

INTRODUCTION: COLORADO POLICY PATHWAYS



Colorado is in flux. With our state’s economy, land and water use, and community development patterns shifting rapidly, decision makers and advocates working to chart the future face both risks and opportunities. The rivers that feed our cities and farms play key roles in these shifts, and 2020 marks an important opportunity to plan better — and plan smarter — around river and water policy across the state in the decades to come.

From the Yampa to the Dolores, the Arkansas to the Poudre, change is underway. Colorado’s rivers are an integral part of the state’s economy, its long-term water security and sustainability, and its appeal to residents and visitors alike. Water policy will be a key ingredient in driving smart solutions for the future of the state.

Three key themes will drive change over the coming decade:

1. Colorado’s population is growing rapidly. People from all over the country and the world are drawn to our public lands and waters, thriving cities, and diverse communities.
2. The outdoor economy is booming,¹ driven in part by this remarkable population growth.

3. But our rural/urban and Eastern Slope/Western Slope divides persist, and structure our conflicts over water, land use, and economic development.

As river advocates, we see opportunities to leverage these changes by increasing our involvement at the state policy level. Leveraging the voices of our many Colorado members and friends, American Whitewater will work collaboratively with a diverse set of partners to elevate smart river management through state legislation that promotes river health, water quality, and boater safety.

This paper details our core principles and our approach to the 2020 Colorado Legislative Session and beyond.

American Whitewater

PROTECT

American Whitewater has worked diligently to collaborate with a large variety of stakeholders since our inception. We understand that cooperation and collaboration provide the most reliable path to success for future generations. Throughout our history, we have worked to protect rivers from projects that do not safeguard their longterm ecosystem and economic health across the country. To accomplish this, American Whitewater has set its focus on the continued support and expansion for our nation’s Wild and Scenic Rivers. Public land management plans create blueprints for river corridors and are only revised every 20-30 years. This is a critical opportunity to secure better protections for

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¹ Colorado’s outdoor economy has grown by 81% since 2014, according to the state’s 2019 Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan: <https://www.bea.gov/news/2019/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-prototype-states-2017>

THREE CORE PRINCIPLES GUIDE OUR POLICY WORK



River stewardship is the key to a sustainable future, and wise water policy can address many dimensions of the change drivers noted above.

Three core principles inform and focus our approach to water policy in Colorado:

1. *A Focus on Economic Development*
2. *A Commitment to Strengthen Infrastructure*
3. *An Orientation toward Quality of Life*

These principles have always been critical to our Colorado program, and continue to inform our community-focused approach to water policy. We know that policies that benefit boaters also promote healthy rivers, and healthy rivers mean healthy communities.

1. A FOCUS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Nearly half of our Colorado members live in the Front Range. Nearly half of our members live in Front Range communities; they're among the millions of people who spend their dollars across the state, especially in the rural regions of the mountains and the Western Slope. Boaters and white-water enthusiasts from the Front Range head to the mountains and Western Slope as often as they can to play on snowmelt rivers. Rural economies thrive on money spent by the boating community—some more than others.

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rivers through Wild and Scenic Eligibility, Wilderness and Special Management Areas, and improved water quality protections.

RESTORE

Rivers across the country have been hindered from experiencing their natural flows. Many rivers across the state lack the natural qualities they require to be considered healthy due to human interference. American Whitewater combats this by partnering with local boating clubs, sponsoring river cleanup days, and providing a strong voice at the table to fight for opportunities to restore flows for restoring habitat and recreation opportunities, as well as to ensure the removal of dams that have outlived their useful life.

ENJOY

We center our work around protecting and restoring rivers so that we can all partake in our final (and most smile-inducing) principle: Enjoy. American Whitewater's website houses the nation's most extensive atlas to whitewater recreation, and we have worked to improve access to rivers around the country. We share a common belief with our members that a day on the water is a day well spent.

