torres as well as Anna Sanchez, talent manager and fellowship program coordinator to the Colorado team.
- We hired Izabella Ruffino as the new Colorado Tribal and Indigenous Engagement Program Manager. Izabella will serve as a liaison with Indigenous communities and support the co-creation of mutually beneficial conservation projects across the state.

We are committed to this work for the long term. We have a critical opportunity to shift our approach and make a positive impact for both nature and people.

### Investing in Innovative Ideas



**TNC's Catalyst Fund** was created to encourage a more intentional approach to rapid learning, ensuring that we adapt, iterate, and innovate faster than ever before.



The Nature Conservancy in Colorado's Catalyst Fund provides support for staff to pursue innovative methods and technologies to rapidly scale conservation projects and solutions. The three projects below showcase some of the impacts we have seen from our first year of projects.

#### **Agrivoltaics**

Agrivoltaics, or the co-location of agriculture within solar arrays, is one way that land underneath solar arrays can be managed for ecological and community benefits as Colorado builds out the renewable energy infrastructure needed to meet our climate targets.

TNC led a partnership to introduce perennial plants under a half-acre solar array in Boulder that wasn't originally designed to co-exist with agriculture. Working alongside Jack's Solar Garden and Drylands Agroecology Research (DAR), the team dug graded basins under the panels for water retention and brought in 150 cubic yards of compost and woodchips. They consulted with WishGarden Herbs and the University of Colorado's Foundations for Leaders Organizing for Water and Sustainability (FLOWS) program to identify plants with medicinal and cultural values.

Nick DiDomenico Jr., executive director of DAR, explains, "If we can thoughtfully design these sites as ecological buffers, as habitat for insects and birds, and then also having viable crops...that creates a huge opportunity for climate stabilization."

The lessons and relationships from this pilot have already helped advance agrivoltaics. TNC championed a successful bill in the Colorado State Legislature that will channel \$1 million toward agrivoltaics research and demonstration projects over two years.

#### **New Technology for Downtown Denver Trees**

As heat waves increase each summer, urban trees are more important than ever. Trees provide benefits like shade, cooling, and increased biodiversity. However, only 4% of downtown Denver is covered by trees, falling short of the 10% goal set by the Downtown Denver Partnership, a nonprofit organization that seeks to help Denver's downtown thrive.

Alongside the Downtown Denver Partnership, TNC is leading a project to install structural soil cells, which provide a structure below paved surfaces to increase soil volume so trees can live longer and grow larger. The pilot project will involve planting four trees in structural cells and monitoring soil conditions. Working on this project has provided valuable insights for TNC's involvement on an advisory committee for the City and County of Denver's first urban forestry strategic plan.

"Cities are places where diverse people, cultures, and thriving economies come together. But you're not going to get those benefits if you don't create places where people want to be—where they can connect with, see, and be inspired by nature."

Chris Hawkins, cities program director for TNC Colorado

### Climate-Smart Changes at Carpenter Ranch

At TNC's historic Carpenter Ranch in northwest Colorado, staff are pioneering climate-adaptive approaches for preserve management. This project aimed to alleviate the environmental stress on native fish and vegetation during low flows on the Yampa River.

TNC's interdisciplinary team designed a conceptual model of waterflows on the ranch, identifying locations to place sensors to measure water flow through irrigation ditches. These data will allow for more finely tuned regulation of water diversions. During the process, the team learned that a partner's weather station had existing sensors that could provide some of the data. The project's impact extended beyond its immediate goals and will help guide us as we determine how Carpenter Ranch can be a model for climate-smart management across TNC's preserves.



## Power to People and the Planet

### Accelerating Renewable Energy in Colorado





TNC is working with key partners and stakeholders to develop state guidelines, frameworks and policies that will prioritize and accelerate renewable energy deployment that aligns with conservation and community goals.

As we act to limit the impacts of climate change and conserve biodiversity, we must make sure that these two priorities complement one another. Given the significant potential land footprint of the needed renewable energy buildout over the coming decades, it will be increasingly important to consider where and how clean energy infrastructure is deployed. With careful planning and robust community engagement, we can build the infrastructure needed to power our future while decreasing air pollution and keeping sensitive natural and working lands intact. This approach can also minimize conflict and ensure that projects are built in ways that work for the communities in which they are sited.

