



“To protect, conserve, and develop waters of the San Juan and Dolores Rivers and their tributaries in Southwestern Colorado, and safeguard for Colorado all waters of the basin to which the state is entitled.”

Southwestern Water Conservation District
Strategic Plan: 2022 – 2026
Adopted: February 17, 2022

Background

The Southwestern Water Conservation District (SWCD) was created on April 16, 1941 by the Colorado General Assembly through House Bill #795 ([CRS 37-47-101 et seq.](#)). SWCD is comprised of all or part of nine counties in southwestern Colorado: Archuleta, Dolores, La Plata, Montezuma, San Juan, San Miguel, and parts of Hinsdale, Mineral, and Montrose. Each Board of County Commissioners appoints one representative to the SWCD Board of Directors, which currently meets at least every other month.

SWCD’s statutory authority is to protect, conserve, use and develop the water resources of San Juan and Dolores River Basins (Figure 1) for the welfare SWCD, and safeguard for Colorado all waters to which the is entitled. Following this mandate, SWCD has assumed a strategic role on behalf of its diverse constituents for more 80 years. That history is an important part of SWCD and we to document the details of that history in a stand-alone document to be prepared in the future.

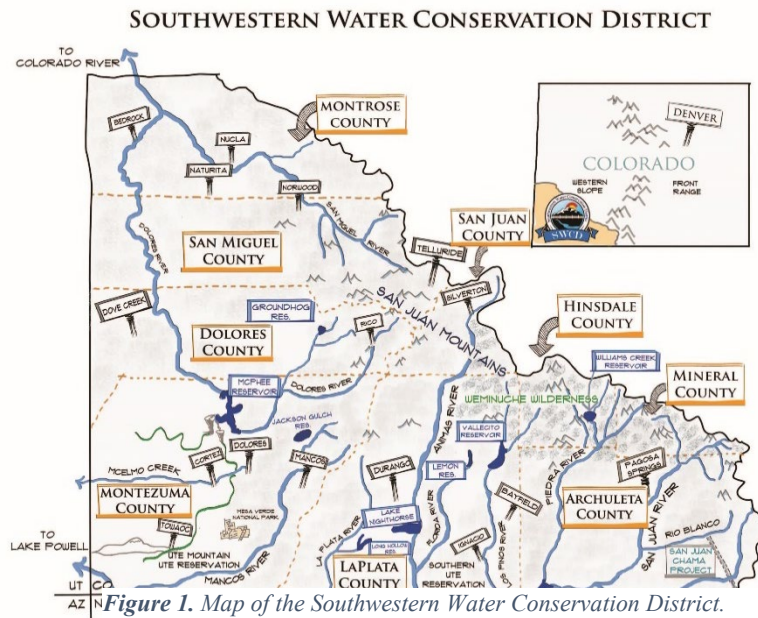


Figure 1. Map of the Southwestern Water Conservation District.

SWCD carries out this essential work thanks to a small tax levied on property within SWCD. For 2022, the Board of Directors adopted a budget showing total revenues of \$1,780,111 with \$1,871,603 in proposed operating expenses. SWCD’s ending fund balance for fiscal year 2021 was \$4,193,347. SWCD currently employs two full-time staff, a general manager, and a programs coordinator. SWCD contracts out for legal, engineering, and other needed professional services.

In 2019, the SWCD Board of Directors initiated discussions about the need to develop a strategic plan. Subsequently, the Board and SWCD staff, with support from Wellstone Collaborative Strategies, have worked to develop this plan.

Strategic priorities

1. In coordination with the appropriate partners, ensure SWCD remains engaged in obtaining, updating and analyzing water supply, demand and quality data necessary to address the water management challenges facing southwest Colorado

Overview As the demand for water resources increases, and supplies simultaneously decline, more innovation and cooperation will be required to continue to effectively manage the water we have. At the forefront of this is the need for the best possible available information on the quantity and quality of the supplies we have, as well as the demand on those resources. Furthermore, in the face of reduced supplies, SWCD must prepare for inevitably tighter water administration, which only heightens the need for better water data.

SWCD is at ground zero when it comes to climate change and drought in the western United States, necessitating adaptation and resiliency in the face of increasingly hotter and drier conditions. Drought and climate have already impacted agriculture, municipal water supplies, and the environment.

