

ROARING FORK



CONSERVANCY

2023 Annual Report

EXPLORE | VALUE | PROTECT



Photo: Lisa DeLusso

Message from Board President and Executive Director

I am often reminded that life is all about balance. Eating a healthy meal is often balanced by a nice dessert. Colorado blue bird days are best enjoyed after a blustery gray snowstorm. Writing newsletter articles, running a nonprofit and fundraising requires I renew my spirit with time spent fishing and hunting. In the water world, this search for balance exists between wet years and dry years, supply and demand, natural and human communities. Dry years where we work hard to enhance flows, protect fish, and preserve our stream health are balanced by the wet years, like 2023 where, much like a fish in a cold mountain stream, we feel like we can breathe again. Perhaps we relax a bit as we feel the collective tension around the valley dissipate like snowflakes on a powder day or dust during summer monsoons. However, when we are not operating to survive a drought, we spend much of our time planning for how we can be more resilient the next time an inevitable dry year hits. One way we do this is through the projects you'll read about here. The other happens behind the scenes or more accurately at the dining room table, coffee shop, or conference room where we meet with partners, community members, teachers, and more to discover the places where water unites us. Where we find unlikely partners who come from different backgrounds and perspectives and create a unique opportunity to find a common ground that balances and enhances the work that we do each day.

The water community is not without its share of extremes and controversies. However, at Roaring Fork Conservancy (RFC), when we have the opportunity to find some common ground, we learn to see a situation from a new perspective. This allows our staff, students, and community to think outside our usual boxes in unravelling water issues, dissipating historic conflicts, and dissolving barriers to future problem solving. For example, our innovative education program connected students from the Aurora School District with Basalt Middle

School students through good old fashioned letter writing. These students, united by a water source at the Fryingpan headwaters, exchange letters sharing how mountain life in Basalt may differ from the urban life in Aurora and how both use and interact with water. In places where adults are often in conflict about the use of this water, the students are building relationships that could, perhaps, be the relationships of the future adults who play a key role in solving these problems. In a similar vein, RFC staff spent much of 2023 working closely with several agricultural producers and water rights holders on drought resiliency projects to explore how soil health can impact annual yield and water usage. Historically at odds over water, common ground was easily found between the ranching community and our watershed group because of a shared concern over persistent drought and lack of water resources, and belief that agriculture is crucial to Roaring Fork Valley's economy, ecology, and culture. Our water quality team united state, federal, and local agencies over concerns of elevated metals content impacting wildlife and ecosystems from Lincoln Creek down the Roaring Fork. Bringing together a diverse group to investigate, sample, and understand the causes of disturbance and potential for remediation. On the Crystal River, the restoration at Riverfront Park in Carbondale creates a balance between ecological instream and riparian uses with town water rights and recreational public spaces. The project demonstrates the delicate balance of maintaining multi-use areas.

While so much in water is controversial, there are so many opportunities to learn a new perspective and find innovative ways to compromise and create beneficial outcomes - even if they're not perfect solutions. So while we all hope for big desserts, bluebird days, and abundant fish, we will continue to maintain balance and fight for the rivers - maybe even more so on the hard, hot, and dry days.



Pat McMahon
Pat McMahon
President,
Board of Directors



Rick Lofaro
Rick Lofaro
Executive Director

Water, Soil and Agriculture: A Close Connection

Summarized from Lotic Hydrological's "Promoting Agricultural Drought Resiliency: Research & Field Investigations".

Farmers and ranchers in the Roaring Fork Valley are coping with the effects of prolonged drought. Reduced access to water can potentially impact operational sustainability and profitability. This, coupled with skyrocketing land values and a decline in interest in ranching among younger generations, places pressure on some producers to sell land and/or shift productive fields to other uses.

The residents of the Roaring Fork Valley and Western Colorado collectively benefit from the existence of irrigated agriculture. Irrigated fields are aesthetically pleasing, contribute to local food supplies, and maintain open spaces for wildlife habitat and migration. Lost irrigated lands may be followed by a proliferation of dry, weed-infested fields or by a rapid transition of large acreages to hardened urban and sub-urban development.