We see many opportunities to drive economic development in a community-based, equitable, and impactful way. Yet a major issue in Colorado politics and state planning is the urban/rural divide between heavily populated Front Range cities and rural communities of the mountains and plains. No one-size policy fits all communities in a state as diverse as Colorado. We support growing recreation economies across the state, from visiting our long-time favorite food stops after a day of adventure, to advocating for expanding state-level incentives for new and emerging small businesses to start growing.

Many rural communities rely on local rivers and creeks to diversify their economies. We support policies to:

- help keep these rivers healthy
- provide additional support to develop smart growth of the recreation economy that enriches and promotes the culture of rural Colorado, and
- enable community-backed, community-led growth.

2. A COMMITMENT TO STRENGTHEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Following a pattern seen nationally, Colorado roads and bridges are in urgent need of repair, upgrade, and investment.² Overcrowding and access will become even larger issues as growth continues. In the 2019 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, the State of Colorado acknowledges that two of the top three barriers to outdoor recreation are overcrowding and congestion, and that we need long-term planning and maintenance of existing infrastructure to overcome this hurdle.³ We support

legislation that will strengthen and modernize the state's existing infrastructure.

Specifically, American Whitewater will support policies that:

- meet the needs of a growing population, and ensure that recreation traffic to rural areas benefits those areas. We support legislation that provides infrastructure needed to strengthen and modernize the foundation that has already been laid throughout the state
- mitigate impacts on natural resources while ensuring access, and choose investments that benefit natural resources whenever possible
- ensure safety in infrastructure that supports river access

3. AN ORIENTATION TOWARD QUALITY OF LIFE

Time in nature, time on rivers, and time in the outdoors are central priorities for many, if not most, Colorado families. Immersion in the natural world provides more than just smiles and good stories, but also a myriad of public health benefits. An increasingly robust body of research and literature supports the powerfully beneficial effect of time outside on individual, family and community health.

Across Colorado, teachers, healthcare workers and community leaders are encouraging people to spend more time outdoors, which is beginning to show benefits in lower healthcare costs at a national level.⁴ A wealth of evidence shows that time spent outdoors easily correlates with lowered stress levels,



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2 See <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/colorado/>

3 SCORP Advisory Group and Contributors. 2019 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. State of Colorado, 2018, pp. 4, 2019 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

4 Barrett MA, Miller D, Frumkin H. Parks and Health: Aligning Incentives to Create Innovations in Chronic Disease Prevention. Prev Chronic Dis 2014;11:130407

improved well-being, and greater social connectedness.⁵

River communities are known as hubs of high “quality of life” for their residents and visitors. In 2016⁶ and 2017,⁷ *Outside Magazine* ranked Gunnison, Steamboat Springs, Durango, and Salida—all iconic Colorado river towns—as some of the best outdoor towns in the country due to their wide variety of outdoor activities, local cuisine, and the quality of life for residents of those communities. River communities across Colorado also thrive as outdoor recreation economies, while diversifying their economies with other areas of industry including sales and agricultural positions.^{8,9} This diversification allows communities to develop resilience to economic shocks,¹⁰ while also grounding the community in a common love of the land.

River conservation policies are fundamental to providing all communities with access to the outdoors. The benefits of outdoor access are vital to communities across the socio-economic spectrum, and span the urban/rural divide. American Whitewater supports policies that take these public health benefits into account, and that prioritize community wellness and quality of life today, and for future generations.

5 Heung, J., Benitez, L., et al. 2018. “OutdoorRx: Elevating Coloradans’ Health Through the Outdoors – A Cross-Sector Framework” Denver CO: Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office

