

RIVER CURRENTS

Spring 2024

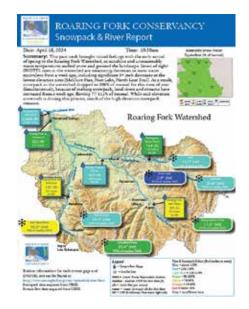
RFC's Snowpack and River Report: A Weekly Fact-Finding Mission

By Matthew Anderson, Water Quality Technician & Rick Lofaro, Executive Director

For the past 15 years, every Thursday morning at Roaring Fork Conservancy (RFC) an investigation is underway. It's not an unsolved cold case, though the subject matter is often cold (at least we hope so!). This is an ongoing investigation to uncover and interpret the ever-changing weekly watershed conditions. What are the snowpack conditions in the watershed? How are the rivers flowing? Are there any drought conditions? What about flooding concerns? These are just a few of the questions that guide the inquiry that becomes the weekly Snowpack and River Report throughout the year. And as always, we look to the experts and their data for responses to these questions.

To begin each report, we look for the basic conditions across the watershed, starting with two key measurements: stream discharge and snow water equivalent (SWE). For discharge data, or stream flows colloquially, we use a network of U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and Colorado Division of Water Resources (DWR) stream gauges located in rivers across the watershed that measure the cubic feet per second (CFS) of water moving downstream. For SWE data, eight Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) SnoTel stations are our starting point. These sites provide both current measurements and percentages of average, which compare current measurements to their thirty-year average. Once all these numbers are recorded, we have the beginning of a report.

Next, we dig for further data and information to contextualize our report summary. For example, when Ruedi Reservoir releases increase or decrease, we contact Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to find out why and for how long. When windy weather disperses dust across the watershed, the Colorado Dust-on-Snow Program is the definitive resource to understanding the implications.



When precipitation is lacking and soil is drying, we turn to the Colorado Drought Monitor. By the time a report is finished, multiple science-based resources are engaged to ensure the whole picture is captured. We also strive to add information pertinent to those recreating in the watershed: fishing closures, avalanche conditions, and ice jam release warnings are all elements we include at various times of the year.

All together, we frequent over a dozen resources including USGS, DWR, NRCS, BOR, U.S. Forest Service, Colorado Duston-Snow Program, Colorado Drought Monitor, Western Water Assessment, National Integrated Drought Information System, OpenSnow, National Weather Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado Avalanche Information Center, Colorado River District, Aspen Snowmass ski resorts, Sunlight Mountain Ski Resort, local news organizations, and many others. Each resource provides key expertise to understanding the watershed.

Once all the facts are gathered and relevant resources consulted, we write a succinct summary that provides the most important up-to-date information and translates the science in an understandable way. It's no easy feat. And by the time the report is finished, we're already on the lookout for next Thursday.

A good investigation is necessary when current facts are either misunderstood or incomplete. When the River Report began, about 15 years ago, existing snow and river information focused solely on ski or whitewater conditions. We saw the need to dive deeper and provide comprehensive information about the water in the snow and in the river and the relationship between the two. The reports became an instant success, used by river enthusiasts, ski bums and water wonks alike, as the acronyms of SWE and CFS became common language. Currently, this weekly report is emailed to over 555 friends across the state and country, viewed hundreds of times on our social media pages, and published every Friday in The Aspen Times since 2017. If we continue at this pace, we won't be surprised if some major news networks call to try and emulate our investigative techniques!

The responsibility we have to our rivers is enormous, and while we try not to take ourselves too seriously, we take seriously educating the public to help illuminate the critical importance of water beyond the epic powder day or sweet Class IV rapid. By providing a weekly update every week of the year, we elevate community and visitor knowledge and enhance understanding of persistent drought, each water year's seasonal fluctuations, and conditions across the watershed amid a changing climate.

