THE CONSERVATOR

WINTER 2025

Colorado Association of Conservation Districts

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Winter, 2025

Letter from the President

Dear Conservation Districts, Watershed Groups, and Valued Partners,

Over the past year, our conservation community has navigated a period of significant change and uncertainty. Shifts in federal partner staffing, evolving program delivery, and adjustments to funding sources have presented real challenges across Colorado. Yet through it all, I have been continually impressed—and deeply encouraged—by the resilience, adaptability, and commitment demonstrated by our conservation districts and partners.

At the local level, districts have remained steadfast in their mission, continuing to provide critical support to producers and landowners. Whether it's helping implement conservation practices, navigating program changes, or simply being a trusted, on-the-ground resource, your work ensures that conservation in Colorado remains strong, relevant, and locally led. This dedication does not go unnoticed, and it is the foundation of our collective success.

I also want to recognize the outstanding efforts of our watershed groups across the state. Your leadership in strategic planning and watershed project implementation is advancing meaningful, landscape-scale conservation. These efforts not only address immediate resource concerns but also build long-term resilience in our watersheds, benefiting communities, agriculture, and natural resources alike.

To our partners—NRCS, FSA, CSCB, and many others—thank you for your continued collaboration and support. While this past year has brought its share of challenges, it has also reinforced the importance of strong partnerships. Your willingness to adapt, communicate, and work alongside districts and CACD has been essential in maintaining momentum and delivering conservation outcomes across Colorado.

As we look ahead, I am confident that the strength of our relationships and the shared commitment to conservation will carry us forward. Together, we will continue to meet challenges head-on, support our local communities, and advance the stewardship of Colorado's natural resources.

On behalf of the CACD Board of Directors, thank you for your dedication, your partnership, and your unwavering commitment to conservation.

Sincerely,
Tyler Neely
President
Colorado Association of Conservation Districts

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Bookcliff, South Side & Mount Sopris Districts

Irrigation Cost Share

The Bookcliff, South Side, and Mount Sopris Conservation Districts have jointly offered an Irrigation Cost Share program to landowners across the three districts since 2010. Through this program, $470,700 has been reimbursed to landowners for irrigation infrastructure improvements in Garfield County, leveraging an estimated $2.5 million in completed work and supporting more than 80 landowners.

The program was originally designed to fill a gap in local funding for small-scale irrigation projects. Over time, it has grown in both reach and impact. They now regularly receive applications for larger projects, and have leveraged CSCB matching grants and other funding sources to grow the program and complete more projects. These projects deliver measurable benefits to agricultural production, soil health, downstream water users, wildlife habitat, and the surrounding communities.

Article written: Emily Schwaller

Some of the cost share projects include headgate installation, diversion structures, big guns, measuring devices, piping, wobbler micro-Irrigation system

Shavano's Riparian Trailer and Water Expo

Bringing Riparian Science to Life: A New Trailer for Interactive Education

A new educational riparian trailer was unveiled for the first time in May during the 4th Grade Natural Resource Festival in Montrose, CO.

Designed as a mobile, hands-on teaching tool, the trailer demonstrates watershed processes, including erosion, sediment transport, stream meandering, and the role of vegetation in stabilizing streambanks.

Similar to most Riparian Trailers, it has a shallow pan on top that contains composite sand, into which water is pumped from a reservoir underneath. Unique features of the trailer include a solar panel that powers a battery-operated water pump, allowing for sustainable, off-grid operation.

During its debut, over 250 students from Olathe, Montrose, Ridgway, Ouray, and Nucla engaged with interactive simulations, observing how water flow shapes stream channels and experimenting with techniques to reduce erosion using model vegetation and natural materials. The trailer effectively translated complex hydrological concepts into accessible, visual lessons, sparking curiosity and thoughtful discussion among students. Based on this initial success, the program team is now developing supplemental lesson plans to enhance future outreach efforts .

Article from Penny Bishop and Mendy Stewart, Shavano CD

West Slope Water Summit and Western Colorado Farm and Ranch Innovation Expo SAVE THE DATE, November 13–14, 2026

West Slope Water Summit

Now in its 7th year, the West Slope Water Summit, presented by Montrose County, brings together water professionals, landowners, policymakers, and researchers to address Western Colorado's most pressing water issues. Organized in partnership with Uncompahgre Water Users Association and the Colorado River District, this year's program will feature sessions on drought planning, water policy updates, infrastructure, and the importance of regional and West Slope collaboration.

Western Colorado Farm & Ranch Innovation Expo

Following its launch in 2024, the Innovation Expo returns with a focus on practical solutions, ag technology, water saving tools, increasing water carrying capacity in soil, livestock and forage management, and regenerative agriculture. This year's event expands its offerings with more hands-on demonstrations, interactive workshops, and regional exhibitors. The Expo is supported by the Western Colorado Soil Health Committee, Shavano Conservation District, and CSU Extension, among others.

Districts Deliver Master Irrigator Programs

Delta- Mesa Master Irrigator Program

In 2025, the Delta-Mesa Colorado Master Irrigator Program successfully launched its inaugural cohort. Following the model of the highly successful Colorado Master Irrigator, the program graduated 25 producers trained in advanced irrigation efficiency and integrated water management across the Colorado and Gunnison River Basins.

