

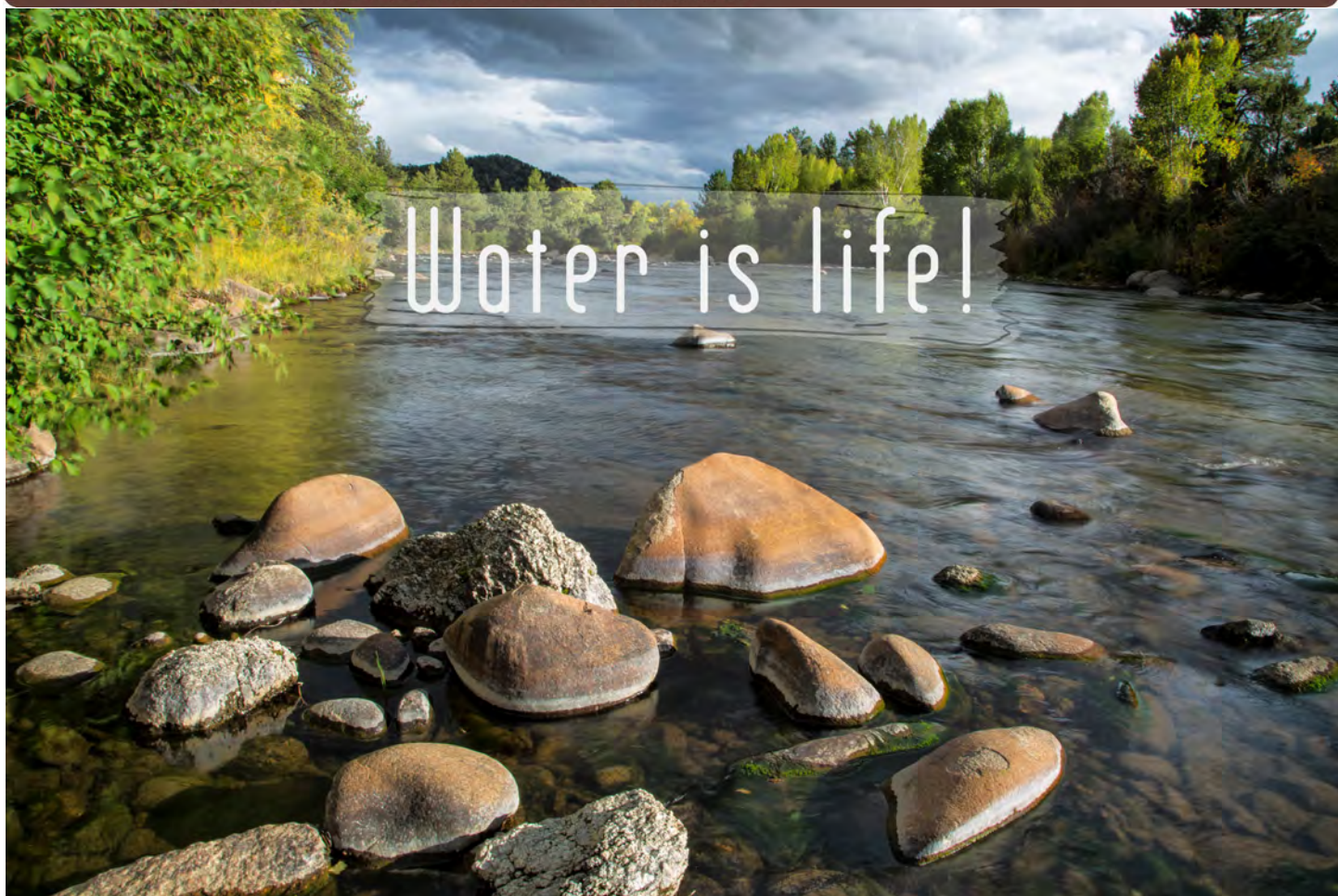


LANDSCAPES

Wild Connections

FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE PRAIRIES

Summer 2026



Arkansas River flowing through Browns Canyon National Monument. Photo: Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management (CC BY 2.0)

Working towards Outstanding Waters Designations in the Arkansas River Basin

by John Sztukowski

Last spring, Wild Connections helped form a coalition led by American Whitewater and Mountain Studies Institute to pursue Outstanding Waters (OW) designations in the Arkansas and Rio Grande basins. Wild Connections helped identify potential candidate streams within our region and we are currently conducting water-quality monitoring on several rivers and creeks, testing for 12 key water quality parameters, including pH, E. coli, dissolved oxygen, nutrients and metals.