GUEST ARTICLE

Shoshone Water Right Preservation Coalition Update

by Colorado River Water Conservation District staff: Brendon Langenhuizen, Director of Technical Advocacy and Lindsay DeFrates, Deputy Director of Public Relations





On December 19, 2023, at the Hotel Colorado in Glenwood Springs, the Colorado River District and Xcel Energy signed a Purchase & Sale Agreement (PSA) to transfer ownership of the historic Shoshone water rights to the River District for \$99 million. The agreement marks a first step towards permanent protection of some of the most senior, nonconsumptive water rights on the Colorado River.

Although the signing of the PSA was a historic moment, the effort has a long history

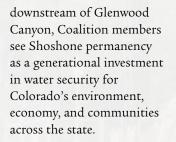
of interest and support.
For more than 20 years, the Colorado River District and 19 other western Colorado fundir

of interest and support. For more than 20 years, the Colorado River District and 19 other western Colorado governments and water entities have been working together to find a way to permanently preserve the Shoshone flows.

Today, the Shoshone Water Right Preservation Coalition - a diverse and growing partnership of stakeholders – continues the multi-year effort to secure funding for the purchase and to add an 'instream flow' benefit to the Shoshone water rights in partnership with the Colorado Water Conservation Board. The proposed instream flow reach would run from the Shoshone Dam (at the Hanging Lake Tunnel) to

a point approximately 2.4 miles downstream at the outfall of the Shoshone Power Plant penstock and carry the same seniority of the current Shoshone water rights.

With its command of 1,408 cfs (or up to 1.02-million-acre feet of water per year) on the Colorado mainstem and benefits both upstream and



The Shoshone Hydropower Plant is a unique run-ofriver hydroelectric facility in which Colorado River water is diverted from the dam near Hanging Lake, transported 2.4 miles through tunnels, then falls down two penstocks to turn the turbines, producing up to 15 megawatts of electricity. The water emerges from the plant unconsumed, continuing to flow downstream to support the environment, recreation, and municipal uses.

Water has always been scarce in the arid West, even more so today, with climate change-induced aridification forming a bullseye over western Colorado. Shoshone's non-consumptive water rights are foundational to sustaining current flows year-round in the Colorado River that are essential for both upstream and downstream ecological and economic benefits in the face of ongoing drought. Over 250 miles of the Colorado mainstem directly benefit from the headwaters to the state line, and this length does not include the many tributaries that also benefit from additional water brought downstream by the Shoshone call. However,

were power production ever to cease due to the challenges of operating century-old infrastructure in Glenwood Canyon, water could no longer be 'called' downstream past junior users, including trans-basin diverters.

The seniority of Shoshone's water right brings exceptional value for West Slope communities and water users. Without these flows, river levels would be lower, water temperatures higher, and other interests upstream could take more water out of the natural river basin. Bolstered by Shoshone flows, the Colorado River supports a robust \$4 billion water-based recreational economy from Grand County westward for rafters kayakers, and anglers - both commercial and private.

Shoshone flows are also essential for maintaining both upstream and downstream environments for native fish and wildlife, including Colorado's four listed threatened and endangered fish: the humpback chub, the bonytail chub, the Colorado pikeminnow, and the razorback sucker occupying critical habitat in the 15-Mile Reach near Grand Junction. Shoshone's senior water rights act as a bedrock for the success of the Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program and continued, streamlined compliance with the Endangered Species Act by providing up

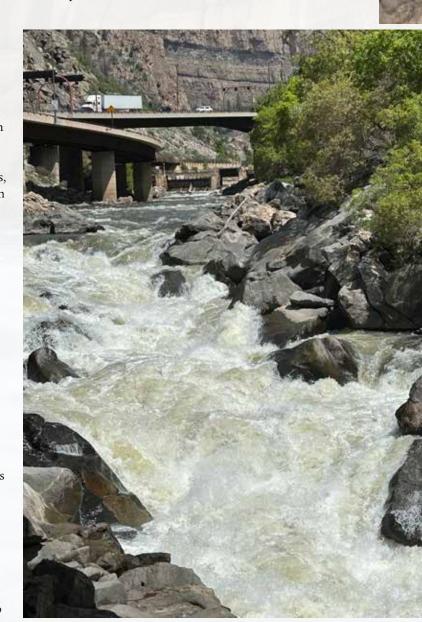
to 86,000 acre-feet of water to this important reach of the river.