Implementation of water conservation programs across the state is one strategy proposed to reduce risks that persistent drought, growing populations, and changing climate place on a finite water supply. Voluntary, temporary, and compensated water conservation programs and policies are gaining traction as the most acceptable and viable means for achieving consumptive use reduction goals, but no reliable data is available on how to characterize likelihood of participation in conservation programs among diverse groups of water users and how successful different water conservation practices are in different geographies and soil types. This limits our understanding of water conservation outcomes for people and streams in the places where programs may be implemented in the coming years.

RFC along with scientists at Lotic Hydrological and four local ranch owners have formed a multi-year partnership to pilot water conservation efforts by modelling different crops in different locations and exploring on-the-ground soil amendments in an effort to enhance understanding of innovative ways to maintain a way of life so integral to western communities past, present, and future... when that future holds a water supply that cannot meet the growing demands.



RFC's Agricultural Drought Resiliency project focuses on three main areas:

PEOPLE

Using surveys to understand how demographics, geography, agricultural activities, and conservation program attributes relate to people's willingness to adopt water conservation measures.

WATER

Using satellite imagery and water rights administration proxies to assess the outcomes of reducing water use on fields across different locations.

SOIL

Conducting field experiments to see how various soil health practices can reduce the impact of reduced water application during droughts or conservation activities.

Crystal River Restoration at Riverfront Park: Phase I Complete!



After years of collaborative work in design, redesign, outreach, fundraising, and planning, the first phase of work in the Crystal River Restoration at Riverfront Park was completed in the summer of 2023. This multi-benefit project will not only improve the reach at hand, but also serve as an example for similar projects elsewhere on the Crystal and other local rivers.

GOAL: Restore the ecological integrity of the riparian zone through streambank stabilization, reconnection of the floodplain, and replace invasive weed communities with healthy and diverse riparian plant regimes.

Action: Riparian grading and reseeding with erosion control were completed to reconnect the floodplain and the river. Dedicated access points for angler access and rustic trail systems were created to protect wildlife habitat and mitigate social trails. Additional spring plantings will enhance habitat, provide wildlife shelter and forage, increasing shading and improve riverine temperatures.

GOAL: Implement a long term, self-sustaining solution to improve river channel stability, fish habitat and spawning areas by promoting conditions that support and enhance instream biotic structure and diversity.

Action: Installed bank improvements to increase stability, decrease erosion, reduce bank height, and help re-establish riparian vegetation. These modifications provide shade and in-stream structural diversity for fish. The recreated thalweg in the lower reach, below the upgraded diversion structure, will create a cool water channel at low flows to re-establish fish passage and enhance habitat.

GOAL: Create a self-sustaining diversion and head gate structure for the Weaver Ditch to function as part of the river system while improving the water delivery for the Town of Carbondale and consistent with future ditch improvements and efficiencies.

Action: The redesigned Weaver Ditch diversion structure functions as a stable part of the stream, requiring minimal in-channel upkeep. The project also added a maintenance access point to eliminate channel disturbance when maintenance is necessary.

GOAL: Enhance passive user experiences of Riverfront Park through interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs.

An improved access from Crystal Bridge Drive will provide the only accessible trail to the Crystal River within Carbondale Town limits. Additionally, an entrance area with new fence and gate will help enforce seasonal bald eagle closures and remind users of park rules and amenities. An outdoor classroom, visible from the bridge, doubles as river access and informal gathering area. These enhancements provide river access while protecting sensitive ecological areas by directing people into areas designated for recreation and gathering. In spring 2024, additional interpretive signage will highlight the unique ecological components of the park and other educational opportunities.

“It is hard to contemplate how the Crystal River Restoration Project would have ever gotten to the construction phase without the assistance and expertise of Roaring Fork Conservancy. Whether it was gaining buy-in from other project partners, grant writing and management, public outreach or technical expertise, Heather, Rick and other members of the Conservancy staff were integral in the project and the project’s success.”

Kevin Schorzman, Carbondale Public Works Director



Photos provided by River Restoration and DHM Design.

Fall Field Season: Packed with Projects and Partners

Fall 2023 was incredibly busy for the RFC water quality team. Just how busy? During a six-week period from late September through early November the team conducted the most intensive and diverse amount of field work ever completed during a fall in RFC history! This obviously meant water quality staff (with volunteer help at times) were in the field most days of the week during this period regardless of weather or other conditions. What may not be as obvious is the fact that for every day in the field, many hours are required on the front end to prepare supplies, calibrate equipment, and work out logistics and scheduling. Then, on the back end additional

time is needed to process, log and ship samples, disinfect equipment, and finalize paperwork, not to mention all the time spent organizing gear and loading and unloading cars!

