



## THE SOUTHWESTERN WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Developing and Conserving the Waters in the  
SAN JUAN AND DOLORES RIVERS AND THEIR TRIBUTARIES  
West Building – 841 East Second Avenue  
DURANGO, COLORADO 81301  
(970) 247-1302

### BOARD MEMORANDUM

**From:** Steve Wolff, General Manager  
**Subject:** Strategic Plan – Moving Forward  
**Date:** 31 October 2021

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As we move forward to develop a final Strategic Plan for the District, I thought it might be useful to provide the SWCD Board with a few of my thoughts on the plan and the process moving forward.

First, and most importantly, this plan needs to be **your** plan! The plan is intended to outline the Board's five-year vision for the District. District staff (Laura and myself), along with our contractors, are merely "tools" to help implement the plan you approve. During our meeting next week to review this document, **I would hope we can hear from all board members individually** – what you like and what you don't like.

I believe a final plan should be more concise and focused than this initial draft. The point of putting so much in this first version was my feeling that more thoughts in here may help the discussion and that it is easier to edit by removing material than trying to add. I certainly don't think our goal should be to have a final document at the end of this meeting. We should plan on having a couple more versions to work through.

I suggest we focus our November discussion on the big picture. Here are a few questions along those lines to elicit board discussion:

1. Do we have the right Strategic Priorities listed?
2. What should be our 5-year goals for each of those priorities?
3. Do we have the resources to carry out the items listed?
4. Does our budget reflect how we have answered questions 1 - 3?

Jacob Bornstein will join us for the first hour of the discussion but has another commitment after that. As always, please feel free to call me if you want to discuss any of this.



*“To protect, conserve, and develop waters of the San Juan and Dolores Rivers and their tributaries in Southwestern Colorado.”*

## Southwestern Water Conservation District

Strategic Plan: 2022 – 2026

Draft Version 10-12-21

Adopted: XXX

### Background

The Southwestern Water Conservation District (District or SWCD) was created on April 16, 1941 by the Colorado General Assembly through House Bill #795 ([Statute 37-47](#)). The District 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 District Board of Directors, which meets every other month.

SWCD’s statutory authority is to protect, conserve, use and develop the water resources of the San Juan and Dolores River Basins (Figure 1) for the welfare of the District, and safeguard for Colorado all waters of the basins to which the state is entitled. Following this mandate, the District has assumed a broad strategic role on behalf of its diverse constituents. District representatives advocate for southwestern Colorado’s water interests at the local, state, and regional level.

Since 1941, SWCD has long played an active part in negotiations among Colorado River water users within the state, serving in an advisory capacity to the State of Colorado on the Upper Colorado River Commission and regularly engaging with state and federal agencies and on interstate Colorado River management.

SWCD supports water-related projects and programs throughout the District’s nine

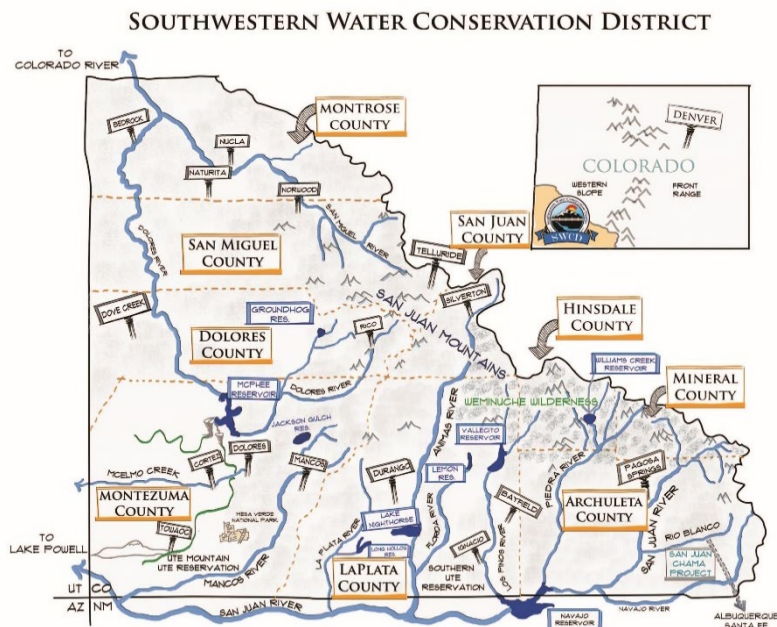


Figure 1. Map of the Southwestern Water Conservation District.