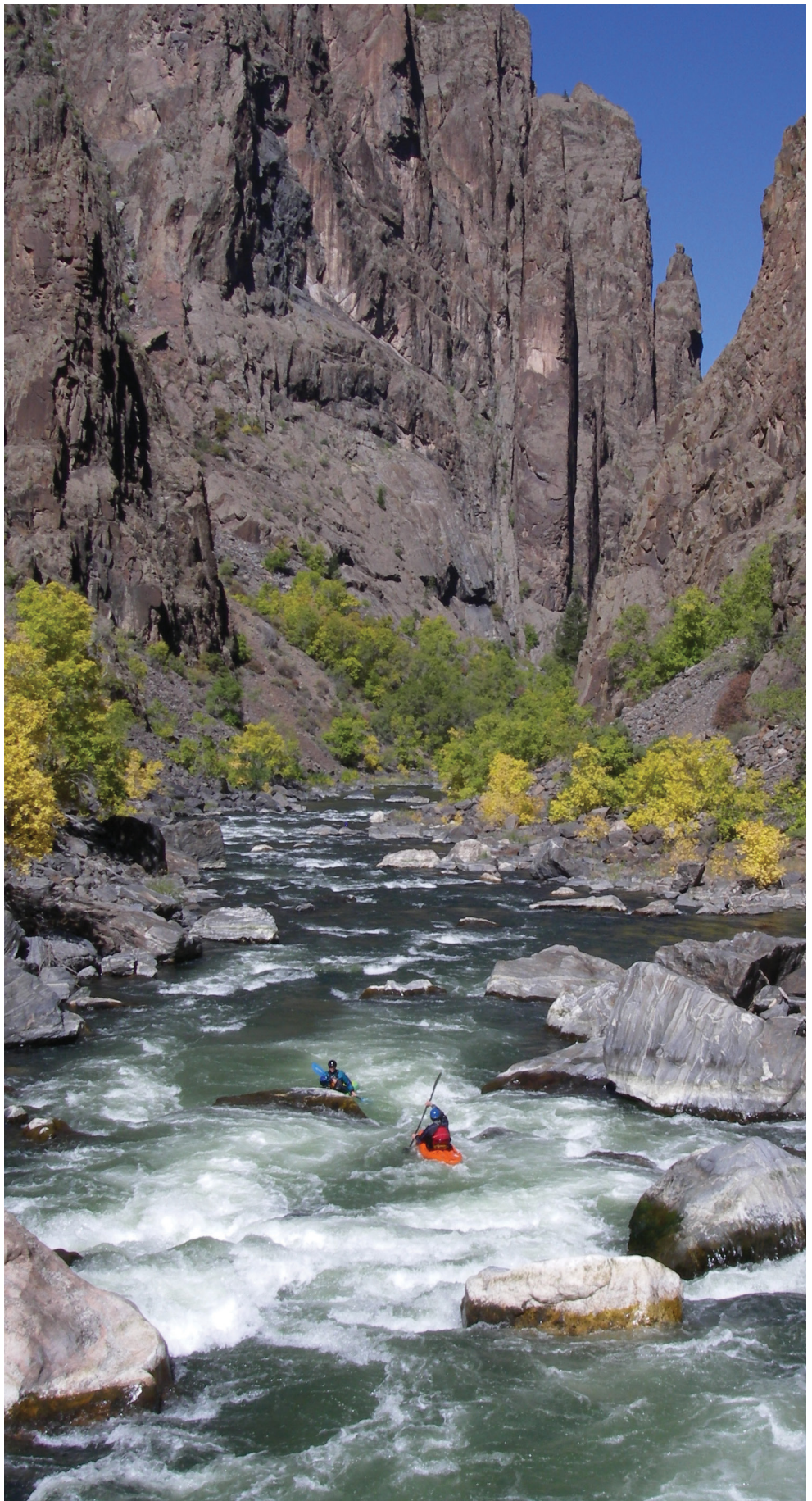
6 The Editors. “The 16 Best Places to Live in the U.S.: 2016.” *Travel* > *Outside Online*, *Outside Magazine*, 17 Sept. 2016, <https://www.outsideonline.com/2105956/best-places-live-us-2016>.

7 Baynham, Jacob, and Megan Michelson. “The 25 Best Towns of 2017.” *Outside Online*, *Outside Magazine*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.outsideonline.com/2193631/best-towns-2017>.

8 “Regional Socio-Economic Profile.” *Salida Colorado*, City of Salida, 24 July 2011, <http://salida.com/Salida-Economic-Profile/index.html>.