Building clean energy infrastructure at the pace and scale needed to meet our climate goals will require a lot of land, as we will need more electricity to power the industries, vehicles, homes and buildings of the future. It is estimated that up to 75% of the nation's new large renewable energy projects will be constructed in the Midwest and West, which potentially will become a "renewable energy belt" of the United States.

Consumer demand, coupled with federal investments, have the potential to double the nation's renewable energy installations by 2030. As the clean energy transition gains speed, we need smart planning at

all levels of governance. According to TNC's new Power of Place-West analysis, we can achieve both climate and conservation goals.

"Together with partners, we need to go smart to go fast—deploying renewable energy in ways that support goals for climate, conservation, and communities."

> -Chris Menges, director of climate action for TNC Colorado

In Colorado, our focus is driving renewable energy development to previously developed or low-impact areas. These sites, which include brownfields, former mine lands, or other land that is unsuitable for farming, housing, or conservation can work well for clean energy infrastructure. In contrast, sensitive areas and working lands such as areas with high conservation value or prime farmland should be protected from development.

Siting renewables thoughtfully can be better for people and nature and set the stage for an efficient, low-conflict buildout. Siting on land that has conservation or cultural value or that is needed for other purposes can create community conflicts that delay or prevent a project from being built.

TNC's science shows that Colorado has more than enough land to support low-impact renewable energy installations. TNC is working with partners and state agencies to develop a comprehensive plan for renewable energy production and a toolbox of technologies that will support the transition. These technologies might include agrivoltaics (co-locating solar installations with agricultural operations), reconductoring (stringing new power lines on existing towers), and other approaches.

These energy investments will bolster state and local economies, creating jobs and producing abundant clean energy. Colorado has an incredible opportunity to accelerate our deployment of renewable energy in a way that supports communities, leads to better air quality, and protects conservation values.

\$9.5B

of benefits came to Colorado's eastern plains from construction and investment activity in the renewable sector between 2020 and 2023. That included \$2.7 billion in direct economic benefit, according to *The Economic Benefits of Colorado's Eastern Plains Renewable Energy Industry by The Western Way, 2020.* 

4%

growth was seen in energy jobs from 2020 to 2021, outpacing overall employment growth, which climbed 2.8% during that same period. Renewable energy is one of the fastest-growing job sectors in the United States, according to the United States Energy & Employment Report 2023..

69%

of Colorado voters prioritize clean, renewable energy over fossil fuels, according to the 2023 Colorado College State of the Rockies Poll.



# 2023

#### YEAR IN PICTURES



#### **FLY FISHING**

TNC hosted Community Fly Fishing at our Phantom Canyon Preserve to offer free fly-fishing lessons for community members. © Anna Sofia Vera/TNC

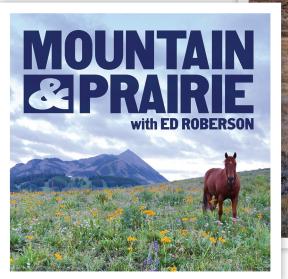


#### **MOUNTAIN AND PRAIRIE**

We partnered with the Mountain & Prairie podcast to create a podcast episode for each month of this year. The episodes feature conversations with a wide range of TNC leaders, partners, collaborators, and stakeholders to highlight the myriad of conservation challenges, opportunities, and solutions in the American West. Listen at mountainandprairie.com/TNC or wherever you get your podcasts! © Mountain & Prairie

#### 25 YEARS AT FOX RANCH

This year is the 25th anniversary of conserving Fox Ranch, a 14,070-acre ranch in northeast Colorado that is home to native prairie and streamside plant communities that support a diverse range of wildlife. We manage the ranch for both conservation and agricultural values by maintaining a cattle grazing lease on site and using grazing management plans compatible with our conservation goals. © John Fielder



#### **EARTH DAY**

TNC's young professionals advisory board, the 13ers, hosted an Earth Day event at the Patagonia Denver store featuring a screening of a short film about our work to create a more equitable tree canopy in Denver. © Maria Kopecky/TNC