counties. Specifically, funding goes to projects that significantly impact water management and development, support data collection, and enhance water education in the region.

SWCD has also led water supply planning within the District, including advocacy for construction of the Dolores Project and Animas-La Plata Project. Over its 80-year history, SWCD has held conditional water rights across the nine river basins in southwestern Colorado to assist in the protection, use and development of water within the state. For the public benefit, SWCD currently holds conditional water rights on the Animas River: the SWCD/La Plata County depletion water right, the SWCD “Project” Water Rights, the La Plata Exchange Plan and the San Juan County Water Rights.

SWCD’s grant program provides financial support to numerous entities across the District for a variety of purposes, among them water supply and watershed enhancement projects, environmental improvements, collaborative community processes, water quality studies, and educational initiatives. In 2021, the SWCD Board allocated \$230,000 to the grant program.

For more than 35 years, the District has spearheaded regional water education by inviting prominent experts to share their expertise at its Annual Water Seminar. For more than 20 years, SWCD has sponsored an Annual Children’s Water Festival for fifth graders across the basins. The District also administers and partially funds the Water Information Program, which provides balanced water education content and programming to southwest Colorado.

SWCD carries out this essential work thanks to a small tax levied on property within the District. In 2021 the Board of Directors adopted a budget showing total revenues of \$1,863,588 with \$1,739,689 in proposed operating expenses. The District’s audited ending fund balance for fiscal year 2020 was \$3,756,612. The District currently employs two full-time staff, a general manager and a programs coordinator. The District 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 District staff, with support from Wellstone Collaborative Strategies, have worked to develop this draft plan.

# Strategic priorities

## 1. Engage in Colorado River, interstate, and transmountain issues

### Overview

The District has a unique and important role to play as one of three entities in state with the statutory charge to safeguard the waters of Colorado. As such, a primary goal of the District is to protect water for future generations, and interstate Colorado river issues provide one of the greatest threats to water protection. Much water development in southwest Colorado is relatively recent in Colorado's history and there is concern that without water protection the ability for the region to grow and change over time will be foreclosed. In particular, with fewer pre-compact rights than many basins, the District's water users are potentially at higher risk under a strict curtailment regimen.

Furthermore, SWCD is concerned about exporting the beauty, culture, and livelihood of southwestern Colorado for the benefit of users outside of this basin. This is inclusive of farming due to buy and dry, the needs of communities, recreation, and the environment. Big river 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 the District. This priority points directly to our statutorily charge to protect, conserve, use and develop the water resources of the San Juan and Dolores River Basins for the welfare of the District, and safeguard for Colorado all waters of the basins to which the state is entitled.

Following this mandate, the District has assumed a broad strategic role on behalf of its diverse constituents. District representatives advocate for southwestern Colorado's water interests at the local, state, and regional level.

Several major Colorado River topics currently under discussion include:

- **Worsening hydrologic conditions on the Colorado River and resulting systemic uncertainty:** As one of the three entities within the state statutorily charged with safeguarding Colorado's water, SWCD is duty-bound to engage with the State of Colorado as it contends with increasing hydrologic shortages in the Colorado River Basin and implications for compact deliveries and other critical agreements to which the State is a party.
- **Protecting the District in the case of curtailment:** The District is in a unique position to evaluate the risks posed to southwestern Colorado in the event of curtailment. SWCD has supported several studies to evaluate these concerns (Phase I, II, and III of the Colorado River Risk Study) and continues to review potential scenarios and model outcomes to understand the position of water users in southwest Colorado.
- **Post-2026 Colorado River Operations:** The 2007 Interim Guidelines<sup>1</sup> are set to expire on September 30, 2026. The process to renegotiate a new set of operating criteria for the Colorado River system is already underway between the seven basin states, relevant tribes, the U.S. Department of Interior, and the Republic of Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> "Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and the Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead". U.S. Department of the Interior. December 2007.