While the amount of work completed and hours involved was substantial, another aspect really stands out. Upon reflection of this fall's accomplishments, it became apparent that the variety of projects in terms of location, type, and scope, as well as the significant partnerships needed to meet these goals is the real story when thinking about the success of the season. Check out this amazing diversity of projects and partners:

PROJECT	WATERBODY	PARTNER(S)
Alpine Lake Algae Sampling	Linkins and Independence Lakes	Independence Pass Foundation University of Colorado
Baseline Macroinvertebrate Sampling	13 sites basin-wide	River Watch of Colorado RFC Water Quality volunteers
Baseline Water Quality Monitoring	22 sites basin-wide	River Watch of Colorado RFC Water Quality volunteers
Capitol Creek Stream Gauge Installation	Capitol Creek	Colorado Water Conservation Board Capitol Creek Caucus
Cattle Creek Water Quality Study	Cattle Creek	Garfield and Eagle Counties
Fryingpan Didymo Survey	Fryingpan River	
Fryingpan Macroinvertebrate Sampling	Fryingpan River	Colorado Water Quality Control Division
Nitrate Watch Citizen Science Program	22 sites basin-wide	Izaak Walton League of America
North Star Macroinvertebrate Sampling	Roaring Fork River in North Star Preserve	Pitkin County Open Space and Trails
Outstanding Waters Project	Hunter, Woody, Avalanche, and Middle Thompson Creeks	Colorado River Basin Outstanding Waters Coalition
Quick Response Metals Sampling	Lincoln Creek and Upper Roaring Fork River	Colorado Parks and Wildlife



“I would choose RFC on my sampling crew any day. They are dedicated, experienced, and meticulous when collecting water samples. In a recent collaboration to investigate water quality issues in the Roaring Fork headwaters composed of local, state and federal partners, RFC’s contribution stood out. In addition to robust sampling experience, their local knowledge, professionalism, scientific integrity, and commitment to transparency make them integral to water quality projects.” Megan McConville, Ph.D., River Watch Program Manager



RFC has a multitude of ongoing stream health monitoring projects, each with different goals and timelines depicted below.



Because of RFC's long-term, rigorous water quality monitoring experience, we continue to be called upon by local, state, and national organizations to provide resources, support, and technical expertise. Here are some highlights of our 2023 work:

- 💧 Participated in EPA-led partnership of government agencies and non-profit organizations investigating elevated metals in Lincoln Creek.
- 💧 Enlisted by Pitkin County Open Space and Trails to initiate water quality monitoring on Brush Creek and macroinvertebrate sampling on the Roaring Fork in North Star Preserve.
- 💧 Assisted the Colorado Water Conservation Board and Capitol Creek Caucus with installation of a stream gauge on Capitol Creek for a joint instream flow project.
- 💧 Technical advisor for the City of Glenwood Springs and the Glenwood Springs River Commission on stream health, outreach, and policy projects.
- 💧 Taught water quality monitoring protocols to 40 students, teachers, and watershed groups at the annual River Watch State Training in Cedaredge, CO.
- 💧 Provided River Watch water quality training for Middle Colorado Watershed Council staff and Glenwood Springs Middle School students.
- 💧 Participated in Middle Colorado Watershed Council's Technical Advisory team for post Grizzly Creek Fire water quality monitoring.