Established under the Clean Water Act of 1970 and administered by the state, Outstanding Waters designation is the highest level of water-quality protection available in Colorado. It is reserved for streams, rivers, and other water bodies that possess exceptional water quality and significant ecological or recreational value. The designation prohibits new or increased pollution that would degrade existing water quality, while allowing current land uses and activities to continue indefinitely, provided they do not negatively affect water quality. An additional benefit is the protection of clean drinking water for local communities and downstream users.

The goal of the designation is simple: preserving Colorado's highest-quality waters for future generations. To qualify, a stream must meet rigorous water-quality standards supported by extensive scientific data collection. Under requirements established by the Colorado Water Quality Control Division, each candidate stream must be sampled during every season for two consecutive years, resulting in eight total sampling events. The designation process also includes community outreach, public hearings, and review by the Water Quality Control Commission (WQCC) of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), making roughly a three-year effort from start to finish.

Continued on page 3

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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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Protecting Waterways as Wild Connections

President's Message

by Jim Lockhart

Water is the focus of this issue of Landscapes. As I have noted in past comments, the “connections” which tie our ecosystem together include our lakes, rivers, and streams. They permit movement by aquatic species, but also create riparian corridors used by terrestrial wildlife. Like land-based wildlife corridors, they are often fragile links which can be harmed or severed by human activities, but which can also be protected and restored. With your help and support, we are working to identify “Outstanding Waters” which deserve the highest degree of protection which state law allows. We are supporting activities to bring beaver back to places where they once lived, which they enrich in many ways. By working to protect wilderness, wilderness study areas, and other areas of special environmental concern, as well as the integrity of our wildlands as a whole, we protect not only the land, but also the waters in these areas. The same is true of our efforts to document and identify ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change, which is in large part responsible for the drought which our state is presently experiencing. Water is the element that makes all life possible.

As we move on in the thirty-first year of our existence as an organization, we have not lessened our other efforts to protect the integrity of our ecosystem. Already this year we have done restoration projects to close abandoned travelways and to remove fencing that impedes wildlife movement – volunteer work that is more important than ever in light of federal staff and funding cutbacks. We are working with other environmental groups to advocate for public lands protections and to oppose short-sighted land use policies which are detrimental in both the near and the long term. We continue to lead hikes to areas of particular interest and to host virtual events highlighting various aspects of our wild world. We thank you for the support which has enabled us to carry on these activities.

2025 was a sad year for us, since we lost our founder, Jean Smith, whose contributions to Wild Connections cannot be overstated, and her daughter, Vickie Smith, who was also active with our organization. We thank all of you who have made donations in their memory, so that the work which they so ably supported can continue and the values which they treasured can go on being protected.



*President Jim Lockhart
Photo: Gerry Anderson*



*South Platte River at Wildcat Canyon, October 2019.
Photo: Jim Lockhart*

Colorado's Wild Places Are Counting On You

Wild Connections remains committed to protecting our wildlands and pursuing projects that make a difference—but we cannot do it without you. 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 urgent 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.

Your donation today ensures that the wild connections Jean Smith envisioned 30 years ago continue for generations to come. Whether you contribute \$50, \$100, or commit to a monthly gift, every dollar makes a tangible difference.



*Volunteers place slash on a decommissioned road at the April 2026 Puma Hills restoration project.
Photo: India West*



Scan this QR code to make a gift to Wild Connections or follow this link:

<https://www.coloradogives.org/organization/WildConnections>

To send a check use the address below.

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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.

Outstanding Waters

Continued from page 1

Wild Connections is focused primarily on securing Outstanding Waters designations for streams located within Forest Service-managed Wilderness Areas in our region. While streams in many Colorado Wilderness areas received Outstanding Waters protection in 1992, several Wilderness Areas within the Arkansas River Basin were designated afterward and remain among the few in the state without these important water-quality safeguards.