- **Exploration of a Demand Management program in Colorado:** Demand management (DM) is a novel concept that, if implemented, has the potential to alter water use and administration within the Upper Basin and, on a more local level, within SWCD's boundaries. SWCD has not adopted a position of support, opposition or neutrality on the feasibility or development, let alone implementation, of a DM program within the Upper Basin. There are simply too many unknowns at this point. Accordingly, SWCD will remain involved in the evaluation and potential formation and implementation of any DM program Colorado may pursue.

## 5-Year Goals

- **Goal:** Waters within the District, to the extent possible, are protected for current and future uses.
  - *Indicator 1:* Beginning in 2022, the District is engaged and helping to inform Colorado River Basin discussions at the District, state, and interstate levels.
  - *Indicator 2:* Any newly negotiated big river operation guidelines are a product the District can support.
  - *Indicator 3:* By 2023, the District has a good understanding of intra-district water supply, demand and risks; and has initiated discussions with local water user entities on future needs and issues.

## Priority Implementation Strategies

- **Stay engaged and effectively represent the broad needs and interests of the SW at the state and Colorado River Basin levels:** The District has opportunities to be a leader in communicating the region's concerns and thoughts on demand management and interim guidelines. To do so, it needs to continue being a voice at the state and federal levels to protect existing uses. The District expands its engagement in becoming the leader in communicating southwest Colorado interests to state agencies. To the extent allowed, the District will take an active role in the interim guidelines, participating in state and interstate conversations wherever possible.
- **Work with a broad range of stakeholders to understand potential impacts of interstate regulations and build a southwest consensus:** The District should work towards building southwest Colorado's consensus on Colorado River issues to enable the region to be a constructive player in state and interstate conversations. SWCD should develop a vision and policy on Colorado River issues by convening different voices to help guide the discussion and develop possible policy recommendations.
- **Understand the water management position relative to other areas and identify potential impacts of interstate regulation:** The District needs to support the region in planning for tighter inter- and intrastate management conditions as well as a drier future across the basin and in southwest Colorado. This includes planning for a decrease in supply and an imbalance between supply and demand.
- **Coordinate and partner with the Colorado River District (CRWCD) on big river issues:** SWCD will continue to coordinate with CRWCD staff on common issues and seek to have an annual joint board meeting to address common themes.

- **Continue to monitor existing and new transmountain diversions:** Remain active in monitoring existing and proposed TMDs that export water outside of the District. Continue to assess value of legal opposition in water court cases.

## 2. Support southwestern Colorado in being adaptive and resilient in face of drought and climate

### Overview

The District 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. According to the CWCB's latest study on water availability<sup>2</sup> under various future climate scenarios, stream flows in southwest Colorado could be reduced in some areas by as much as 35%, the greatest stream flow reduction on the western slope.

In addition, 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 region is expected to have three times the damages due to wildfires, which is the greatest increase for any region in the state. Lastly, more than five times as much damage due to flooding is expected within the District, which is also the greatest increased risk in the state.

(Source)

Furthermore, in the face of reduced supplies, the District must prepare for inevitably tighter management. Many water users don't have headgates that are lockable or have working measurement devices.

### 5-Year Goals

- **Goal 1:** Water users have tools and agreements in place to understand, adapt to and be resilient in the face of extended drought and climate change.
  - *Indicator 1:* By 2024, funding partnerships (state, federal, local, or other) are in place to support drought planning and implementation efforts.
  - *Indicator 2:* By 2026, the District supports the development of two to three plans for water users and providers at a sub-basin scale.
- **Goal 2:** The District leads in raising awareness of southwest Colorado-specific impacts of climate change on water resources and water management.
  - *Indicator 1:* By 2022, the District will have added a climate change impacts page to its website.
  - *Indicator 2:* By 2023, the District will have hosted a webinar or other presentation focused on the impacts of climate change on water resources in southwest Colorado.