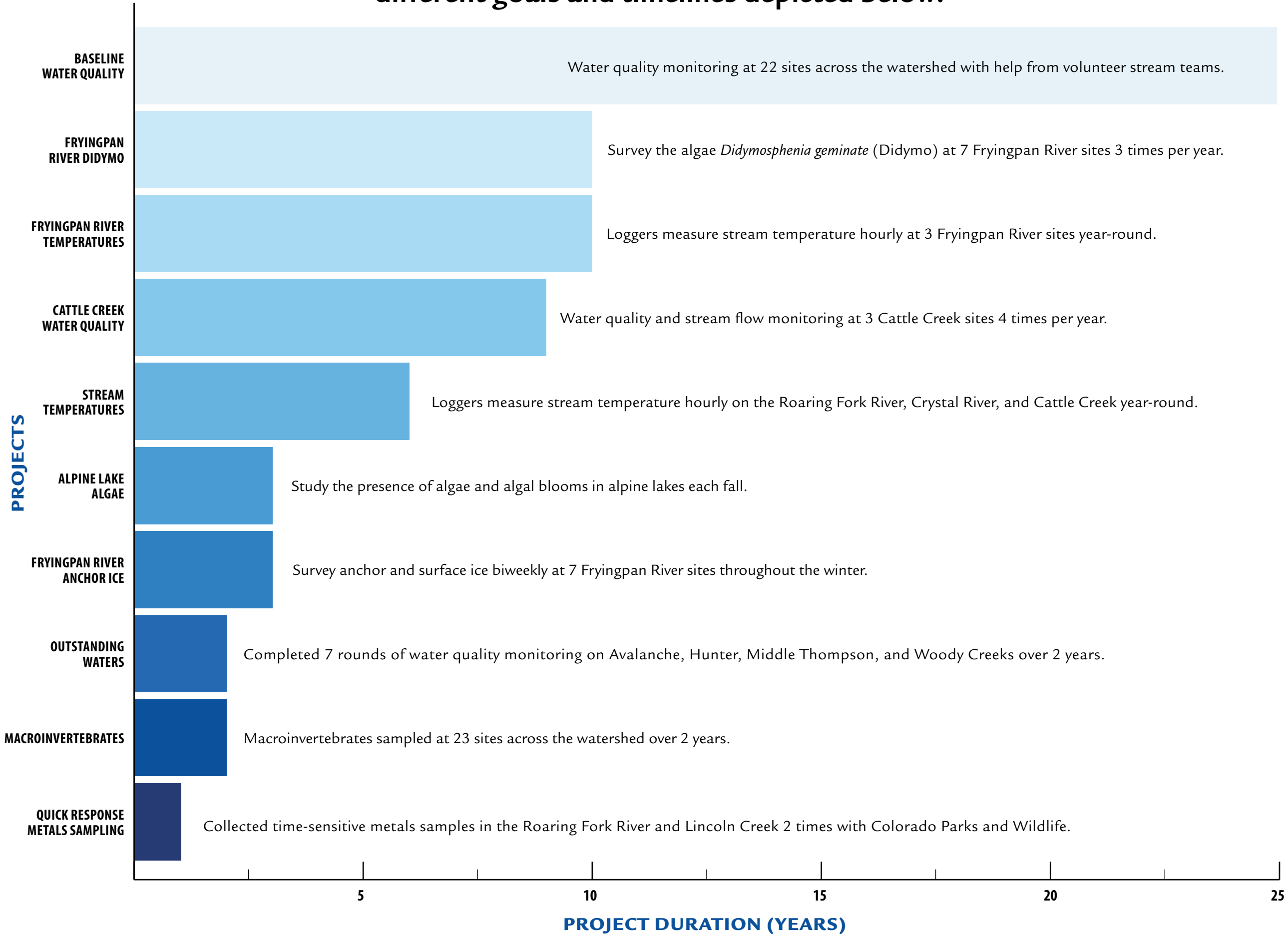




Photo: Jennifer Brown

The Gift of Time

What do Aspen Country Day School, Basalt Elementary School, Basalt Middle School, Glenwood Springs Elementary School, Roaring Fork Valley Homeschool, and Sopris Elementary School have in common? They are all receiving yearlong watershed science programming with RFC.

Students at these seven schools located between Aspen and Glenwood Springs are building deep knowledge of river systems through experiences that foster connection and inspire positive action. The programs delivered are designed to create multiple connections between students and their environment which is essential for promoting river stewardship.

The Roaring Fork Valley Homeschool Group joined RFC for yearlong programming in 2023. This amazing group is comprised of homeschool families that participate in community education throughout the school year. This group, which meets monthly with RFC instructors, consists of students from preschool to middle school and their parents, who attend and participate in every class. Students are grouped according to their age and dive into topics such as snow science, riparian habitats, river biology, conservation, and hydrology. Regular programming allows RFC to foster relationships and build on previous knowledge, which is essential for creating a sense of community and sparking positive action. Families learn together through play, experimentation, and discussion. It is inspiring to watch students lead discussions with their parents and share their enthusiasm with each other. Each class has become a series of moments in which everyone learns from each other; students, parents, and RFC instructors.