#### **WORLD AFFAIRS CONFERENCE**

Colorado State Director Carlos Fernández speaks on a panel about the Colorado River at CU Boulder's Conference on World Affairs. © Maria Kopecky/TNC



#### **PARKS RIVERS TRAILS AND** TREES VOLUNTEER EVENT

A young volunteer helps clean up an urban park at a spring stewardship day hosted by TNC and partners. © Denver Parks Trust



#### **GOCO RETREAT**

TNC Fellow Andrea Torres on a high ropes course at the Great Outdoors Colorado retreat for fellows at nonprofits around Colorado. © Anna Sofia Vera/TNC



#### **TRAIL CAM**

A trail camera snapped this pic of a mountain lion at TNC's Phantom Canyon Preserve in the Laramie Foothills. © Andrew Bushnell and Fernando Boza

### Accelerating Solutions for Southwest Colorado's Rivers



The Colorado River basin supports 30 native fish species that are found nowhere else in the world. The Colorado River provides water for 40 million people across the southwest United States and Mexico, and it's in crisis. The river system is overallocated and its flows are shrinking due to climate change.

In Colorado, this river system provides water for farmers and ranchers, cities, Tribal Nations, outdoor recreation, and industry.

In southwest Colorado, The Nature Conservancy is working on conservation projects that bring people together to support ecosystem health and help bolster river resilience in this critical region of the Colorado River Basin.



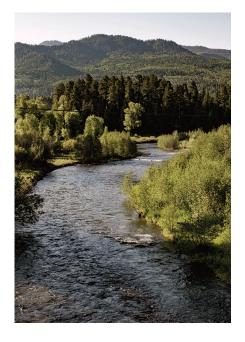
The San Miguel River begins in the San Juan Mountains, tumbling over Bridal Veil Falls before it winds through the Telluride valley floor and red rock canyons to converge with the imperiled Dolores River. After a three-year effort working with partners on stream management planning, TNC is focusing on implementing projects to restore flows in critical areas of the river and improve infrastructure. These projects will benefit the people who depend on the river as well as native warmwater fish that rely on the San Miguel and its tributaries for spawning habitat.

"A lot of our work is centered on partnerships, and it's powerful to identify and build shared values with partners, then turn those shared values into on-the-ground conservation projects."

> -Mickey O'Hara, TNC's freshwater project director for southwest Colorado

#### **Upper San Juan Basin**

The San Juan River starts in the mountains near Pagosa Springs, joining many tributaries as it flows more than 300 miles to meet the Colorado River. TNC is building collaborative relationships with stakeholders to support this river basin. We provided critical bridge funding to the newly formalized Upper San Juan Watershed Enhancement Partnership, allowing the group to formalize and hire a full-time coordinator ahead of receiving significant federal funding secured by our partners at Trout Unlimited and the Town of Pagosa Springs. TNC is working alongside the Watershed Enhancement Partnership to pursue additional public funding for priority projects that will benefit both nature and people. Several of these projects are taking shape through this collaborative work, including two river restoration projects near Pagosa Springs.





#### Florida River Tribal Partnerships

The Florida River originates in the Weminuche Wilderness, flows down to the Lemon Reservoir near Durango, and eventually merges into the San Juan River. TNC is partnering with the Florida Consolidated Ditch Company to support both the health of the river and its water users. These efforts aim to restore stream flows and connectivity to the river through a combination of water transactions and infrastructure improvements. In the next year, TNC is supporting a retrofit of a 12-foot channel-spanning dam to improve passage for fish while increasing operational efficiency and safety.

#### **Tribal Partnerships**

Solutions will be more effective, durable, and equitable if shaped together with Tribal input. TNC Colorado has been partnering with Tribal Nations to explore water projects that benefit both nature and people.

This year, Lorelei Cloud, who is a member of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and a board member for TNC Colorado, was appointed to the Colorado Water Conservation Board as the first Tribal council member to serve in the position. She represents an area that covers the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute reservations, along with 10 counties in southwest Colorado.