### Priority Implementation Strategies:

- **Cooperative management plan initial steps:** Complete modeling work to identify local risks and opportunities. Work with all the stakeholders to reduce or minimize the risk to the water users and identify flexibilities to help manage water in the face of extended drought and climate change, building upon existing infrastructure and partnerships. Identify local partners to develop cooperative management plans.

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<sup>2</sup> Colorado Water Plan Analysis and Technical Update, Colorado Water Conservation Board, 2019.

- **Seek to address climate change planning gaps for water users and sub-basins:** Serve as a District-wide convener and lead by bringing together stakeholder groups, guiding local leaders to funding, and providing financial support for planning efforts via SWCD's grant program to ensure climate change-related planning gaps are filled across the District.
- **Umbrella augmentation plans or related:** Where needed, work to develop or support augmentation plans in water short areas that can be utilized as a tool for climate and drought planning.
- **Seek funding to support the region:** Work with the Congressional delegation to seek federal funding to support climate resiliency, infrastructure, and forest health.
- **Serve as a key disseminator of information on southwest-Colorado specific impacts of climate change and their expected impacts on local water resources:** The District will carry information regarding the climate change impacts to local decision makers, stakeholders, and planners whose actions affect water resources management in southwestern Colorado. The District will also endeavor to raise public awareness on locally-specific climate change impacts to water resources.

### **Additional Implementation Strategies:**

- **Support forest health:** Resiliency in face of fire and forest management is important to prevent damage to the region's water supplies. The District will participate in forest health initiatives and collaboratives to understand and advocate for benefits to water supply and quality. In addition, the District will partner with land management agencies working on forest health to monitor the benefits or potential risks to water supply and quality.



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

- **Municipal / domestic water use, especially small communities:** Some of the smaller communities do not have senior water rights or augmentation plans. In addition, several communities are growing and so are their water needs.
- **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 measures.
- **Environment:** Having a healthy environment and ensuring that native fish have sufficient clean water to survive is important. The endangered fish species recovery programs need to continue to be supported. 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 are specific areas of concern.
- **Tribal:** Support partnerships to ensure tribal water needs are met.

#### 5-Year Goal

- **Goal:** Avoid and minimize potential conflicts through active planning and engagement.
  - *Indicator 1:* By 2023, the District has a good 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:* By 2026, at least one multi-purpose project is initiated with support/participation of multiple stakeholders that proactively meets at least two needs and can serve as a model for future efforts.

#### Implementation Strategies:

- **Conduct basin-wide planning:** Support integrated planning efforts through funding and engagement. Understand the water rights in the district to meet multiple needs and implications under scenarios identified in the Southwest Basin Implementation Plan.
- **Water quantity and quality data collection:** 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.

- **Further develop diversity and balance as part of the District’s culture of representing all its constituents.** Issues are presented to the SWCD board from a balanced viewpoint or reflecting various viewpoints. SWCD educational events (such as the seminar) provide a diversity of experts and topics relevant to all types of uses and interests. SWCD staff seek to engage diverse users that represent perspectives from across the District and various water interests.
- **Engage with partners and stakeholders to proactively work on identifying opportunities for mutual benefit and potential conflict:** Support the resolution of local conflicts through consensus among all relevant stakeholders by being a convener and hosting a high-integrity process. Partner with Colorado Parkers and Wildlife, CWCB, and conservation nonprofits to be involved in instream flow discussions earlier. Engage with county commissioners in all nine counties to encourage dialogue. Engage the Roundtable, irrigation and conservancy districts, tribal engagement, local government, and non-profits on an on-going basis.
- **Tribal partnership:** The District will continue to strengthen relationships with both tribes and identify opportunities to partner.
- **Legislative advocacy (federal and state):** The District will continue to monitor federal and state legislation and policy development and advocate for the interests of the District.

