LANDSCAPES
Wild Connections
FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE PRAIRIES
December 2025

Wild Connections staff, board members and volunteers raking 39 Mile Mountain roadless area as part of the July 2025 restoration project. Photo: Dillon Eldridge

Moving Past the Government Shutdown

by John Sztukowski

The recent government shutdown, the longest in our history, caused turbulence across the federal government, including for our public lands agencies. Negative impacts on our public lands were primarily due to mass furloughs of agency staff, which led to an increase in damage and illegal activities, lack of maintenance, and postponing planned prescribed burns in this timely season. This is to say nothing of the economic impacts to surrounding communities.

We are happy to see our land management partners at the federal agencies back at work and collecting paychecks. However, it sounds like some of our local furloughed federal employees did not come back, seeking more stable employment. At the onset of the shutdown, some of our local partners expressed concern that firings would follow furloughs, despite the illegality of it. Even with the government back online, there are still many National Park Service workers, including in Colorado, that have not received their back pay.

Despite the month-and-a-half long government shutdown, the federal government still moved forward with attacks on our public lands. The proposed rescissions of the 2001 Forest Service Roadless Rule and 2024 BLM Public Lands Rule continued to move forward behind the scenes by staff that were not furloughed. Also, during the shutdown, the Trump administration nominated former New Mexico Congressman Steve Pearce to lead the BLM. Pearce is highly unqualified and cozied up with the drilling and fracking industries. He has steadfastly opposed conservation designations, and, most alarmingly, has repeatedly tried to sell off our public lands!

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Wild Connections
Protecting wildlands since 1995

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Mission: Wild Connections, a science-based conservation organization, works to identify, protect, and restore lands of the Upper Arkansas and South Platte watersheds to ensure the survival of native species and ecological richness.

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Standing Strong Today to Protect Public Lands

President's Message

by Jim Lockhart

The year 2025 marks the 30th year of Wild Connections' existence as an organization. It has been a year of unusual challenges which we expect will continue in 2026. The tasks before us have never been greater. Our mission is the subject of this "Landscapes" issue: to join with other environmental organizations – and with the support of the vast majority of the American public – to keep public lands in public hands. We will not surrender our lands to private owners or special interests to exploit for single-purpose, short-term economic gain. We work to protect wildlands on a landscape-wide basis. We are uniquely suited to send the message that we must prevent not only a wholesale giveaway of our heritage, but also the fragmentation of our public lands by the kind of selective, here-and-there, bits-and-pieces surrender that is currently being proposed.

In the last issue of Landscapes, I noted the highlights of our 30 years as an organization, such as our creation of the Wild Connections Conservation Plan, and our many contributions of both data and advocacy to major public lands planning decisions. It is equally important to note our regular year-to-year activities, such as: conducting restoration projects; leading hikes; providing public information through events, webinars, newsletters, and "Landscapes"; and encouraging people to speak out for protection of public lands. Here too, we bring a unique perspective by our focus on promoting large landscape connectivity and the protection of natural migration corridors.

President Jim Lockhart at Red Rocks Open Space. Photo: Shane Rosenthal

As always, we reach out to you, our volunteers and supporters, at this time of year. You make our work possible through your generosity in giving both time and money to our cause. In looking over our activist lists, I have been deeply impressed with how long those lists are. So many of you have contributed so much, in so many ways, and have done so for a very long time. These contributions of time, money, and effort are the key to making us an effective organization. We cannot thank you often enough.

President Jim Lockhart leading a hike at Thirty-One Mile Mountain roadless area. Photo: India West

In this issue, we also note with great sadness the passing of our founder, Jean Smith. For all our thirty years, Jean was the heart and inspiration of Wild Connections.

No one gave more or contributed in so many ways or did so longer or with more wholehearted devotion. We truly cannot honor her as often or as much as she deserves.

Read more about Jean's incredible legacy on page 4

You have made these 30 years a success—let's keep the momentum going

Over the past three decades, you've helped protect Colorado's wildlands through your volunteer hours, partnership, and generous donations. In these times of accelerating climate change and mounting pressures on our wildlands, Wild Connections will continue to help people like you learn about and take action to protect our public lands.

We continue to plan future hikes, events, and restoration projects in support of our long-term vision of a network of protected and connected wildlands in central Colorado, from the mountains to the prairies. We need your financial help now more than ever to address today's conservation challenges - from protecting designated wilderness areas to restoring critical habitats and identifying climate refuges that will serve as nature's lifeboats in a warming world.

The "Give!" campaign runs through January 3rd. Donate at "Give!" and get rewarded for your generosity! "Give!" is a year-end philanthropic initiative in the Pikes Peak Region that specializes in raising awareness of smaller organizations. You can find Wild Connections in the Big Ideas section on givepikespeak.org.

Scan the QR code to make a gift to Wild Connections through Give! Last day to give is January 3rd! https://campaign.givepikespeak.org/nonprofit/wild-connections/

Scan the QR code to make a gift to Wild Connections through the Colorado Gives Foundation https://www.coloradogives.org/organization/WildConnections

To send a check use the address below- Please direct any gifts made through your DAF to -
WILD CONNECTIONS
PO BOX 3061
COLORADO SPGS, CO 80934-3061

***Join Wild Connections' board and make tangible conservation impact**—from protecting and connecting critical wildlife habitats to leading educational hikes that inspire community action to save our public lands - use your skills to protect Central Colorado's wildlife.*
For more information contact Jim Lockhart at jim@wildconnections.org.