- **Goal 1:** Through SWCD sponsorship and related partnerships, ensure ongoing data collection efforts on water supply, demand, and quality.
 - *Indicator 1:* By 2023, SWCD has an increased understanding of intra-district water supply, demand and risks; and has initiated discussions with local water user entities on future needs and issues.
 - *Indicator 2:* Continue to fund and support accurate and increased data collection on water quantity and quality in southwestern Colorado to encourage a common foundation of information for decision-making among diverse interests.
 - *Indicator 3:* By 2024, enhance funding partnerships (state, federal, local, or other) that support drought planning and implementation efforts.
 - *Indicator 4:* By 2026, SWCD is supporting the implementation/development of two to three regional water supply planning efforts for water users and providers at a sub-basin scale.

- **Goal 2:** SWCD and its stakeholders have the necessary data, tools, and agreements in place to understand, adapt to and be resilient in the face of extended drought and climate change.
 - *Indicator 1:* Where needed, work to develop or support regional augmentation plans in water short areas that can be utilized as a tool for climate and drought planning.

2. Lead advocacy for southwest Colorado in Colorado River, interstate, and transmountain issues

Overview SWCD has a unique and important role to play as one of three entities in state with the statutory charge to safeguard the waters of the Colorado River Basin. As such, a primary goal of SWCD is to protect water for future generations, and interstate Colorado River issues may be one of the greatest threats to water supply certainty. Much of the water development activities in southwest Colorado is relatively recent as compared to some other river basins in Colorado, and there is concern how that may impact those water users. There is uncertainty how that could impact southwest Colorado water users.

Colorado River Basin issues are further exacerbated by a drier future with a decrease in supplies and an imbalance between supply and demand across the entire Colorado River Basin and in several places within SWCD. This priority points directly to our statutory charge to protect, conserve, use and develop the water resources of the San Juan and Dolores River Basins for the welfare of SWCD, and safeguard for Colorado all waters to which the state is entitled.

- **Goal 1:** Waters within SWCD, to the extent possible, are protected for current and future uses.
 - *Indicator 1:* SWCD continues to be engaged and helping to inform Colorado River Basin discussions at SWCD, state, interstate and federal levels to protect and advocate for southwestern Colorado's unique risks while leveraging similarities with other river basins in Colorado.
 - *Indicator 2:* Any newly negotiated Colorado River Basin operational guidelines are a product SWCD can support.
 - *Indicator 3:* Continue to monitor activities related to transmountain diversions that may impact the water supply within SWCD's boundaries. Respond accordingly and proportionately.

- **Goal 2:** Continue to provide support to both the Upper Colorado River and San Juan River Endangered Species Recovery Implementation programs (RIPs).
 - *Indicator 1:* Provide support to the ongoing post-2023 process to develop the framework for the operations and funding of the RIPs for the period of 2023 – 2037.
 - *Indicator 2:* As appropriate, help facilitate the continued success of both RIPs into the future by remaining an active participant in both programs.

3. Balance meeting multiple water needs amongst a diverse set of priorities, especially when there is potential for conflict or mutual benefit

Overview Water needs within SWCD are diverse and in some cases in conflict. Rather than advocating for any one water interest, SWCD supports balancing needs, being proactive, and identifying opportunities for win-win situations. Specific needs that SWCD hopes to help address through multi-purpose projects and collaborative water management include:

- **Tribal:** Support partnerships to help facilitate meeting tribal water needs.
- **Municipal / domestic water use, especially small communities:** Try to serve as a resource to smaller communities that have a less certain water supply and/or in the face of increasing demands.
- **Agriculture:** Agricultural water supplies have also dwindled in some basins due to drought. In addition, some irrigated lands have been subdivided and the water rights are not being exercised as they were historically. Similarly, there is not as much farming and agricultural water use as there used to be due to generational shifts. There is need to preserve historic agricultural rights as well as improve agricultural water conservation tools.
- **Environment:** Having a healthy environment and ensuring that native fish have sufficient clean water to survive is important. The endangered fish species recovery programs and CWCB's instream flow program need to be monitored and supported where appropriate, all the while considering future water development needs. The consumptive needs of the environment, such as cottonwoods and willows, are also important to the ecology of the region.
- **Recreation:** The recreational economy, such as boating and fishing, is critical to some communities.
- **Water Quality:** Mine drainage, sediment, and temperature exceedances are specific areas of concern that must be addressed in areas of concern on some stream segments within SWCD.

