

# Your Southwestern Water Conservation District at 75

By John Porter Board President, Southwestern Water Conservation District

Created in 1941 by the Colorado General Assembly, the Southwestern Water Conservation District encompasses Archuleta, Dolores, La Plata, Montezuma, San Juan, San Miguel, and parts of Hinsdale, Mineral, and Montrose Counties. As board president, I would like to share some lessons learned in the past 75 years, ones we'll carry through the next 75.

### Lesson #1: Adaptability is a Necessity

Times have changed since 1941. Colorado Statute charges the District with "protecting, conserving, using and developing the water resources of the Southwestern basin for the welfare of the District, and safeguarding for Colorado all waters of the basin to which the state is entitled." Following this mandate, the District worked tirelessly for decades to ensure water supplies would meet growing demand by filing for storage project water rights in almost every major river basin. SWCD lobbied for federal dollars to be spent on project construction in our area. The philosophy was, and continues to be, to plant the seed and help it grow.

This work resulted in the establishment of the Florida Water Conservancy District and Lemon Reservoir; the Pine River Project extension; the Dolores Water Conservancy District and McPhee Reservoir; the Animas La Plata Water Conservancy District, Ridges

Basin Reservoir, and Long Hollow Reservoir; and the San Juan Water Conservancy District and proposed Dry Gulch Reservoir.

As population pressure threatens to dry up agriculture, and regulations and constituent values have expanded to include environmental protections and recreational use, the District's mission has adapted necessarily. When the ALP Project debate was underway, for example, SWCD was integral in the formation of the San Juan Recovery Program, established to recover endangered fish species populations in the San Juan River in New Mexico downstream of the proposed reservoir. SWCD currently funds a variety of essential work, including stream flow data collection and mercury sampling in local reservoirs. To address mounting concerns regarding future compact curtailment and drought, SWCD supports water supply augmentation through winter cloud seeding and exploring creative solutions like "water banking."

**Lesson #2: Be at the Table**  
Participation at the local, state, and federal levels is essential to protecting our resources. That's why the District is a member of Colorado Water Congress, a state entity focused on water policy.

The District takes positions and engages in debate on water-related bills during the state legislative season. We keep a close eye on federal water management policies, often submitting public comments and work-

ing with federal and state partners to ensure continued state control of water rights. The District is supportive of the Colorado Water Conservation Board's instream flow program to establish minimum stream flows for the environment, and is working to improve the program's ability to adapt to rural community needs for future development. As for the broader Colorado River system, SWCD participates in dialogue among Upper Basin states through the Upper Colorado River Commission.

At the local level, the District has represented water development interests in the collaborative River Protection Workgroup, which resulted in the Hermosa Creek Watershed Act. SWCD worked with other Roundtable members to ensure our corner of the state was heard in the Colorado Water Plan.

### Lesson #3: Reinvest Local Tax Dollars Locally

It's a not-so-well-kept secret that SWCD's grant program supports water work across the District: domestic supply and irrigation infrastructure improvements, recreational development, habitat rehabilitation, collaborative community processes, and water quality studies. Here are a few recent examples:

- Archuleta, Mineral and Hinsdale Counties: Rio Blanco habitat restoration by the San Juan Conservation District, watershed health via the San Juan Mixed Conifer Group;
- La Plata County: initial studies for Long Hollow

Reservoir, the La Plata West Water Authority's rural domestic water system;

- San Juan County: Center for Snow & Avalanche Studies dust-on-snow research, mining reclamation through the Animas River Stakeholders Group;

- Montezuma and Dolores Counties: the Dolores River Dialogue (a collaboration focused on issues below McPhee Dam), irrigation efficiency improvements by the High Desert Conservation District; and,

- San Miguel and Montrose Counties: the San Miguel Watershed Coalition's watershed studies and irriga-

tion diversion improvements to allow fish and boater passage, domestic system upgrades for the town of Norwood.

### Lesson #4: Educate the Next Generation of Water Leaders

For more than 20 years, the District has spearheaded regional water education by sponsoring an Annual Children's Water Festival for students across the basin and administering the Water Information Program with contributions from participating entities. SWCD played an instrumental role in creating the statewide Colorado Foundation for Water Education, and con-

tinues to sponsor the organization. As generations of water leaders step back, new stewards must step forward to ensure that the southwest Colorado we know and love continues.

For these lessons and more in water management, join us at the upcoming Annual Water Seminar on Friday, April 1 at 8:30am at the DoubleTree Hotel in Durango. Register in advance (\$35) online by phone (970-247-1302), or at the door (\$40). For more information, visit <http://swxcd.org/programs/annual-water-seminar>. We hope to see you there!