The impact of year-long watershed science programs is significant. Students who participate in these programs develop a strong understanding of the importance of river systems and the role they play in our environment and lives. They also learn about the challenges facing our rivers and the steps they can take to protect them. By inspiring young people and their families to become river stewards, RFC is helping to ensure that our rivers remain healthy and vibrant for generations to come.

“Our goal for planning a year-long program with RFC was for the students to build a strong understanding of the riparian ecosystems and deepen their personal relationship to the watershed where they live. Each month, as we meet in different locations throughout the Roaring Fork Valley, the students are learning about new parts of the ecosystem as well as seeing repeating themes. The kids love the hands-on learning opportunities and making connections to real life places. Working with the same instructors all year also gives our kids a chance to get to know them and the instructors are able to adapt the program to the kids. We’ve been so grateful to collaborate with RFC on this year-long learning adventure!”

Rachel Mulry, Roaring Fork Valley Homeschool Group

EDUCATION IMPACTS

Roaring Fork Conservancy taught **295** education programs making over **6,200** contacts in 2023!

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

- 16** Watershed Explorations were offered in 2023 including river floats, hikes through riparian habitats, snowshoe hike, and excursions to view fireflies and orchids in rare thermal wetlands. **239** individuals participated in 2023 Watershed Explorations.
- 27** Summer Camp, Basalt Regional Library and After School programs reached **333** youth.
- 14** Participants in two, 1-day Fly Fishing Clinics.



SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Roaring Fork Conservancy educators taught **234** river and watershed related school programs reaching **4,436 STUDENTS**

- 2,170** Elementary School students
- 2,050** Middle School students
- 216** High School students

35%
of education programs took place at The River Center

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 54** 1st year raft guides received River Ecology Interpretation training.
- 2** State-wide professional conference presentations reached **178** participants.

Roaring Fork Conservancy honored with a 2023 Award for Excellence in Environmental Education

The Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education awarded RFC's *Watershed PenPal Program* with a 2023 Innovative Environmental Education Program Award.

RFC's Watershed PenPal program unites students from Basalt, Colorado with students in Aurora, Colorado by reaching across the Continental Divide to create relationships through old fashioned letter writing and current technology. Aurora Water's Environmental and Educational Outreach program helped forge a connection with the partner school in Aurora - Vista Peak Exploratory. The City of Aurora and the Roaring Fork Valley both utilize water from the headwaters of the Fryingpan River, making this a transbasin project and relationship. In today's heightened need for water, we often face conflict and territorial battles.



This program aims to create positive relationships through communication.

Through a series of shared classes, Google Slides, videos, and fun activities, students in both Aurora and Basalt learn about where their water comes from and why it's important to value, conserve, and protect this life-giving resource. As a part of the program, students also meet their pen pal through Google Meets. RFC launches the Watershed PenPal program in Aurora by traveling to the partnering school to meet the students and teach the first class that connects them to their headwaters and pen pals.

This project approaches water use by creating connections, teaching about water systems, and building positive relationships. Students learn that the only way forward is through understanding earth's natural systems, each other, and the knowledge that we are all water users.

Community Outreach and Engagement



Photo: Sue Rollyson



The Brooksher Watershed Institute

Since 2019, The Brooksher Watershed Institute has hosted local, state, regional and national water leaders who provided presentations to the public addressing our most precious resource, water. Five in-person programs were offered in 2023, and each program provided opportunities for participants to engage in dialogue with these water leaders. The topics covered a lower basin perspective on the Colorado River, partnering with beavers to restore Colorado's mountain wetlands, getting to know the people within the entire Colorado River Basin that depend on the river, "A River Out of Time" film screening, and a field drawing workshop and art exhibition. The programs had over 374 attendees.

More information about The Brooksher Watershed Institute, including recorded presentations, slides, and related reports, are available at roaringfork.org/education-and-outreach/brooksher-watershed-institute/.

25th Annual Fryingpan & Beyond River Cleanup

Volunteers for the 25th annual Fryingpan & Beyond River Cleanup had a week to clean up road and stream-side debris. Over 125 residents and visitors picked up trash along 14 miles of road adjacent to the Fryingpan River, the Roaring Fork River from Aspen to Glenwood Springs, the Crystal River, and even along the Colorado River.

River Stewards

RFC's River Stewards, a dedicated group of young professionals, spearhead community engagement events to inspire young river enthusiasts to explore, value, and protect the Roaring Fork watershed. These passionate individuals helped with the Fryingpan and Beyond River Cleanup, participated at the Runoff Party and River Float, ran several social media campaigns, volunteered at river restoration projects, and were instrumental in putting together the User Guide to the Lower Roaring Fork River.