The consistent flows also help sustain local agricultural producers and Colorado's \$11.9 billion agricultural economy through increased flows and higher water quality. Finally, the Shoshone flow regime brings cool and clean dilution flows providing water quality benefits for West Slope communities

that rely on the Colorado River for drinking water.

Permanently protecting these flows means Colorado's communities and businesses receive decisive water security while preserving key environmental, recreational, and economic benefits for water users upstream, downstream, and across the state.

To learn more, please visit www.KeepShoshoneFlowing.org



Photos: Colorado River Water Conservation District

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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 multiyear 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.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Sarah Willeman Doran and Brendan Doran, Turnabout Ranch

Lynn Nichols and Carson Gilchrist, Jouflas Property

Alison and Mike Spayd, Spradley

Drew Walters, Pitkin County Open Space and Trails, Shippee Property Lotic Hydrological

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attributes relate to people's willingness

to adopt water conservation measures.

of reducing water use on fields

across different locations.

reduced water application during

droughts or conservation activities.

GUEST ARTICLE

A Water Quality Investigation of the Lincoln Creek Watershed

by Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff: Megan McConville, Ph.D., Water Quality Specialist, River Watch Program Manager and Ashley Rust, Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Specialist



On August 31, 2021, Colorado Parks and Wildlife's (CPW) Area Aquatic Biologist, Kendall Bakich was conducting a routine late summer native boreal toad survey on

Lincoln Creek, a tributary to the Roaring Fork River located on Independence Pass. During her visit, a concerned camper found Kendall and reported fish dying in Grizzly Reservoir. Kendall assessed the scene and identified 12 dead fish and four distressed fish in orange colored water near where Lincoln Creek enters the reservoir. Kendall suspected the fish kill was likely caused by poor water quality, possibly emanating from Ruby Mine, a historic mine situated upstream of Grizzly Reservoir.

At that time, Kendall called CPW's water quality team in Denver, Mindi May, Ashley Rust, and Megan McConville. This call resulted in the development of a sampling plan to collect water quality data from 11 locations on Lincoln Creek above and below the mine, and above and below the fish kill in Grizzly Reservoir. Kendall, who is trained in River Watch water sampling protocols, returned to the scene on two separate days in September 2021 and filled bottles of water to be analyzed by the River Watch Program. River Watch, the longstanding community science volunteer water quality monitoring program, which began in 1989, supports volunteers statewide in the collection of water quality samples to inform management decisions. The water chemistry is analyzed by Ph.D., chemist, Megan McConville in CPWs River Watch Water Quality Analytical Laboratory, and data are shared publicly.

Lab results from the September 2021 water sampling showed extremely high levels of

aluminum, cadmium, copper, iron, and zinc in Lincoln Creek above Grizzly Reservoir. Dissolved copper levels in all 11 samples were well above acute and chronic thresholds that trout and other aquatic life can tolerate, creating lethal conditions for fish. This data was compared to historic data collected by CPW and the Division of Mining and Reclamation Safety (DRMS) intermittently since 1994. The historic data represented baseline conditions and was used to contrast the present water quality results. In some sections of Lincoln Creek, copper concentrations were 100 times higher than the aquatic life threshold and represented the highest observed concentrations recorded. Total aluminum was also elevated compared to previous samples. Something in the area had changed, dramatically.

CPW's water quality team called the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to alert their orphan mines team of this change. Because of that call, an incredible collaboration formed to respond to the alarming water quality issue on Lincoln Creek. The team consisted of CPW, the EPA, RFC, DRMS, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pitkin County Environmental Health, Pitkin County Healthy Rivers Program, The Twin Lakes Reservoir and Canal Company, Trout Unlimited and the U.S. Geological Survey.

RFC has participated in River Watch, collecting samples up and down the Roaring Fork Valley for almost 30 years. Representing one of the few non-profits involved in this effort, RFC was an incredible asset to this investigation. In particular, Chad Rudow and Matthew Anderson's knowledge of proper sampling techniques, flow measurement collections, and professionalism quickly made them trusted













allies and, in many cases, lead samplers in this collaborative group. CPW was thrilled to have RFC involved as they help translate this broader effort to the people living in and who care about the Roaring Fork Watershed.

