

Watershed Stewardship Plan Executive Summary

The LFVC has completed the first draft of our Watershed Stewardship Plan and we are seeking input from the community and interested parties to guide our efforts for the next ten years. The purpose of this executive summary is to provide an overview of this draft Plan in order to generate feedback which will be incorporated into the final Plan. This document will be revisited on an annual basis, ensuring that our goals are in line with the needs of the community and environment.

Background of the Watershed Stewardship Plan

Newsletter Contents:

- Background of the Watershed Stewardship Plan
- Summary of Issues Including Objectives
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Our Vision:

The Lake Fork of the Gunnison River drainage is to be a healthy watershed that is defined by a balance of resource conservation, economic opportunity, recreational activities and community values. The health of the watershed will be sustained, protected and improved by a broad-based partnership of an educated citizenry, nonprofit groups and governmental entities.

Our Mission:

The Lake Fork Valley Conservancy seeks to sustain and enhance the environmental and rural character of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River valley through education, restoration and stewardship.

What is a Watershed?

A watershed is an area of land where all the water drains to one point. In our watershed, this point is where the Lake Fork drains into Blue Mesa Reservoir on the Gunnison River in western Colorado, and is fed by numerous tributaries, most notably Henson Creek.

Why a Watershed Approach?

A watershed is the ideal unit for management, intertwining all the elements of culture and landscape. As so aptly stated by John Wesley Powell, "[a watershed is] that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demand that they become part of a community." A healthy watershed provides

a sustainable economic base, protects community and cultural values, and sustains ecological integrity. The LFVC's planning process provides the opportunity for citizens and stakeholder groups to create a common vision for our watershed's future. The development of partnerships and collaboration among the various levels of government, community organizations, interested public, and other stakeholders is vital to the success of protecting the watershed.

Purpose and Use of the Watershed Stewardship Plan

The Lake Fork Watershed Stewardship Plan is a dynamic, strategic document with the purpose of guiding decision making by stakeholders living within and managing the resources of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River watershed over

a ten year time frame. The Plan provides an overview of the watershed's natural resources and ecological zones, demographics and cultural and historic resources, identifies and describes threats to the resources in the watershed, contains time-based objectives to address resource issues, and provides programmatic and organizational strategies for attaining our proposed outcomes through a collaborative process. It is not intended to be a regulatory document.



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Key Issue: Mining Impacts and Water Quality

Historic mining contributes to the cultural heritage of the area, and is part of the unique character and tourism draw of the watershed. Acid mine drainage and leaching from waste piles from abandoned mines cause heavy metals and sedimentation problems in streams, impacting water quality and severely depressing biological productivity.

Water quality standards set by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment help to support aquatic life, recreation, and drinking water uses (where feasible). These

standards are exceeded in both Henson Creek and the upper Lake Fork, due to a mix of both mining impacts and natural mineralization.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Improve water quality and prevent further degradation.
- Protect areas high in natural, cultural and historic values that would be sensitive to mining impacts.

Key Issue: Development Impacts

The term “development” incorporates residential and commercial, as well as supporting infrastructure, such as roads, water and sewer systems, fences, and utility access. Development is vital to the local economy in that it generates jobs, property tax revenues and consumers for local businesses.

With the Lake Fork drainage comprising predominantly public land, the characteristics of the Lake Fork valley presents a unique and positive opportunity to develop the river corridor in an aesthetically and ecologically sound manner. The majority of current development is along the Lake Fork, impacting riparian areas through the conversion of native riparian forests and wetlands into homes, infrastructure, pastures and lawns. Potentially, development may place constraints on water usage, fragment and decrease

key wildlife and fish habitat, increase erosion, disrupt the ecological fire regime of the forests, and increase the spread of invasive weeds. Potential pollutants from development may include septic leachates, pesticides, sediments, and organics.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Advocate and encourage land use planning and zoning regulations promoting aesthetic development that maintains the cultural and natural values of the Lake Fork watershed.
- Promote restoration of key reaches of the Lake Fork to enhance and protect riparian habitat, while respecting private property rights and uses.
- Advocate and facilitate the conservation of private lands.

Key Issue: Altered Hydrologic Regime

The Colorado River Basin is experiencing the impacts of global climate change and there is growing concern that there could be an increase in demand for Upper Gunnison basin water, including the Lake Fork. Consequently, the Town of Lake City and Hinsdale County plan to put a water release control structure at the outlet of Lake San Cristobal and claim the water rights to the upper 1000 acre-feet of water. This water would then be held in reserve for use in times when the lower Colorado Basin states would make an upstream call on water, forcing water users in the Lake Fork to shut down their wells and irrigation ditches.

Fluctuation of water storage in the lake could have potential impact on fish and riparian habitat below the lake, as well as

wetlands at the lake’s inlet, depending on how the lake level is managed after construction.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Raise awareness of the need for water conservation in the valley.
- Advocate for effective land use planning to maintain in-stream flows in rivers that protect the wetlands, riparian areas, fisheries, aesthetics, and economic and cultural values.
- Provide recommendations so that Lake San Cristobal water levels are managed to protect or enhance fisheries and riparian habitat.