This conservation work has a ripple effect throughout the Colorado River Basin. The benefits of these projects are shared by people around the region, and the impacts of river restoration and management flow downstream to the rest of the Colorado River and its tributaries.

### Momentum for a Greener Denver

Big changes are setting the stage for a more sustainable city.



A combination of efforts are gaining momentum to make progress for Denver to become a greener, more sustainable city. As the people of Denver elected a new mayor this summer, The Nature Conservancy led the creation of a policy platform that laid out environmental priorities for Denver's mayoral and city council candidates. The platform was signed by more than 30 organizations, and supporters include newly elected Mayor Mike Johnston and 11 city council members. It includes commitments related to air quality, climate, water, parks, food, compost and recycling, land use, and transit.

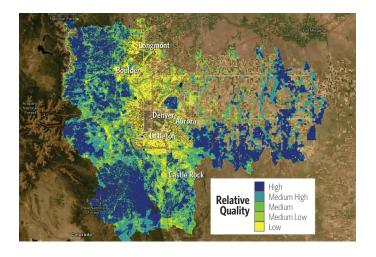
It's also an exciting time for urban forests and tree canopy. The federal government is investing \$1.5 billion in urban and community forestry projects. Denver is creating its first-ever urban forest strategic plan, which will establish a long-term vision and strategy for trees. We are continuing partnerships with organizations in the Globeville and Elyria-Swansea neighborhoods to create a model for community-led tree planting.



Two ballot measures TNC supported, the Parks Legacy Fund in 2018 and the Climate Protection Fund in 2020. are now yielding great results. Together, these funds are generating nearly \$100 million per year for parks and climate action in Denver. Thanks to the Parks Legacy Fund, Denver has been able to stay on top of its parks maintenance, making it one of a few cities in the country that is not falling behind.

Finally, we launched the Regional Conservation Assessment, which provides a vision for the seven-county metro Denver region. For two years, TNC has led land management and environmental experts in the development of a first-of-its-kind analysis of priority conservation opportunities in the region. We have been sharing the data with key partners like the Mile High Flood District, Denver Regional Council of Governments, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, who will integrate the results into their planning processes. We plan to launch demonstration projects that showcase how we can better protect and connect habitat and provide equitable access to nature.

These projects are positioning Denver to be a leader in creating an equitable, sustainable, and resilient city for all.





# Protecting the Southern High Plains

Grasslands and prairies are the world's most threatened and least protected habitat. That's why we are focusing on land conservation in the Southern High Plains, a 71-million-acre region at the intersection of five states: Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Together with Nature Conservancy leaders and partners in each state, we're accelerating conservation to boost climate resilience, preserve biodiversity, and support communities and livelihoods. This year, we had two big successes in southeast Colorado.

The 17,600-acre Wilson South Ranch is a piece of a larger conservation puzzle for shortgrass prairie. The ranch is in the historic range of the lesser prairie chicken, a vulnerable species threatened

by habitat conversion and fragmentation. TNC worked with the family that owns the ranch to place a conservation easement on the property, which will ensure intact wildlife habitat and connectivity with surrounding public lands.

Alongside the nonprofit organization Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, TNC Colorado helped conserve the 27,000-acre Delhi Ranch. The ranch connects the Comanche National Grasslands and a large area of protected lands that includes JE Canyon Ranch (conserved in 2015) and Bow and Arrow Ranch (conserved in 2018), and the Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site (a U.S. Army training site that emphasizes environmental protection). The area totals

nearly one million acres of intact grasslands under private, state, and federal ownerships. The ranch is a rare opportunity to conserve habitat connectivity for elk, mule deer, and several declining bird species, as well as to protect historic sites along the Santa Fe Trail.

These two projects showcase the power of partnerships to help make an impact in the Southern High Plains. Both ranches provide corridors for wildlife to move between grasslands, canyons, and mesas, and are part of an intact network of lands that support resilience in the face of a changing climate.

### Restoring Forests Across the West

TNC's Western Dry Forests and Fire Program works at a regional scale.



Fire does not stop at jurisdictional borders, and our work must not stop there either.