To address this gap, we are sampling representative streams within the Sangre de Cristo, Spanish Peaks, and Greenhorn Mountain Wilderness Areas. These include Stout Creek, Horn Creek, and the Huerfano River in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness; the South Fork of the Wahatoya Creek in the Spanish Peaks Wilderness; and Little Graneros Creek and Greenhorn Creek in the Greenhorn Mountain Wilderness. These representative streams are intended to support Outstanding Waters designation for all waters within their respective Wilderness Areas. We are also sampling Newlin Creek in the Wet Mountains, which supports the conservation of the Hayden Creek cutthroat trout—a rare native fish population relocated from Hayden Creek following the 2016 Hayden Pass Fire.

Our coalition partners are sampling an additional nine streams in the northern Arkansas River Basin and three streams in the Rio Grande Basin. Together, these waters will be bundled into a comprehensive Outstanding Waters proposal for consideration by the WQCC. To date, five of the required eight sampling rounds have been completed, with the remaining three scheduled over the coming year. The coalition anticipates bringing the proposal forward during the Commission's June 2027 rule-making process.

At a time when public lands and waters face increasing threats, permanently protecting Colorado's cleanest and most ecologically significant streams is more important than ever. Outstanding Waters designation provides a lasting safeguard against future degradation and helps ensure that these exceptional waters continue to support wildlife, recreation, clean drinking water and local communities for generations to come.



*Looking up the Huerfano River at its Outstanding Waters sampling location. September 3, 2025
Photo: John Sztukowski*

Drought!

by Alison Gallensky

Water is life! This year, in the Wild Connections region and beyond, water is a scarce commodity. According to Colorado State Climatologist Russ Schumacher, this water year, starting in October 2025, has been the warmest on record by a large margin statewide. "Mountain snowpack was — if we look at it kind of aggregated up over the whole state — was the worst that it's ever been since snowpack has been measured," Schumacher said.

Drought is impacting rivers and lakes in the Wild Connections region. One significant example: Denver Water is completely draining Antero Reservoir this year and moving the water to Cheeseman Reservoir where there is less evaporation. Antero Reservoir in South Park is Denver Water's first collection reservoir on the South Platte River. It is believed to be on the site of an ancient lakebed. When the reservoir is not drained, it has a rich ecosystem. It is one of the few lakes in Colorado where multiple trout species can thrive side by side. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is working to save some of the fish. Kyle Battige, CPW Senior Aquatic Biologist says they "hope to rebuild into a high-quality fishery once the reservoir is filled in the future." However, the reservoir was closed to public access and draining started May 13. Any remaining fish are unlikely to survive.

In addition, since the early 1970s, water from the Fryingpan River on the western slope of the Continental Divide has been imported into Turquoise Lake and Twin Lakes near Leadville through a series of tunnels. This year will be the only the second time in 54 years that none of the water from the Fryingpan River will be delivered. Recreation on the Arkansas River will be impacted. Outfitters are considering offering fewer trips using larger rafts and instead offering inflatable kayak trips and making other adjustments.

What does this drought year mean for the plants and animals Wild Connections works to protect? Healthy forests rely on snowpack for growth and seed production. Trees are more susceptible to insects and disease in drought conditions. Riparian habitats found near streams, ponds, and in marshy areas, are where wildlife thrive in our region. Drought reduces groundwater and surface water. This leads to crowding, competition, and disease transmission for fish and other aquatic species. Native cutthroat trout lose habitat when streams are warmer. Terrestrial wildlife and birds rely on plants in riparian areas for shade, food, and nesting. Mule deer fawns are more susceptible to parasites, diseases, and predation when vegetation is less available in drought years. Drought also increases the incidence of high-severity wildfires.

There are ways to help make the landscape more resilient to drought. Protecting lands with wilderness characteristics and roadless areas protects the riparian corridors that run through them. Removing routes through sensitive locations and restoring natural conditions are important for soil conservation. Wild Connections has identified areas that can serve as climate refugia which are especially important to protect and restore. Beaver reintroduction (and beaver dam analogs) can improve stream conditions by reducing gullying and increasing water storage. Wetlands created by beavers serve as natural fire breaks.