Goal 1: Work with and support all stakeholders in water management discussions. Always seek consensus and attempt to minimize potential conflicts through active planning and engagement.

- *Indicator 1:* Support integrated water planning efforts through funding and engagement. As appropriate, meet regularly with local water users to discuss and plan for future water needs. This effort includes understanding the water supply, water rights and water demands in SWCD to meet multiple needs. Scenarios identified in the Southwest Basin Implementation Plan may help guide this effort.
- *Indicator 2:* SWCD will seek to strengthen relationships with the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes and identify opportunities to partner with on water management issues. Establish regular coordination efforts with Tribal Councils.
- *Indicator 3:* Work collaboratively with the diverse partnerships present in the San Juan and Dolores River basins to support ways to address the multiple sets of water quantity and quality priorities.

4. Support investment in improvements to existing and development of new infrastructure for multiple uses in southwest Colorado

Overview There is a significant amount of aging infrastructure that requires evaluation, rehabilitation and reinvestment. The challenges and costs to rebuild and repair are considerable. Yet it is important for maximizing storage, ensuring agricultural deliveries, enhancement of native fish needs, and supplying municipal needs for communities that this infrastructure be restored and maintained.

Deteriorating agricultural ditches, diversions, and reservoirs need to be repaired and improved. Moreover, efficiency in agricultural water deliveries is a critical issue in record dry hydrologic conditions.

Municipal infrastructure must upgrade water and wastewater treatment to keep up with new water quality regulations. In addition, some municipal water supplies needed for future growth are not fully secured. Several small rural municipalities in southwest Colorado do not have adequate domestic water supply for dry summers. SWCD can support these communities evaluate their supply gaps, implement strategies to address their needs, and seek state funding.

Additional water storage may be a valuable tool for southwestern Colorado, particularly in drier hydrologic conditions. Maximizing existing storage within SWCD can involve activities such as dredging, expanding storage at existing reservoirs, rehabilitating existing dams that have fallen into disrepair or no longer meet public safety standards, and securing and constructing new storage facilities. Several aging reservoirs within SWCD are under storage restrictions to protect the public, and the costs for their repair and rehabilitation are major challenges to continue their operation. SWCD should serve as a key local advocate for state and federal funding to support these much-needed projects.

And finally, under a severe climate scenario, southwest Colorado's risk for natural disasters is greatly increased. Forest fires can have devastating impacts on reservoirs, run-off, and water quality. The SWCD is expected to have increased damages due to wildfires. SWCD must remain involved in forest health discussions, to support the connections to water supply conditions.

- **Goal 1:** Water infrastructure restoration needs, as well as water supply planning, conservation and protection opportunities are identified.
 - *Indicator 1:* Ensure that opportunities brought by the 2021 infrastructure bill are realized, which will entail working with federal, state and local entities to identify and develop projects worthy of funding
 - *Indicator 2:* Ensure SWCD's grant program prioritizes use of funds to leverage state and federal dollars to maximize the benefit of our resources to meet the goals of SWCD.
 - *Indicator 3:* SWCD will continue to participate in forest health initiatives and collaboratives to understand and advocate for benefits to water supply and quality.

5. Strengthen the continued professional and efficient operation of SWCD while building a culture of mutual trust and respect

Overview Building and maintaining a culture of mutual trust and respect among SWCD staff, Board members, consultants and stakeholders is essential to developing consensus around unifying goals, enhancing partnerships, engendering the engagement of relevant stakeholders, and ultimately advancing SWCD’s mission. SWCD’s internal culture must serve as an example of how our partners, stakeholders and even adversaries are treated. SWCD’s internal operations must be trustworthy as well, with continued responsible fiscal management, a culture of public transparency in our operations, and a constant effort of “customer service”.

Professionalism is the foundation for building an internal culture of respect and trust, as it empowers SWCD representatives to stay focused on their common goals, undeterred by unrelated issues that derail progress and distract from the SWCD’s statutory obligations to its constituents. For example, having clear staff job descriptions, director responsibilities, and fluid communication with SWCD consultants ensures that expectations of each team member’s contributions are clear.