## Additional Implementation Strategies

- **Prioritize agricultural conservation<sup>3</sup>** efforts where it could have multiple benefits, such as collaborative resiliency and improved stream flows in areas where environmental, municipal, or recreational water availability is low. Based off basin-wide planning efforts, these areas can be identified and targeted with outreach to producers. Tactics include putting in sprinkler systems and supporting interested agricultural producers to switch to crops that use less water and are more profitable. In some cases where increased consumptive use could improve pre-compact rights by demonstrating higher levels of historic consumptive use, efficiency measures could be implemented to better safeguard the basin’s water supplies.
- **Support the environment and improve water availability:** The District will invest in riparian restoration to replace tamarisk and Russian olive with cottonwoods and willows and work to restore degraded streams.
- **Protecting pre-compact water rights to safeguard water supplies:**
  - Partner with local land trusts to protect pre-compact agricultural water rights as well as water management and land use practices that benefit both agriculture and the environment.
  - When agricultural lands are being converted to developments or being divided up, support water rights management practices that preserve the historic consumptive use of pre-compact water.
  - Prioritize grant requests that maintain pre-compact water rights within the District.

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Agricultural conservation often improves the efficiency of agriculture and if the crop was not getting sufficient water through flood irrigation, efficiency measures can increase consumptive use while reducing total diversion amounts.

## 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 in the District that requires evaluation, rehabilitation and reinvestment. The challenges and costs to rebuild and repair are significant. Yet it is important for maximizing storage, ensuring agricultural deliveries, enhancement of native fish needs, and supplying municipal needs for communities that this infrastructure to be restored and improved upon urgently.

Deteriorating agricultural ditches, diversions, and reservoirs means some of Colorado's water never reaches the crops, and in some cases, threatens to stall ongoing use of precious pre-compact water rights within the District. Moreover, efficiency in agricultural water deliveries is a critical issue in record dry hydrologic conditions, so blow outs on key ditches will only compound irrigator concerns. (local data?)

Municipal infrastructure must upgrade water and wastewater treatment to keep up with new water quality regulations. In 2020, the American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that it will take \$10.2 billion over the next 20 years to maintain and upgrade the state's drinking water infrastructure and another \$4.7 billion for infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some municipal water rights are not fully secured and the area is experiencing growth. Several small rural municipalities in southwest Colorado do not have adequate domestic water supply for dry summers. The District can support these communities evaluate their supply gaps, implement strategies to address their needs, and seek state funding.

Water storage is valuable tool for southwestern Colorado in drier hydrologic conditions. Maximizing existing storage within the District 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 the District are under storage restrictions to protect the public, and the costs for their repair and rehabilitation are major challenges to continue their operation. The District serves as a key local advocate for state and federal funding to support these much-needed projects.

### 5-Year Goals

- **Goal:** The greatest water needs are met and risks reduced.
  - *Indicator 1:* Water infrastructure restoration, conservation, and storage opportunities that strategically support meeting the other goals are identified by January of 2023 and supported through planning and grant efforts on an ongoing basis.

### Implementation Strategies

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<sup>4</sup> "Nothing Lasts Forever," *Headwaters* Summer 2020 on aging infrastructure, p. 13.

- Identify and acquire storage rights to support the needs of other water users.
- Review grant program funding and its ability to leverage state and federal dollars to maximize the benefit of our resources to meet the goals of the district.
- Continue to work at the state and federal level to seek additional funding opportunities to meet identified needs within the district.
- Ensure that the District serves as a knowledge center for aging infrastructure and storage needs in southwestern Colorado. Resources such as the Project List in Southwest Basin Implementation Plan can help inform us.
- Educate constituents and key decisionmakers on gaps in water supply needs across southwestern Colorado as identified in Colorado's water plan and its technical update.