There is no direct connection between climate change and a single year of drought. Annual precipitation has been fairly consistent in Colorado over the last 30 years. However, average temperatures in Colorado have been increasing, and average snowpack has been decreasing over similar timeframes. These trends are expected to continue. Increased temperatures are expected to increase the frequency of droughts. These changes to Colorado's life-sustaining water supply make the work done by Wild Connections and our community of supporters more important than ever.



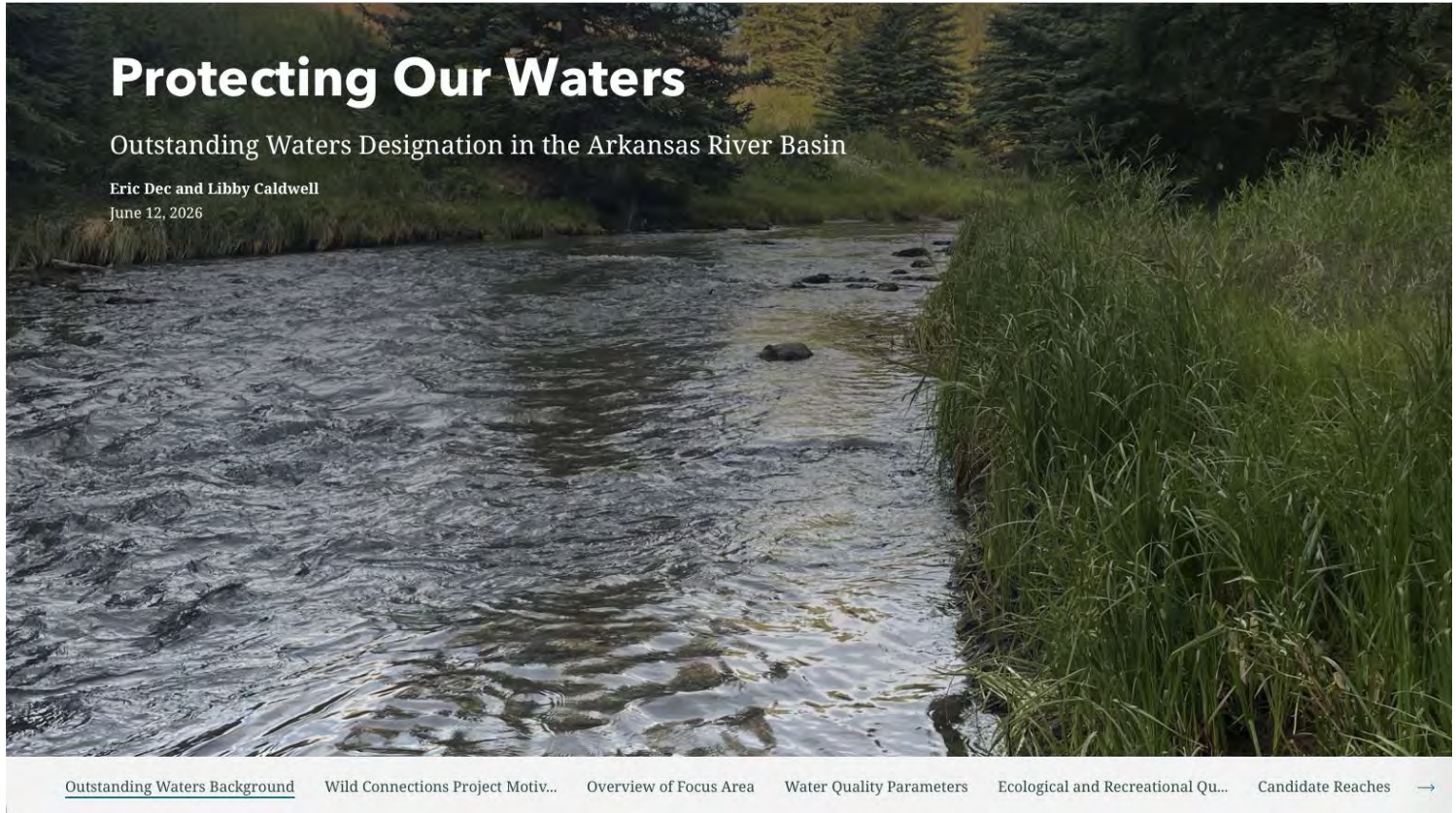
*Looking south up South Fork of the Wahatoya Creek, just south of Wahatoya Trail in June 2025.
Photo: John Sztukowski*