9 “Gunnison County Economic Indicators Report.” Gunnison County, 2014, pp. 8–11, Gunnison County Economic Indicators Report.

10 “Economic Resilience.” *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Content Guidelines: Recommendations for Creating an Impactful CEDS*, U.S. Economic Development Administration, 26 Feb. 2015, <https://www.eda.gov/ceds/content/economic-resilience.htm>.



FIVE POLICY DIRECTIONS

OUR APPROACH

We strongly believe that all Colorado water policy should be based on the broadest possible representation of interests. Increased representation will result in durable, well-supported policy outcomes for our state, and for the entire Colorado River Basin. We are committed, as a foundational issue, to increasing the number and diversity of voices at the negotiating table for water policy. American Whitewater staff are currently members of a number of Colorado

working groups and coalitions built around topics that range from Wild and Scenic rivers to legislative development. In particular, we continue to actively seek out areas where the recreational community's voice may be missing and our voice can help provide guidance and perspective.

As a non-partisan organization, we find common cause with individuals, organizations, companies, elected officials, and communities that share our love of rivers. Our members drive

our engagement in local and statewide river protection projects. Our approach to state policy will always be deeply informed by our commitment to increasing the size of the negotiating table at all levels of government.

Grounded in this commitment, and looking to the 2020 legislative session and beyond, we see five distinct sets of opportunities for smart policymaking at the state level.

► INSTREAM FLOW PROTECTIONS

Preserving and enhancing instream flow protections is critical for river health in Colorado. We see the importance of this work on a daily basis, in every region of the state, across every population, and throughout other industries. Instream flows support both environmental and human health, and are essential to healthy rivers. We will continue to fight for and expand instream flow protections in Colorado, and seek collaborative, creative ways to protect flows in our rivers.

We support legislation that provides water right holders the liberty to lease their water back to the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB), which governs state policy on water protection and development. We also hope to expand the concept of recreation as a beneficial use within the CWCB, for water users around the state. As recreation becomes even more ingrained in the culture—and identified as critical to the state's economy—recreational water rights will be tools to assure communities that water will remain in the stream by law.



► RESTORATION PROJECTS

Restoring Colorado's rivers means addressing impacts from water development, mining, and other human activities that have degraded our rivers and our river communities. Restoration projects must be fully funded and well-implemented. We support projects around the state that leverage restoration dollars to benefit river health. Full funding for the Colorado Water Plan is a critical step in ensuring effective restoration. We strongly support the Plan's current directions toward improving river access, filling data gaps in streamflow needs,¹¹ restoring river corridor habitat and improving diversions to allow fish and boat passage. Programs such as demand management could also be funded through the Plan and go to supporting streamflows.

Along with the Colorado Water Plan, we will continue to work closely with affiliate clubs and other local stakeholders to provide a recreational perspective on river restoration projects. This model has resulted in real success restoring sections of the Colorado and Dolores Rivers. We will continue to look for opportunities to do similar projects statewide.

We will also ramp up our work to support urban river restoration projects, such as the South Platte River project in Denver.¹² River restoration in cities brings important health, recreation and economic benefits to city-dwellers, many of whom become river champions in their local and regional communities.