City of Glenwood Springs River Commission

RFC participated in the Glenwood Springs 8th annual RiverFEST event. Over 140 volunteers cleaned up trash along streams and rivers throughout Glenwood Springs and ended with lunch and festivities.

"Iron Fly" Fly Tying Competition

Roaring Fork Valley Fly Fishing Club and RFC co-hosted the 7th annual Iron Fly Competition at the Topsy Trout in early February. Iron Fly is a fly tying event combined with a little, friendly competition. Competitors are provided with secret and "funky" materials that must be used in each creative fly tied. Over 100 people attended this fun-filled annual fundraiser for both organizations.

Carbondale Boat Ramp Work Day

RFC partnered with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Roaring Fork Fishing Guide Alliance, Town of Carbondale, Boulder Boat Works, and River Stewards for a Carbondale Boat Ramp Workday. Over 30 volunteers accomplished a much needed face lift for one of the busiest boat ramps in the state! Volunteers trimmed and cleared vegetation to improve parking and river access; relocated boat tie-off points, replaced directional and informational signage; moved restrooms and dumpsters to a safer location; and improved parking configuration and traffic flow.

Runoff Party: Get River Ready with RFC

Over 50 river lovers attended RFC's first Runoff Party. River users, from novice to professional, came to learn about fishing, flows, snowpack, water quality, river etiquette and safety, and how-to's and best practices, all in effort to get ready for the summer floating season.

16th annual River Float

After a three year hiatus, RFC's annual River Float returned this year and sold out in record time! Believing that the best way to learn about the river is to get on it, RFC staff and boat ambassadors taught participants about local wildlife, water rights, riparian habitat and more, and pointed out RFC-owned conservations easements along the way.

User Guide to the Lower Roaring Fork River

This new guide was created to help novice and experienced river users. Contained within the user guide are boat ramp etiquette, floating etiquette, fishing etiquette, fish identification, universal river signals, the importance of riparian areas and a floating safety checklist. The user guide also has a map of the Lower Roaring Fork River identifying boat ramps, intersections on main streets, public restrooms, in-stream hazards and a detailed map of the Carbondale Boat Ramp, one of the busiest boat ramps in the state. The user guide is printed on waterproof paper. The QR code on the guide leads river users to a website with links to U.S. Geological Survey stream gages, information about transmountain diversions, conservation easements within riparian areas, Colorado Parks and Wildlife river closures, and the option to download a digital copy of the user guide at roaringfork.org/education-and-outreach/river-user-guide/.

CARTER BROOKSHER AND THE BROOKSHER FAMILY

National Council Supporter Spotlight



Thank You to our 2023 National Council!

Representing all parts of the United States, RFC National Council members make annual membership contributions of \$1,500+. This support serves as the foundation of our funding and enables us to serve as a voice for the rivers, execute sound river science, inform decision-makers, and educate the next generation of river stewards.

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Gayle Waterman
Kay & Robert Watson
Marie & Bill Wise

WHAT HOOKED YOU WITH RFC?

Honestly, fishing is what hooked me on to RFC. I started fishing with my parents in Missouri at the age of 5. This early introduction to water made me an angler for life, and I couldn't wait to fish in the famed Roaring Fork Valley when we moved here in the late 1990's. My husband Dane and I were founding members of the Roaring Fork Club, and when I learned of a river organization in Basalt created by the Roaring Fork Club and the Town of Basalt, I knew it was a perfect fit. I have always been involved in environmental organizations wherever I lived, and I was excited to bring my experience to RFC.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO GIVE YOUR FIRST GIFT?

(Laughing) When I joined the board of directors in 1998, I knew I also had to be financially involved as a donor. I had recently stepped down as the founder and President of the Women's Board of the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago. This unique and talented group of women were responsible for fundraising for much of the zoo's activities, and they modeled themselves after the women's boards of the symphony, opera, and museums in Chicago. In a similar effort, Dane and I supported The River Center from day one, and helped with the inception of the River Rendezvous fundraiser. Our family has supported RFC as National Council members for the past 25 years and are proud that our adult children are continuing our legacy. RFC has played a special role in our lives in Basalt, and it's been a wonderful experience to be part of the organization's growth and success, especially seeing the River Center come to life as a vibrant part of the community and having the honor of the popular Brooksher Watershed Institute bearing our name.