Wild Connections' India West and volunteers seeding and raking in an illegal route into the Forest Service Puma Hills Roadless Area in South Park at our 2024 volunteer restoration project. Our Fall 2025 Puma Hills Restoration Project, just North of this site, was postponed due to the shutdown and new agency guidance forbidding volunteer projects on public lands during a shutdown. We are now planning to host this project in the Spring of 2026 with our partners at the USFS South Park Ranger District.
Photo: Shane Rosenthal

Moving Past the Government Shutdown

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The recent shutdown has affected Wild Connections' public lands work as well. Our October 4, 2025 restoration project with the FS South Park Ranger District was postponed. We had contingency plans to move forward with the project despite the shutdown as we have in years past. However, on October 1, the Forest Service received new guidance explicitly forbidding volunteer projects on public lands during a shutdown. If it had been a short shutdown, we would have been able to reschedule the project in November 2025. However, given that it was the longest shutdown in history, at 43 days, we had to postpone the project until next year.

Also, given the shutdown, we had to postpone meetings and site visits with our agency partners for planning future projects. Similarly, our Outstanding Waters outreach with the federal agencies was delayed. Now that some of our partners are back, there is dire lack of staff and resources for our public lands managers. This most damning result of the shutdown is a direct consequence of this administration's tactical assault on its own government during this past year. At a recent meeting, one of our federal partners candidly stated that with all the lost staff this year, they cannot take on any new projects or proposals and are just doing their best to hold on.

So, as we look to 2026 and beyond, it is more important than ever that organizations like Wild Connections, and committed public lands stewards like you, step up to assist our public lands partners. Together, we must fill in the gaps to protect our public lands and waters, and their inhabitants, so that wild nature can continue to survive and thrive.

Bighorn Sheep Canyon along the Arkansas River is predominantly made up of intact BLM managed public lands. On the horizon lies the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and Wilderness, public lands managed by the US Forest Service. These and other public lands are under threat from rollbacks and attacks under the current administration.
Photo: EcoFlight

The Little Organization Jean Built

The Outsized Influence of Wild Connections

by Alison Gallensky

Jean Smith sharing the history of conservation planning in Colorado with Alison in 2018. Photo:Neil Gallensky

I first met Jean Smith at a Sierra Club retreat over 30 years ago. Jean would soon go on to found the organization now known as Wild Connections. At that time, she was just starting to gather people to identify and map wild places. She gave a presentation at the retreat about the need to find the actual boundaries of roadless lands in the Pike and San Isabel National Forests in Central Colorado.

There was a relatively small crowd at that presentation. However, the word was spreading about this important project. Soon she gave a presentation to a packed auditorium in Golden, Colorado. This was followed by training sessions where we learned how to document the roads that bordered roadless areas in the forest. We were also learning about how Wilderness quality lands are defined by the federal land management agencies, and that conservation biology has shown connected networks of intact landscapes are essential to protect biodiversity.

I joined more than one hundred volunteer mappers, and we identified 1.2 million acres of roadless land. The Forest Service reviewed Wild Connections' inventory and added over 107,000 acres to their inventory as part of defining the 2012 Colorado Roadless Rule. Roadless lands protected in the Pike-San Isabel National Forest increased more than 16% as a result. In addition, Browns Canyon was designated as a National Monument in 2014, protecting lands that I inventoried in the late 1990s. Next, we turned our attention to Bureau of Land Management lands. Staff, interns, and volunteers mapped and documented Lands with Wilderness Characteristics. The Bureau reviewed this inventory and added 113,000 acres to their inventory. Lands with Wilderness Characteristics identified in the Bureau's Royal Gorge Field Office increased by more than 145% as a result. Based on advocacy by Wild Connections and partner organizations, the revised Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan (completed in 2024) significantly expanded conservation protections for about 300,000 acres. Wild Connections hasn't stopped at increasing protection for public lands. We have also worked to improve the quality of these places. We have managed and participated in restoration projects in over a dozen locations in our region. It is hard to see that there ever were roads in many of these areas. And locals have reported increases in deer and elk populations where we have worked.

I have been proud to be part of Wild Connections and to collaborate with Jean Smith and so many of you over the last 30 years. Wild Connections has truly had an outsized impact on public lands in Central Colorado. Wild Connections and Jean Smith have truly had an outsized impact on my life as well. Thank you to everyone who has made this possible. None of this would have happened without Jean.

Wild Connections was saddened to learn that Jean Smith passed away on the evening of November 28, 2025. You can learn more about the amazing things she accomplished during her 92 years in her obituary at https://www.newcomerdenver.com/obituaries/jean-smith

We would love to hear about your memories of Jean Smith and Wild Connections. Email info@wildconnections.org and send us photos, drawings, stories, poems, or anything that speaks of your interaction with us and our founder.