► WATER SUPPLY FORECASTING

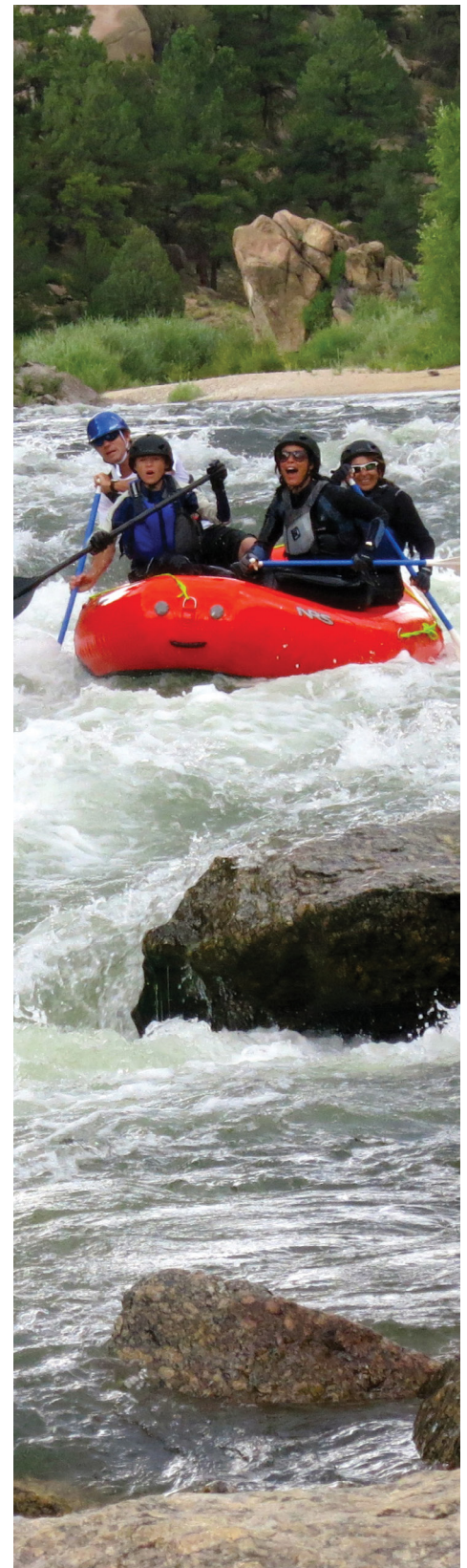
Accurate forecasting of snowmelt is an essential tool in preparing for drought

and flooding across the state. Providing accurate information for our members through the United States Geological Service's (USGS) and the Colorado Division of Water Resources flow gauges is a key service we aim to improve upon. We will support policies that enhance access to new and better tools for a variety of stakeholders in river basins across the state.

We will continue our work with the Colorado River Basin Forecast Center, water conservancy districts, the agricultural industry, and other allies in the outdoor industry on pushing for modernization, expansion, and implementation of improved forecasting systems. Our goal is to see an improved system that will provide reservoir managers with more confident inflow forecasts, which will in turn lead to a more predictable release period for recreational and other water users across the state.

► RECREATIONAL IN CHANNEL DIVERSIONS (RICDs)

Because recreational water rights are the most junior rights in our state's system, we will continue to work for policies that protect and enhance these rights statewide. Recreational In Channel Diversions (RICD) are a particularly important tool for enhancing flows and recreation access. More than two dozen communities have installed whitewater parks based on RICDs, creating substantial local recreation economies. Because RICD owners must construct a structure in the river that "captures and controls" water to put to "beneficial use between the proposed reach"¹³ of the river, the process can unfortunately be time-consuming and litigious. We support policies that



11 American Whitewater is currently using Water Plan funding through a grant administered by the CWCB to fill data gaps in streamflow needs for recreation in the Rio Grande River Basin. This work is a part of the Stream Management Planning process, a directive of the Water Plan.

12 Simpson, Kevin. "After Long Regarding the South Platte as Not Much More than a Sewer, Is Metro Denver Ready to Love Its River?" *The Colorado Sun*, 1 Oct. 2018, <https://coloradosun.com/2018/10/01/denver-embrace-south-platte-river/>.

13 Colorado Water Conservation Board. "RECREATIONAL IN-CHANNEL DIVERSION RULES." *RECREATIONAL IN-CHANNEL DIVERSION RULES*, Department of Natural Resources, 2001, pp. 2-3.

make this process easier, faster, and more effective for river communities.

► WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

Wild and Scenic River designation is the national gold standard for river protection. Designation is a lengthy and comprehensive process, but worth it. Here in Colorado we have just one Wild and Scenic River designation, covering 76 miles of the Cache La Poudre River.¹⁴ There are many other rivers across the state that already have the Outstanding Remarkable Values required for designation status and have been found eligible and suitable for inclusion in the national system.