WHAT DO YOU WISH PEOPLE KNEW ABOUT RFC?

RFC was one of the first watershed groups formed on the Western slope at a time when water was not the popular issue that it has become today. I joined the organization within a few years of its formation, and I have seen the progress and success of RFC over the past two decades. I'm not sure people know how much RFC has contributed to the health of the watershed along with the community awareness and education in a place where many take these things for granted. **RFC continues this amazing work in the valley and our family is so pleased to have been a part of the team for so long.**

In loving memory of Dane Brooksher.

If you'd like to join RFC's 2024 National Council, please contact Sheryl Sabandal, sheryl@roaringfork.org. Listing reflects memberships received between November 2022-November 2023 membership term.

Gifts and Contributions – *Roaring Fork Conservancy acknowledges our generous donors and program sponsors.*

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City of Aspen Clean River Program	National Weather Service, Grand Junction	Two Rivers Community School
City of Aspen Parks & Open Space	Natural Resources Conservation Service	U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
City of Glenwood Springs	Nichols/Gilchrist Family	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Clean Space Project	Northwest Colorado Council of Governments - Water Quality and Quantity	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Colorado Ag Water Alliance	Pitkin County	U.S. Forest Service
Colorado Basin Roundtable	Pitkin County Emergency Management	U.S. Geological Survey
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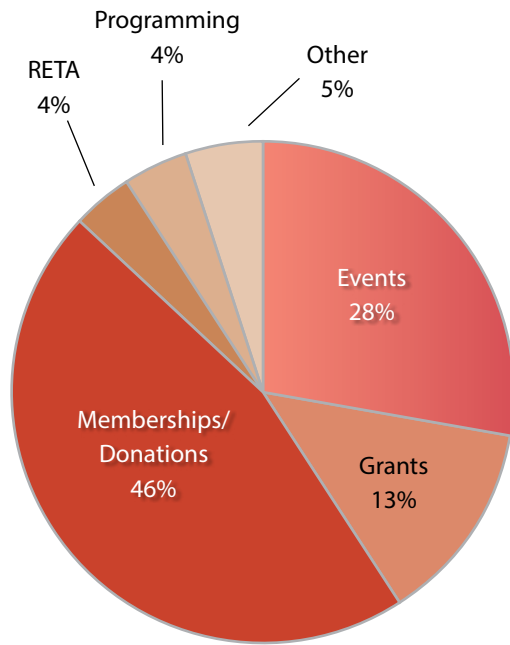
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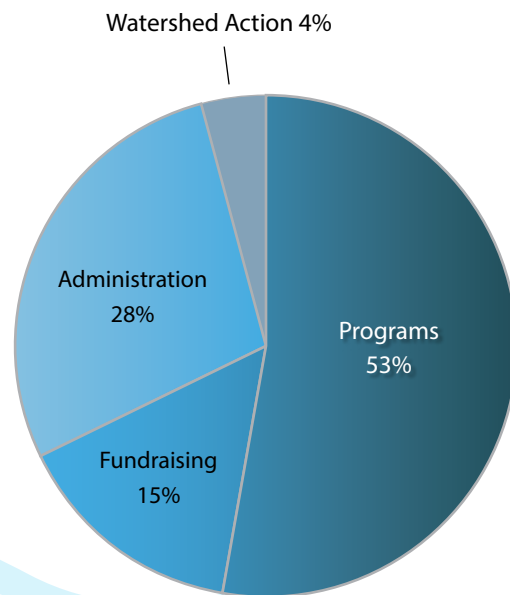
2023 Revenues

Events	\$323,096
Grants	\$150,620
Memberships/Donations	\$530,584
RETA	\$50,797
Programming	\$42,780
Other	\$61,147
Total	\$1,159,024

2023 OPERATING EXPENSES

2023 Expenses

Programming	\$655,777
Fundraising	\$181,977
Administration	\$350,553
Watershed Action	\$46,555
Total	\$1,234,861*



* Capital improvements funded by reserves.

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As one of the largest watershed organizations in Colorado, Roaring Fork Conservancy serves residents and visitors throughout the Roaring Fork Valley through school and community-based Watershed Education programs and Watershed Science and Policy Projects including regional watershed planning, water resource policy initiatives, stream management, and restoration.



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