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

**Overview:** Building and maintaining a culture of mutual trust and respect among District 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 the District’s mission. The District’s internal culture must serve as an example of how our partners, stakeholders and even adversaries are treated. The District’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 District representatives to stay focused on their common goals, undeterred by unrelated issues that derail progress and distract from the District’s statutory obligations to its constituents. For example, having clear staff job descriptions, director responsibilities, and fluid communication with District consultants ensures that expectations of each team member’s contributions are clear.

With the District’s lean budget and limited capacity, board, staff, and consultant commitment to efficiency is critical to achieving the District’s other strategic priorities. Improving operational efficiency starts with the development of this strategic plan, which will guide the District 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.

### 5-Year Goals:

- **Goal 1:** Increase professionalism by establishing clear expectations for the District’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 2023, board will consider adoption of District investment policy to ensure appropriate financial management of its funds.
- **Goal 2:** Align District resources and activities with strategic plan priorities.
  - *Indicator 1:* Board and staff annually review and update strategic plan.
  - *Indicator 2:* By 2022, review and discuss District staffing needs.
  - *Indicator 3:* Starting in 2023, ensure budgeted resources are directed towards strategic plan priorities.
  - *Indicator 4:* Further improve coordination and utilization of District 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.
  - *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.

## Implementation Strategies

- **Seek internal relationships based on professionalism, trust, and respect.** Relationships amongst board, board and staff, and between staff will be grounded in respect. Ensure the general manager is meeting expectations of the board and there is a desire to always seek consensus on issues, rather than going to a vote.
- **Utilize tools that provide clear direction on District management.** Finalization and continued review of District personnel policies and other internal management will clarify internal management expectations.
- **Pursue opportunities for transparency with the public when appropriate.** In addition to ongoing compliance with the Colorado Open Meetings Law, the District can identify and pursue opportunities for additional transparency measures, including for example posting a public version of the board packet, posting the draft SWCD budget online, and providing remote access to in-person meetings.
- **Prioritize fiscal responsibility:** Efficient, transparent use of public monies, including development of an investment policy, improved investment strategies, strong budgetary management, and refined internal accounting will engender trust with constituents.
- **Continually improve upon internal management:** Effective administration and internal management to ensure a smooth-running District will allow the board, staff, and consultants to focus on priority water matters.
- **Board review of staffing needs.** There have been intermittent discussions about the value of transitioning to in-house counsel or engineering, hiring part-time administration staff, or adding a third employee to support the general manager. Further review of this need would help clarify board goals and expectations for staff.
- **Evaluate the need to pursue additional revenue:** Given the priorities outlined in the strategic plan, it will be necessary to review whether the District's current revenues are sufficient to enable meeting goals outlined under the plan.

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

### Overview

The District's policy efforts are effective when its voice and mission are easily identified by local and state decisionmakers, as well as its constituents. Building the District's name recognition and credibility will require prioritizing public outreach to brand SWCD as southwest Colorado's water watchdog and the "go-to" on water policy in our corner of the state. While the District 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 the District's work with the public. Moreover, strengthening the District's digital communication infrastructure will prepare it to lead rapid mobilization 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 District accountability to constituents by regularly reporting District 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, the District will be better positioned having already implemented key outreach strategies.

### Five-Year Goals

- **Goal:** Increase District mission recognition and credibility with target audiences.
  - *Indicator 1:* By 2022, the District board, staff, and consultants have agreed upon an "elevator speech" and tagline that adequately summarizes SWCD's work.
  - *Indicator 2:* By 2023, the District 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, the District staff has prioritized and begun implementing a suite of selected strategies to reach target audiences.

### Priority Implementation Strategies

- **Develop a consistent SWCD "brand" and message:** A District outreach strategy will necessarily require the board, staff, and consultants coalesce around one or several central messages informed by the priorities developed in this strategic plan. As the natural and day-to-day spokespeople for the District, this coherence of message will be invaluable in making the District's mission communicated clearly and consistently by those closest to it. This branding effort would include even, for example, how we refer to the District (SWCD, the District, Southwest, Southwestern, the "Southwest District, "Southwest Water").
- **Identify target audiences to deliver the District's message:** Once the message is clear, who needs to hear it and why? The District will need to identify local decision makers, key local water professionals and leaders, and/or the general public. Once this target audience or audiences are identified, it will be important to use that to inform which tools will best reach them.