Led by the EPA, the team launched a full investigation to identify if the source of the water contamination was human-caused, originating from Ruby Mine, or not. The team revisited the 11 sampling sites along Lincoln Creek in July 2022 and September 2022 to collect water during high and low flow conditions in Lincoln Creek.

The multi-organizational team collaborated to compile and summarize results from the investigation. EPA published a site assessment report and shared it with the public in November 2023. On February 1, 2024 all of the agencies convened in Basalt to host a public meeting and answer questions related to this investigation.

The final report concluded that while there are extremely high levels of copper at and near the mine, and these concentrations have increased dramatically from historic data, the water-quality results indicate the Ruby Mine contributes a minor proportion of degradation to Lincoln Creek. The major proportion (>95%) of the metal loading was determined to be from a naturally occurring mineralized tributary adjacent to the Ruby Mine, representing natural acid rock drainage, rather than acid mine drainage. The EPA can invest in cleanup for human-caused pollution through the federal CERCLA program, but does not have the Federal authority to clean up natural sources of pollution. Additionally, if EPA had the authority to address the small percentage of chemical contribution from the Mine, it would not markedly remove the majority of the degradation. While this investigation demonstrates EPA does not have the authority to pursue cleanup or remediation, this report provides a very critical and thorough documentation of existing conditions.

Unfortunately, the worsening water quality observed from the mineralized tributary matches a pattern that scientists are seeing

across the state and even in the pristine wilderness of Alaska. Climate change is causing more heavy metals, like copper, to be released from mineralized areas. Weathering conditions that erode rock and release dissolved metals are changing rapidly. Changes in winter snowpack and thawing permafrost change water flow paths through the rocky hillsides and allow for greater oxidation of natural mineralogy. More freeze and thaw events cause rocks to fracture and water carries newly exposed dissolved minerals to surface streams. Climate change was the likely culprit and is causing worsening water quality conditions for fish in Lincoln Creek.

Important for all readers: The most relevant environmental threats associated with contaminants in Lincoln Creek are related to aquatic life and not human health. Acute impacts to aquatic life, including fish mortality, have been documented in Lincoln Creek and the Roaring Fork. However, human health threats are considered minimal because water and soil concentrations are generally below applicable benchmarks and standards, and are not a threat via direct contact during recreational activities. Contaminants in the Lincoln Creek watershed are not readily incorporated into edible parts of fish, and fish do not exist in the most contaminated areas of Lincoln Creek. Therefore, threats to public health are not expected based on current conditions.

So what's next? The collaboration of federal, state, and local stakeholders continues. Community members, CPW, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, The Twin Lakes Reservoir and Canal Company, Trout Unlimited, U.S. Forest Service, The Independence Pass Foundation, Pitkin County, and RFC continue to monitor the water quality throughout Lincoln Creek, looking for trends, and pursuing opportunities for management to improve water quality.

Read the EPA report at https://roaringfork.org/your-watershed/lincoln-creek/.



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Pick up a copy of the User Guide to the Lower Roaring Fork River at the River Center. To download a copy, visit the link below or scan QR code.

https://roaringfork.org/education-andoutreach/river-user-guide/





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Supporter Spotlight

Julia and Ted Behar

What hooked you with RFC?

RFC is the leading advocate for fresh water resources in this wonderful valley and has an invaluable role in protecting this vital resource. I've developed a deeper connection to RFC through their stream science and educational opportunities. I enjoy being involved in helping to collect data related to our freshwater status and depend on RFC for my awareness of the health of our streams and lakes. The summer and winter newsletters keep me informed on stream flow and snowpack. The educational opportunities, particularly the Brooksher Watershed Institute, provides high level academic insight on varied water related issues. I would be a far less informed and responsible citizen of nature without RFC.

What do you wish people knew about RFC?