American Whitewater will continue to work with stakeholder groups who manage these river sections to protect their outstanding values locally. We are deeply involved in federal land planning processes to get all free-flowing Colorado rivers with outstanding values identified as eligible and, where appropriate, suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Across the country, 33 states provide a state-level designation that is similar to Wild and Scenic status.¹⁵ Coloradans also support state-led river protection efforts. Understanding that potential federal designations may be concerning to some, we will seek opportunities to work collaboratively and with diverse stakeholders through these sometimes-fraught issues.

American Whitewater also continues to work with stakeholders throughout the state on the development of management plans that protect our rivers' outstandingly remarkable values. We are actively involved in the Upper Colorado River Wild and Scenic Alternative Management Plan, working with nearly three dozen partners to develop a plan that will be widely supported. American Whitewater will continue to hold leadership roles within such stakeholder groups, and will seek policies that advance the prospect of additional protections in Colorado.

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¹⁴ Turner, Sarah. *Wild and Scenic Rivers: The Importance of Federal River Protection in the Rockies*. State of the Rockies Report Card vol. 2009, Colorado College, pp. 64–71

¹⁵ Ibid, Turner 2009

CALLS TO ACTION



This paper outlines our new approach to water policymaking in Colorado. We never work alone, and that is more true now than ever. We look forward to working with our members, business partners and fellow conservation advocates to make concrete gains for rivers and communities across the state in the following ways:

OUR MEMBERS

- Speak to elected officials on water issues that matter to you
- Talk to fellow boaters, rafters, and water enthusiasts about American Whitewater and the work that we do
- Urge other river advocates to join American Whitewater
- Host an event/film night/or speaking session that highlights incredible water resources near you
- Support elected officials who are actively engaged with the recreation community and seek to grow our impact across the state

OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS

- Spread the conservation message with your customers
- Host events, film nights, and

educational programming around water issues in your area

- Provide space for elected officials to hold town hall events with the community
- Connect with fellow businesses to promote water stewardship

FELLOW CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS

- Grow our unified policy approach in a way that works for you
- Seek out new and innovative ways to involve elected officials
- Spread information for events and opportunities within your membership
- Collaborate with us on finding sensible and modernized answers to water issues in Colorado

American Whitewater is committed to forging new partnerships, reinforcing our bonds with existing allies, finding common ground with new allies, and working in diverse coalitions to advance river recreation and conservation in Colorado.

MOVING FORWARD



The 2020 legislative session will be a new and exciting time for our team, and for innovative approaches to water policy in Colorado.

- We will be actively involved on a weekly basis at the capital. Working alongside coalition partners and friends of American Whitewater within the general assembly, we will seek to bring on new partners and officials to help in our cause. Whether they are Democrats, Independents, or Republicans, we will work eagerly with representatives to protect their district's vital whitewater resources.
- We will hold legislative trainings across the state to get members and friends of the organization involved in the legislative process. This program will create a network of passionate river enthusiasts to speak out at the capital, as well as within their respective districts at public hearings and town hall events. Be on the lookout for future training sessions in your area, and get in touch with the American Whitewater team if you would like to host a training session.
- In addition to working with members and elected officials, we will be growing our own voice within the state. By participating in a number of boards held in the capital, we'll bring an experienced voice, educating on recreation issues, and continuing to grow understanding of economic and statistical figures that are closely tied to our industry.

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CONCLUSION

American Whitewater has lofty goals for the coming months and years in Colorado. We know the road ahead of us will be filled with challenges. But if we roll up our sleeves, we can achieve victories that will make our members, as well as past, current and future partners, proud.

Policy work is hard, plain and simple, but we've never let hard work steer us away. We're excited to work at all levels of government across the state in a way we never have before.

We're devoted to expanding the circles we work within, while ensuring that our

members and partners are included in the efforts on the horizon. American Whitewater has always stood for the protection and restoration of our nation's whitewater rivers, ensuring that everyone can get out and enjoy them. Thank you for being a part of the ride.

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