Key Issue: Recreation

Recreation-based tourism is the lifeblood of the local economy, especially in Hinsdale County where traditional mining, forestry, hunting and agriculture-based employment has significantly declined. The tax dollars and income generated are critical for local government budgets and services. Tourism directly creates jobs, primarily in the construction service and retail sectors.

Recreational use of the watershed has been steadily increasing and shifting away from traditional hiking, fishing, hunting and camping to more high impact motorized tourism, including ATVs, off-road motorcycles and SUVs. Increasing motorized recreation, especially if improperly managed, potentially causes erosion, disturbances of stream-flow and sedimentation, excessive dust, and transport of non-native weeds into the backcountry.

Another concern with increasing recreation is the loss of solitude, an important cultural value for backcountry users, especially for year-round residents who live here because of the area’s remoteness and isolation. There is a limit to the number of users that can be sustained without threatening both the health of the watershed and the recreational experience of the users themselves.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Increase awareness of residents, business owners, and tourists of recreation impacts and benefits of sustainable tourism.
- Advocate effective tourism planning to maintain the cultural and natural integrity of the watershed.

Key Issue: Invasive Plants

Invasive plants can pose a threat to native plant communities, wildlife, land and recreation values, soil stability and water quality, and the productivity and integrity of agricultural lands and adjacent public lands. They typically are aggressive invaders, they can be poisonous to livestock, they can be carriers of detrimental insects, diseases, or parasites, and their presence negatively affects environmentally sound management of natural or agricultural ecosystems.

There are four invasive plant species that have become a major concern in the Lake Fork watershed and have been identified as “noxious weeds” by the Colorado Noxious Weed Act;

Yellow toadflax (butter and eggs), Canada thistle, Oxeye daisy and Downy brome (cheatgrass).

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Raise awareness about noxious weeds and integrated pest management practices including prevention and control.
- Encourage proper management of noxious weeds in order to protect and enhance residential and agricultural properties, native plant communities, wildlife habitat, and watersheds thus preventing adverse economic and ecological impacts species both locally and downstream.

Key Issue: Non-Native Aquatic Species

Some non-native aquatic species, especially brook, rainbow and brown trout, provide fishing opportunities in waters where native trout do not exist. These species may also fill an important role where native cutthroat trout once survived but are now absent. There is a risk however to introducing new species to our watershed. Introduced species of trout may displace native species, compromising ecosystem diversity. Parasites such as *Myxobolus cerebralis* (which causes whirling disease) and aquatic nuisance species (ANS) such as zebra mussels, and New Zealand Mudsnails have no apparent benefit to the watershed. Non-native species may have no natural controls and prove devastating to

trout reproduction and survival, ultimately degrading the quality of the fishery and negatively impacting the recreational economy.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Where practical, encourage reintroduction of native cutthroat trout to appropriate habitat within their historic range.
- Raise awareness of prevention and control measures of aquatic nuisance species and parasites.
- Improve water quality to a standard that is favorable to native invertebrate and trout species.

Key Issue: Altered Fire Regime

The natural fire regime is a description of the role fire would play across a landscape in the absence of modern human intervention. A natural fire regime contributes to a healthy forest by maintaining a proper diversity of age classes, rather than being overcrowded with younger trees. Without a fire regime that approximates the natural cycle, the forest ecosystem can be lost to large-scale fire, insects or disease. The threat of fires having an unnaturally high intensity has been increased by human interven-

tion through fire suppression.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Raise awareness of the need for a healthy fire regime.
- Advocate proper planning for local fire control and controlled burns that is appropriate to improve ecosystem health and to protect developed areas.

Key Issue: Domestic Livestock Grazing

Livestock grazing has been an important component of the economy for generations in the Gunnison Basin. Working ranches maintain open space and properly managed grazing can enhance wildlife habitat and native plant communities. Excessive or poorly managed livestock grazing can decrease plant cover, change native plant composition, facilitate weed invasion and reduce forage for livestock and wildlife. Additionally, significant weed invasion is prevalent in the lower watershed and deserves extra educational outreach to livestock producers.

Disease transfer between domestic sheep and native

bighorn sheep is a concern where the two species overlap in our watershed's alpine zone.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Raise awareness of the need for diverse native plant communities that provide sustainable forage for livestock and quality habitat for wildlife.
- Advocate for sustainable livestock and wildlife numbers that are appropriate for the carrying capacity of the available habitat while considering other land uses.

Key Issue: Deer and Elk Population Growth

The Lake Fork watershed is within a limited hunting management zone. The Division of Wildlife and sportsmen have played a vital role in reducing the historically overpopulated elk herds and discrepancy in bull to cow ratios within our herds. A better part of the Gunnison Valley has exceeded population goals for post-season elk herds. The limited hunting has greatly benefited deer and elk populations and their habitat within the Lake Fork valley. Although this control has helped it does not eliminate the possibility of high elk numbers as seen in the past on critical winter ranges. Continued population control will help maintain critical winter ranges in the future.

Watershed Plan Objectives:

- Monitor big game numbers working with the Division of Wildlife.
- Advocate for continuation of limited hunting to promote healthy habitat and sustainable numbers of big game animals.

PLEASE SEND US YOUR FEEDBACK

The full draft plan will be available on the Lake Fork Valley Conservancy's website at www.lfvc.org. Comments can be sent to LFVC staff at the contact below. We welcome any questions or concerns!

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