*Photo from the same location taken in May 2026. Spring runoff would have started by this time in a typical year
Photo: John Sztukowski*

Creating an Outstanding Waters Story Map for Wild Connections

by Eric Dec



StoryMaps are a great way to tell a place-based story using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) such as ArcGIS. I have been studying StoryMaps in my master's-level GIS class, so StoryMaps seemed an obvious choice to report findings from Wild Connections' Outstanding Waters (OW) project. Wild Connections' project goal is to earn Outstanding Waters designations for streams in the Upper Arkansas River Basin and Pike San Isabel National Forest.

Telling the Outstanding Waters story started by examining supporting materials. The Mountain Studies Institute (MSI), based in Durango, built a Story Map about Outstanding Waters in the Rio Grande Basin.

I also read the Outstanding Waters fact sheet provided by John Sztukowski, and reviewed the requirements for Outstanding Waters designation, such as water quality and ecological and recreational characteristics. Because the MSI project map included streams in the Rio Grande Basin, Wild Connections decided to create our own map that focused on the Upper Arkansas River Basin and the Pike San Isabel National Forest, which is Wild Connections' area of interest. We then looked at all existing streams in that area, which included streams that already had Outstanding Waters designations, and the candidate Outstanding Waters streams.

We were curious why some streams in wilderness areas were not candidates. Our analysis showed that many streams in the Holy Cross, Mount Massive, and Collegiate Peaks Wilderness Areas had already been designated as Outstanding Waters. Streams in the Buffalo Peaks Wilderness that were not on the candidate list had Colorado Department of Health and Environment (CDPHE) category 5 water quality ratings. A category 5 rating signifies that the body of water is not meeting state water quality standards, which is likely why they were left off the list of potential Outstanding Waters.

We also looked for risks that might harm each candidate stream's Outstanding Waters qualities. This included an analysis of human and climate risks like logging, grazing, mining, drought, fire, and existing discharge permits. This risk data was compared to existing sampling locations, and a few recommendations were made for new sampling sites.

Next, we located each stream on our map and reviewed images of the streams taken during Wild Connections' water quality sampling trips. It was important to look at the images to create a connection to the streams and their locations. For presentation purposes, the streams were geographically grouped. The southern group includes streams in the Sangre de Cristo, Spanish Peaks, and Greenhorn Mountain Wilderness Areas. The streams in the northern group are in the Pike San Isabel National Forest, but not in wilderness areas.

Our final analysis resulted in a preliminary list of candidate streams for future Wild Connections Outstanding Waters work in the South Platte River Basin. This included creating a map of all streams in the South Platte River Basin and in the Buffalo Peaks, Lost Creek, and Mt. Evans Wilderness Areas that do not currently have Outstanding Waters designations.

Eric has been a long-time volunteer for Wild Connections. His Outstanding Waters story map was recently finalized for Wild Connections and can be found at wildconnections.org/conservation/outstanding-waters

Protect Our Public Lands: What Happens in Browns Canyon Matters to All Americans

by John Sztukowski, Wild Connections, and Michael Kunkel, Friends of Browns Canyon

A version of this article appeared in the Mountain Mail newspaper dated July 5, 2026



Browns Canyon National Monument. Photo: Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management (CC BY 2.0)

Colorado's public lands belong to all of us. From Browns Canyon National Monument to the roadless forests and desert landscapes of the American West, these lands provide important wildlife habitat, clean air and water, abundant recreation opportunities, and economic benefits for communities.

They are held in trust for future generations and managed for multiple uses by all Americans. Yet the protections that safeguard these lands and their multiple-use mandate are under attack. Browns Canyon National Monument illustrates what's at stake. Our local national monument protects the nation's most popular whitewater destination, Gold Medal trout waters, critical big-game habitat, priceless cultural resources, and a treasured landscape.