By monitoring and thereby protecting our vital watershed we all benefit from the work done by RFC. By working with local, state, and national organizations to aggregate information about the health of our rivers and lakes,



RFC aids in making sure that we know how best to care for them. The more educated we are the more likely we understand our environment and can act to protect it. The Brooksher Watershed Institute provides young adults and adults with high level academic presentations. For the younger among us, RFC has innumerable school and after school programs to introduce and teach our future citizens about the value of our riparian environments and the joys to be had from recreating in and around them.

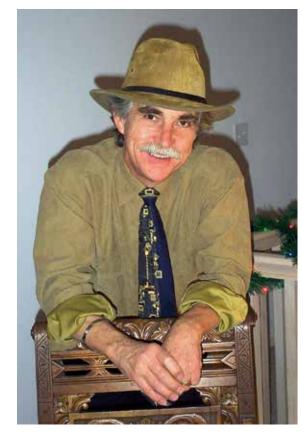
Special Thanks

Long-time Stream Team volunteer, Dick Helmke, is hanging up his waders.

Dick began water quality monitoring for RFC in 2007 and wrapped up his "volunteering career" in 2023, a 16-year run! Throughout those years he monitored Cattle Creek every other month in all seasons and conditions. Dick had numerous teammates over the years and was even able to recruit his wife Marice Doll to help out for a few years. However, it was his consistency that kept the Cattle Creek Stream Team going all these years.

Not only did Dick, a retired engineer, conduct the standard sampling regime, but he went above and beyond, collecting stream flow measurements as well as graphing sampling results.

We truly appreciate Dick's dedication and significant contribution to RFC's baseline water quality monitoring program. THANK YOU!





quality monitoring program conducts sampling at over 20 sites throughout the watershed in partnership with Rive Watch of Colorado. Water quality volunteers, or Stream Teams, assist with our efforts, providing hundreds of hours of monitoring each year and getting to know their local streams and rivers.

you are interestea in oming a Stream Team lunteer, contact Chad Rudow via email at ad@roaringfork.org.

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2024 Robert Billingsley River Conservators:

Jessica and Seth Mason, Lotic Hydrological



RFC will honor Jessica and Seth Mason of Lotic Hydrological as our 2024 Robert Billingsley River Conservators at the Return to the River event on July 17, 2024.

Seth Mason is the Principal Hydrologist at Lotic Hydrological, a consulting firm based in Carbondale. Seth is dedicated to helping local governments and watershed organizations like RFC collect, analyze, and tell stories around data. He hopes that his work helps to motivate community action or policy development for sensible water resource management and protection. Seth received his M.S. in Land Resources and Environmental Sciences from Montana State University and his B.A. in Environmental Studies from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Never one to let a little free time go to waste, Seth is currently completing a Ph.D. in Systems Engineering at Colorado State

University. When he's not in the office, Seth can be found volunteering as a Nordic coach and soccer coach, constantly trying to convince himself that he has a knack for corralling the energy of middleschool boys. In his rare moments of downtime, you can find him herding his two rambunctious boys around the valley on a medley of skis and kayaks, tinkering with bikes and sailboats, or pondering the mysteries of bespoke manual espresso machine designs that seem more like Rube Goldberg inventions than coffee makers.

Jessica Mason is a Water Resources Engineer at Lotic and a super-mom who can often be spotted in local rivers measuring streamflow with

an acoustic doppler with two kids in tow. She received her M.S. in Water Resources Engineering from Montana State University and a B.S. in Civil Engineering and Architecture from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Jessica has over fifteen years of experience in water resources engineering, watershed sciences, and water resource planning. She specializes in hydrological and hydraulic modeling; water rights engineering; deployment and operation of data collection and management systems; and project management. In a former life, Jessica designed bridges, raced with the U.S. Women's Raft Team, swam across the Chesapeake Bay, and danced ballet. These days, you might find her in various corners of the Roaring Fork watershed, maintaining stream gauges, constructing hydraulic models, and designing stream restoration projects. In the summer months, Jessica spends as much time as possible floating rivers and exploring mountainsides with her

two young children. When the weather gets cold, she steps into her alpine ski bindings for powder days or grabs her Nordic skis to coach or train for the next big race. Whether at work or at play, Jessica drives toward her goals with furious intent.