In Colorado, all 20 of the state's largest wildfires on record have occurred since 2001. Colorado is not alone in dealing with catastrophic wildfires. Severe fires have burned millions of acres a year across the West, devastating habitat, threatening water supplies, impacting air quality, and causing billions of dollars in damages to communities. We urgently need action to bring our forests back to health and reduce the impacts of extreme wildfires on our natural resources and communities.

Spanning nearly 150 million acres across 14 U.S. states, western dry forests—a forest type that experiences little annual rainfall and long dry seasons—are home to many threatened plants and animals. These forests store billions of tons of carbon, supply water to millions of people, and provide opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Western dry forests evolved with frequent cycles of fire that cleared out small trees and brush from the understory. But after a century of suppressing fires and excluding traditional Indigenous management, these landscapes are dangerously overgrown. These conditions, compounded by climate change, are resulting in unprecedented warm and dry conditions, leading to recent wildfires exploding into destructive, high-intensity blazes

#### Collaboration Across Borders

The Nature Conservancy's new Western Dry Forests and Fire Program aims to put 50 million acres of dry forests on a trajectory toward increased resilience by 2030 and restore the natural role of fire in our dry forests through collective, multi-state action. Across the West, TNC is working with Tribal partners, local communities, and agencies like the U.S. Forest Service to conduct ecological restoration—such as forest thinning and controlled burning—that matches local forest types and characteristics.

We know this work can prevent high-severity wildfires, but the current pace and scale of restoration will not achieve the outcomes we need. We must work smarter. faster, and at bigger scales to have a positive impact that meets the size of the challenge. One way to achieve this needed impact is by partnering with Indigenous Peoples to support the restoration of their traditional uses of fire to manage forests and maintain cultural values.

In Colorado, TNC is part of several local collaboratives. such as the Northern Colorado Fireshed Collaborative. Alongside a network of individuals and organizations representing a broad range of perspectives, expertise, experiences, and capacities, we are working together to



increase the frequency and area of prescribed fire in northern Colorado, from the Wyoming border through the Clear Creek Watershed and west through Grand County.

With this group, we conduct analysis, planning and outreach to facilitate management of wildfires for ecological benefit when conditions allow. We are working to increase local capacity for prescribed fire and treat 20% of strategic priority areas using a combination of mechanical, manual, and prescribed fire treatments.

We also partnered with the Aspen Institute to publish the Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience to advance a more strategic and coordinated approach to wildfire resilience policy and legislation. This report came out of a series of workshops that sought input from all levels of government, Tribal Nations, the private sector, fire-prone communities, philanthropists, academics and other stakeholders. It makes it clear that a paradigm shift will require long-term, strategic and cross-sector coordination. We can use this Roadmap to approach wildfire resilience

in a way that addresses climate change, promotes ecosystem health, advances economic recovery and supports historically underserved and excluded communities.

Fire does not stop at jurisdictional borders, and our work must not stop there either. Working collectively as a region, we can maximize our partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, inform decision-makers, and accelerate restoration across lands to benefit water, wildlife and communities.



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#### A LEGACY OF IMPACT



What does it mean to leave a legacy? For Diane Reeder and Dr. Richard Heppe, it's about making an impact beyond your lifetime. "My husband and I try to be good stewards of the world around us. When we're no longer here, we want to leave something that will continue working toward our goals," says Diane.

Diane and Richard are part of TNC's Legacy Club. This means they have named TNC a beneficiary of their estate plans or made other long-term gifts to TNC.

Diane inherited a deep love for nature from her mother. As she explains it, "My mother always loved nature and knowing the names of all things living. Beginning from a very early age, she taught my sister and me the names and importance of plants and animals in the intricate web of nature."

She sees TNC as an "outstanding, ethical shepherd of our world and environment." With TNC's approach of building lasting relationships and strategically evolving over time, she feels confident that TNC will have the global impact she wants to see in the world.

The Legacy Club is a way to make a difference long into the future. Diane says, "Your generosity will make a difference. Being a Legacy Donor is very fulfilling as you know that you are going to leave something behind that will help to support a global organization that has a far-reaching impact."

#### TO PLAN YOUR CONSERVATION LEGACY

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Diane Reeder and Dr. Richard Heppe exploring Colorado © Photo courtesy of Diane Reeder