But just last year, Browns Canyon landed on a federal list created under an executive order to review the boundaries of several national monuments. This review could result in downsizing or even eliminating these national monuments.

At the same time, broader attacks on public lands are unfolding across the country. One of the most worrisome examples is the recent repeal of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Public Lands Rule. Adopted after extensive public input, the rule recognized that conservation, recreation, local communities, environmental restoration, and cultural resource protection are legitimate uses of public lands alongside commercial and industrial uses.

More than 130,000 public comments were submitted responding to the repeal, with 98% supporting the rule. Its repeal tips the scales in favor of private and corporate interests at the expense of public interests – wildlife, public access, recreation, and conservation values that enjoy broad support across the USA.

Continued on Page 7

Protect Our Public Land

Continued from page 6

Other proposals would undo years of collaborative public-land planning. Congressman Jeff Hurd's Productive Public Lands Act would overturn several Bureau of Land Management plans, including Colorado's Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan. This plan just finalized in 2024 after a 10-year effort involving local communities and stakeholders, including in Chaffee County. The plan protects roughly 300,000 acres of public lands and 60 miles of rivers, comprised primarily of the Arkansas River and intact public lands along it, while maintaining multiple-use management.

Efforts are also underway to rescind the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which has protected 45 million acres of pristine national forest lands since 2001. These roadless areas protect biodiversity, clean water, clean air, hunting and fishing opportunities, and backcountry recreation. Despite claims that more roads are needed for wildfire management, the exact opposite is true. Extensive data shows that 90% of all wildfires start within half a mile of a road.

More than 620,000 public comments were submitted last year after the Roadless Rule rescission was announced. More than 99% of those comments opposed rescinding the rule. In the face of overwhelming support for the rule, Sen. Mike Lee of Utah is still attempting to bypass the established rulemaking process by adding the Roadless Rule Nullification rider to the Wildfire Prevention Act, which has advanced to the Senate floor.

Meanwhile, federal land-management agencies are being weakened through staffing cuts and organizational upheaval. These impacts are already being felt locally. Browns Canyon National Monument recently lost both its longtime BLM and U.S. Forest Service managers. Across the country, all Forest Service regional offices are being eliminated along with 75% of the agency's research facilities.

This creates a dangerous cycle. Gut land-management agencies, thereby reducing their ability to manage public lands effectively; then, point to ineffective management as justification for transferring or selling public lands. During debate over a federal budget reconciliation package last year, Senate Republicans championed a rider to sell 3 million acres of federal public lands. The proposal was removed following fierce pushback from over 100 environmental, outdoor recreation and hunting and fishing organizations. This threat demonstrated how quickly long-standing safeguards to our public lands can be undermined.

Public lands were never intended to serve a single interest. They are meant to balance multiple values: recreation, wildlife, clean air and water, cultural and historic resources, grazing, resource development, and local economies. While reasonable people may disagree about where that balance should be struck, most Americans agree that public lands should remain public. Browns Canyon National Monument exists today because local citizens, businesses, sportsmen, conservationists, and elected officials came together around a shared vision. That same spirit is needed now.

The future of Browns Canyon—and public lands across the West—depends on citizens speaking up and reminding decision-makers that these lands belong to all Americans. Once public lands are sold and fragmented, the ecosystems they protect will be lost or seriously diminished. We owe future generations the same opportunity to experience free-flowing rivers, healthy wildlife populations, and inspiring landscapes that previous generations protected for us. The time to defend our public lands is now.



Webpage describing the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Public Lands Rule (officially known as the Conservation & Landscape Health Rule) before it was repealed. Image from archive.org captured May 8, 2026.



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Table of Contents

Page 1, 3	Working towards Outstanding Waters Designations in the Arkansas River Basin
Page 2	President's Message
Page 3	You have made these 30 years a success—let's keep the momentum going
Page 4	Drought!
Page 5	Creating an Outstanding Waters Story Map for Wild Connections
Page 6-7	Protect Our Public Lands: What Happens in Browns Canyon Matters to All Americans

*Green Mountain Meadow after restoration.
Photo: Lee Patton*