- **Increase the District’s digital footprint to reach and expand our audience:** In today’s media landscape, consumers expect information to come to them. That means if the District wants to communicate with an audience, a newsletter lands in their inbox or tidbits show up on their social media feed. Other ideas include submitting quarterly op-eds to the local papers or pursuing a regular guest column.
- **Invest time and energy in enhancing the District’s relationship with both tribes:** Commitment to enhancing the relationship with both tribes through regular contact at various levels (staff, board, consultants and formal/informal) will be invaluable to the District carrying out its mission.
- **Regularly seek out key decisionmakers and other constituents in their arenas to build relationships and listen to their input:** Some opportunities may include developing a regular circuit for meetings with key decisionmakers (e.g. BOCCs and City Councils) and water users (e.g. DWCD, MVIC shareholders meeting, PRID, CC Ditch). From Chris Treese, “Constituents don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”
- **Prioritize and improve the District’s media relationships:** Developing a rapport with local media to invite coverage of water issues may involve one-on-one meetings between staff and the press, requesting an annual audience with the *Durango Herald’s* editorial board, and sending emails acknowledging journalists when they “get it right.” Prioritizing media relationships also means understanding their pressures and responding to their requests for information in a timely manner. It may be helpful to identify a District press contact who responds to all media inquiries.
- **Update SWCD content and materials to reflect SWCD strategic planning priorities and highlight the District’s diversity:** As SWCD’s strategic plan is finalized, it would help to reorganize website and SWCD’s brochure to make the District’s priorities clear in our public facing content. The District might want to consider a short electronic annual report to let people know “what we’ve done for them lately.” There may be opportunities to invest in professional support, such as graphic designers for SWCD materials or a photographer to develop an SWCD photobank of diverse uses and water features across the District to use in materials, on the website and for presentations.
- **Enhance educational program offerings such as the Children’s Water Festival and Annual Water Seminar.** With many events moving to a hybrid format during the pandemic, there is the opportunity for SWCD to make current educational programs more accessible for constituents across the District’s nine counties. Partnering with entities such as the Four Corners Water Center at Fort Lewis College will enhance the District’s opportunities to engage younger audiences.
- **Educate southwest constituents on the relevance of Big River issues for their communities and SWCD’s leadership role on their behalf.** The District will provide programs (webinars, presentations) and content (newsletters, website, press releases) for public consumption to educate the public on Colorado River issues and their impact on southwest Colorado communities and increase public identification of SWCD as a lead agency on the topic. The District should clearly communicate to constituents the work being done on their behalf.



### Other notes

- **Knowledge and Understanding:** The District should be a place of knowledge for the region.
  - Identify what the issues are.
  - Conduct studies about climate change, how to use and save water, irrigation efficiency.
  - Better outreach, support, and coordination with water districts. SWWCD should know every reservoir project and support those with small staff in meeting needs.
  - Monitoring - Water quality and supply monitoring
  - Understand all the issues by county across the SW and to have active communication with mix of county stakeholders, including county commission.
  - Develop a common understanding across the District of the importance of water to the region and the opportunities for multiple use of the resources
  - How both economies of ag and environment dependent on a healthy and sustainable water supply and quality. Agricultural and recreational economy. Our little rural economies are dependent on healthy watersheds.

### Other In-Basin Issues Mentioned

- Drought and Colorado river issues are all based on **climate change** and we need to be able to talk about it.
- **District leadership** is needed especially in small communities. The SW region needs clarity on the issues and the District needs to set the table and process with cooperative problem solving.
- **Tribes** are constituents and deserve representation as one of our roles is to meet the needs of the tribes. Need to develop a better and more in-depth relationships with the tribes and meet perhaps 2x per year based on their interest. The District and the tribes should work together to shape the destiny of the SW. This should be at every level: staff to staff, board to council, legal counsel to legal counsel.