Over the past 10 years, Jessica and Seth have partnered with RFC on numerous projects including the 2016 Crystal

River Management Plan, Fryingpan Flow Evaluation Tool, and Agricultural Drought Resiliency in the Roaring Fork Valley. Their high level, creative thinking coupled with genuine desire to improve the river system on a small or large scale has made their partnership invaluable to RFC. We are grateful for their support, partnership, and friendship!

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Crystal River Restoration at Riverfront Park

For just over a week this spring, crews returned to Riverfront Park to plant native riparian vegetation and install temporary irrigation and wildlife fencing. All installations were done by hand to minimize disturbance. The park is currently open to the public. The Town of Carbondale anticipates removing both the irrigation and fencing in 1-3 years as vegetation establishes.

Welcome New River Stewards:



Alyssa Drake grew up in Golden, Colorado, where her deep appreciation and respect for the outdoors started early in life. She attended the University of Arizona, earning a B.S. in Natural Resources focusing on Conservation Biology. During her summers in college, Alyssa came to the Roaring Fork Valley where she worked as a raft guide on the Colorado River in Glenwood. After graduating, her passion for outdoor pursuits and love for the RFV led her to work as a ski instructor at Buttermilk during the winter months. Whether she's skiing in the winter or rafting in the summer, Alyssa can always

be found immersed in water-related activities. Spending extensive time on the river sparked Alyssa's desire to pursue a career in river conservation. Alyssa is excited to combine her passion for conservation and outdoor recreation to ensure we can enjoy these rivers for generations to come.



Chase Ellsperman is a GIS Analyst for the City of Aspen. He spent his youth exploring the many valleys and peaks of the Roaring Fork watershed and developing a strong conservation ethic. He is a lifelong hunter and angler, and a product of the RFC youth education programs which educate the valley's schools. These days, you'll most often find Chase bushwhacking to discover a new section of fishable water or rock to scramble up. He studied Environmental Science and GIS at Fort Lewis College in Durango, then spent a few years working seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service before

landing back in the valley. He hopes to put his wide range of experiences to good use with the River Stewards and looks forward to giving back to the watershed that has provided him so much.



Melissa Wills is a Grants Manager for the Colorado River District – overseeing the distribution of an average of \$4 million in grants annually to high impact water projects across the Western Slope of Colorado. Melissa has over eight years of nonprofit and philanthropic experience through past work with Vail Valley Foundation and El Pomar Foundation. Previously, Melissa completed the El Pomar Foundation Fellowship Program - a two-year intensive nonprofit executive and grantmaking training in Colorado Springs. Melissa holds a Bachelor's degree in International Studies from

the University of Denver. Originally from Bozeman, Montana, Melissa was raised to find true admiration in some of nature's finest river flows. Melissa lives in Carbondale, CO and can frequently be found backcountry skiing, mountain biking, and backpacking in the Rockies. Melissa is excited to bring her knowledge of West Slope river projects to the River Stewards and the Roaring Fork River.

Staff Flows



Connor Allen was born and raised in the Roaring Fork Valley spending as much time outdoors as possible. From mountain biking to paddle boarding, his love for the outdoors fueled his passion for environmental protection. As a junior at The University of Colorado Boulder majoring in Environmental Studies, he's thrilled

to be joining the RFC team this summer as Watershed Health Intern. He's eager to learn and contribute to protecting the valley's unique watershed.

Thank you to....

Cailyn Raper who has been RFC's Watershed Educator since last fall. She is off to do missionary work in orphanages in Africa this summer and we wish her all the best!

Retired River Stewards Quinn Harnett, Leah Mancabelli, and Chris Vaughan! Thank you for all the years of volunteering at river cleanups, river floats, film festivals and more - all to connect young professionals to their local rivers. Bravo!

Roaring Fork Conservancy has inspired people to explore, value and protect the Roaring Fork Watershed. We bring people together to protect our rivers and work to keep water in the streams, monitor water quality, and preserve riparian habitat. Roaring Fork Conservancy is an independent 501(c)(3) not-forprofit organization registered in the state of Colorado.

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