

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: preserve 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 it a roughly three-year effort from start to finish.

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 protections 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.