## 7. Program Opportunities

### What's working well and what need improvement

Respondents were asked which of the current programs are working well and which are not. In general, there was a feeling that a lot is working fairly well, but there is some areas of improvement for all programs.

- **Water supply augmentation through weather modification:** Several interviewees believe that it is important to continue supporting weather modification, while an equal number are not sure if it's effective or that the District should be spending so much a year on it. If it is effective, one board member mentioned the need to upgrade systems.
- **Endangered fish species recovery efforts in the San Juan Basin:** Many interviewees discussed this as one of the most successful programs. That said, most water users don't know how important it is and outreach is needed. Given its broad importance, one board member indicated they were not sure why we aren't bringing more funding partners together. One board member warned that the program and federal funding expire in 2023 and we need to be prepared for how we are going to handle that. Fish ladders and other infrastructure will have to be maintained in perpetuity.
- **SWCD's grant program:** The grant program had the largest diversity of opinion.
  - **Benefits:** The majority of respondents indicated that grant program is good and that people rely on it. The District has become a go to for amalgamating funding for larger projects by providing match. Money for emergency repairs is vital. Some respondents indicated that more money should be put into the grant program because of so much aging infrastructure and the need to maintain these water rights. In addition to providing grants, the program has other benefits. It is a tool of communication and partnership in knowing who's doing what on the ground.
  - **Outreach:** Could do more outreach, as a lot of people don't know about it.
  - **Competing Priorities:** Others expressed an interest in only supporting the emergency funds, given other priorities.
  - **Level of Need:** Concern was expressed regarding the extent to which funding is needs based and if water users could pay for some of the repairs themselves.
  - **Progress:** There was some acknowledgement that the grant program has improved and is funding a more diverse set of projects across the region, but more work in that direction could be beneficial.
  - **Operational Improvements:** It was mentioned that the grant program does not require contracts and that the guidelines aren't clear. It was suggested that it could be operationally improved without making it too bureaucratic.
  - **Environmental Projects:** While the grant program has funded important environmental projects, it was noted that the percentage in the funding is small and that sometimes these projects are disqualified for small technicalities compared to other projects.
- **Regional water education (Annual Children's Water Festival, Water Information Program, Annual Water Seminar):** Nearly all respondents consider the Children's Water Festival and WIP program to be successful. There is concern that we live in such a polarized country and education can help be a bridge. As for the Annual Water Seminar, it was noted that this has improved over time and is beginning to address the topics of interest to those in the region and have more of a two-way conversation.

- **Federal and state legislative and Policy monitoring, communications, and analysis:** Need to be more representative for when we choose to support or not support legislation.
- **Colorado River negotiations:** See above comments for big river negotiations.
- **Water Rights management:** District has a small portfolio. Some believe that the District should get more involved in acquiring water rights, but others mention this is expensive and the District should be focused on partnering with other water rights holders to help them maintain their rights, absolute and conditional.
- **Data collection:** Supporting gaging stations and water quality monitoring is very important. If we don't know how much water we have, it is hard to manage. USGS is struggling to maintain some of these stations on their own.

#### Strategic Opportunities for Growth

- **Planning:** We should have a comprehensive look at what should be accomplished related to watershed health, water quality, or quantity needs
- **Driving Force:** Should be a convener rather than commenter. For instance, should be fostering steam management plan
- **Get more people involved:** Need to do a better job getting more people involved, including younger people such as at Fort Lewis College.
- **Partnerships:** Improving partnerships was a general theme. This includes with the Tribes as mentioned above, and also with the River District, CWCB, and DWR. Additional emphasis was on partners within the basin to help solve problems and fund priorities. One interviewee mentioned that we should be offering more services to water users, such as engineering support when they have a need.
- **Public Affairs / Engagement:** A common theme is that the District could do a better job at engaging its constituents around a variety of issues.