With SWCD’s lean budget and limited capacity, Board, staff, and consultant commitment to efficiency is critical to achieving SWCD’s other strategic priorities. Improving operational efficiency starts with the development of this strategic plan, which will guide the SWCD team in focusing its efforts and budgeted resources toward identified priorities and related outcomes. Efficiencies can also be sought in small ways, such as seeking improved, cost-effective office management techniques or implementing standing policies to guide financial management so the Board can focus on water policy and advocacy.

- **Goal 1:** Increase professionalism by establishing clear expectations for the SWCD’s team.
 - *Indicator 1:* By 2022, review and update staff job descriptions and implement an effective performance evaluation process.
 - *Indicator 2:* By 2023, adopt director responsibilities and board code of conduct.
 - *Indicator 3:* By 2022, the board will consider adoption of a SWCD investment policy to ensure appropriate financial management of its funds.

- **Goal 2:** Align SWCD resources and activities with strategic plan priorities.
 - *Indicator 1:* Board and staff annually review and update, as needed, strategic plan.
 - *Indicator 2:* By 2022, review and discuss SWCD staffing needs with the Board.
 - *Indicator 3:* Starting in 2023, ensure budgeted resources are directed towards strategic plan priorities.
 - *Indicator 4:* Further improve coordination and utilization of SWCD consultant team to ensure agility and efficiency.

- **Goal 3:** Facilitate inclusive conversations, prioritize transparency, and seek active stakeholder input for strategic Board decisions.
 - *Indicator 1:* Seek to return to in-person board meetings as soon as practicable while pursuing enhanced avenues for Board and stakeholders’ engagement in the virtual world.
 - *Indicator 2:* SWCD Board meetings will be led by the president in a clear fashion that encourages Board engagement, allows space for public participation, and facilitates board consensus on key decisions.

6. Cultivate SWCD credibility with decisionmakers and public through targeted outreach efforts

Overview SWCD’s policy efforts are effective when its voice and mission are easily identified by local and state decisionmakers, as well as its constituents. Building SWCD’s name recognition and credibility will require prioritizing public outreach to brand SWCD as southwest Colorado’s water expert and the “go-to” on water policy in our corner of the state. While the SWCD maintains a group of interested supporters, focused outreach can expand our base constituency, increase communication and collaboration with key partners, and generally improve visibility of SWCD’s work with the public. Moreover, strengthening SWCD’s digital communication infrastructure will prepare its efforts to convey advocacy messages or other urgent information to key leaders and constituents.

Furthermore, any public entity should be able to clearly justify to taxpayers its value and need. In that sense, public outreach reinforces SWCD accountability to constituents by regularly reporting SWCD activities, policy positions, and goals directly to them. Increased outreach would also seek to meet the public’s expectations regarding accessibility in the digital age by entering the communications spaces they engage with regularly. Finally, should a future board wish to request a tax increase from voters, SWCD will be better positioned having already implemented key outreach strategies.

- **Goal 1:** Increase SWCD mission recognition and credibility with target audiences.
 - *Indicator 1:* By 2022, SWCD Board, staff, and consultants have agreed upon an “elevator speech” and tagline that adequately summarizes SWCD’s work.
 - *Indicator 2:* By 2023, SWCD Board and staff have identified target audiences to deliver the agreed upon message of SWCD’s work and credibility on various policy matters.
 - *Indicator 3:* By 2024, SWCD staff has prioritized and begun implementing a suite of selected strategies to reach target audiences.

- **Goal 2:** Develop and operate a SWCD outreach program that can provide information, education and support to water users across the basin.
 - *Indicator 1:* Compile and write history of the SWCD

Accompanying documents to the Strategic Plan:

Action Plan: An annual work plan for SWCD staff and Board. Developed each year by staff and submitted to the Board for approval each year at the December Board meeting. Action Plan should be informed by and back up annual budget. 2022 Action Plan is being developed.

Strategic Plan “One-Pager”: One page document that shows Strategic Priorities and Goals. Primarily used as a “quick reference” for Board, staff and others. (Attached)