Specifically designed to address the unique challenges and opportunities of Western Colorado agriculture, the program was developed under the guidance of a 12-member Program Advisory Committee. The committee included local producers, representatives agricultural support agencies, and staff and supervisors from the Mesa and Delta Conservation Districts.

Participants heard 35 technical presentations and four expert panels on irrigation innovation, water law and policy, farm economics, soil and plant health, and agricultural behavioral health. Each program cohort of 25 will receive up to $65,000 in direct support for on-farm improvements and benefit from three years of post-graduation technical assistance and

"This has made me a more confident producer!" -Program Participant

data-informed decision-making. The program's first year achieved a 96% graduation rate, with participants reporting a deeper understanding of local hydrology, increased use of moisture-monitoring technologies, and greater confidence in implementing deficit irrigation strategies.

Notably, graduates have formed a strong peer-to-peer network, and nine have continued their involvement on the 2026 Program Advisory Committee. Mesa and Delta Conservation Districts are proud to continue providing this vital program in support of long-term agricultural resilience and success in our region.

Submitted by Holly Stanley Mesa CD

Arkansas Valley Program

The Arkansas River Valley continually faces water challenges due to drought, below-average snowpack, malfunctioning irrigation infrastructure, and difficulties within irrigation ditch companies, as well as municipal pressure for water use. In January 2025, the Pueblo County Conservation District (SPCCD) partnered with the Pueblo County CSU Extension office and Colorado Master Irrigator to produce the Colorado Master Irrigator Program Arkansas Valley edition. Twenty-five participant farmers and ranchers heard from thirty different speakers, ranging from academic experts in the field, private irrigation companies, and farmers who have implemented irrigation efficiencies.

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Arkansas Valley continued..

Participants had the opportunity to engage in more in-depth discussions and learn about the history of irrigation in the valley, as well as multiple aspects of water law, particularly those related to the area (CO/KS Compact), and various options for improving irrigation systems. Participants were supplied with a variety of materials to take with them and a stipend for attending all four days of the course. They completed multiple surveys throughout the program and will continue to complete surveys at the end of each irrigation season. The information gained from the surveys will help gauge increases in water use efficiency and inform future classes on the education topics needed. The CO Master Irrigator Program will bring much-needed and wanted water use improvement and education to the Arkansas River Valley. Ninety percent of program surveys indicated an increase in knowledge and a desire to improve water use. SPCCD hopes to offer this program in the coming years.

Submitted by South Pueblo County CD

The Colorado Master Irrigator Program is a comprehensive educational course designed for producers who utilize Colorado's waters to irrigate their crops. This statewide program is hosted throughout each area and offers programming tailored to the local watershed. The goal of this 4-part program is to equip producers with the knowledge they need to determine best practices for irrigating in their specific regions, thereby improving water and energy use efficiency and conservation, as well as enhancing soil health and profitability on their operations.

SAVE THE DATES

Camp Rocky Registration Open

Camp Rocky is week-long residential camp for 14 to 19 year-olds to experience the best of a traditional summer camp, while also learning about natural resource careers. The 2026 camp will occur **July 5th-10th** in Divide, Colorado. More information can be found at https://www.camprocky.org/

CACD Annual Meeting!

The CACD Annual Business Meeting is tentatively scheduled for November 10-12, 2026. The location is to be determined and will be announced at a later date. We invite all Conservation Districts to either attend or send a proxy.

Understanding Return Flows:
A New Study on the White River

Written by: Liz Chandler

The White River Integrated Water Initiative—led by the White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts—is conducting a vital Return Flow Study focused on the middle reach of the White River. This collaborative effort aims to better understand how water applied to the land for irrigation makes its way back to the river—where it returns, when it returns, and how much of it comes back.

In an area where agriculture and aquatic ecosystems rely on the same finite water supply, answering these questions is critical. The purpose of the study is to provide reliable, science-based information to empower landowners, water managers, and decision-makers to assess the effects of water use and make informed plans for the river's long-term sustainability.

The study has partnered with Dr. Ryan Bailey, Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Colorado State University, who developed a groundwater model that traces how water moves from flood irrigation into the soil and ultimately back to the White River as return flows. The role of the Initiative is to collect data to verify the model's accuracy and fine-tune it for real-world conditions.

For more information on the White River Integrated Water Initiative, please contact the White River or Douglas Creek Conservation Districts. 970-878-9838

So far, the model has performed well—it accurately represents how water moves through the system and is being used to simulate potential future scenarios. These scenario simulations help evaluate how changes in water management—such as switching irrigation methods or reducing diversion volumes—affect river flows, which in turn can inform decisions about the river's future management.

A key result from the model is that approximately 80% of the water diverted for irrigation returns to the White River becoming measurable by July. Importantly, these flows are not just a mathematical curiosity—they are essential to the health of the river. From July through September, return flows account for roughly 75% of the total river volume, providing much-needed water during the driest and hottest time of year.

While flood irrigation does reduce river flows in the spring and early summer, the return flows later restore river volume and lower water temperatures in late summer, fall, and winter. This natural "retiming" of water flows benefits the river during critical low-flow periods, supporting aquatic species and the overall ecosystem health.

This Return Flow Study is a powerful example of how sound science and local collaboration can produce tools for informed decision-making. As we face increasing demands on our water resources, the insights from this study will help our community develop balanced solutions that support both agricultural sustainability and healthy river systems.