Thirty Years of Protecting the West

Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
As we celebrate our 30th anniversary of protecting the West, I feel humbled and proud, humbled by the support and faith that our donors have shown in Western Resource Advocates, which has allowed us to grow to the organization we are today, and proud of the successes we have accomplished as a result of that support.

Thirty years after we were founded, Western Resource Advocates has grown stronger, more nimble, and more effective—just when our communities need it most.

In fact, the 2019 legislative sessions around our region were among the most successful we’ve ever seen, especially on climate change. Working with the leadership in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada, WRA and diverse coalitions of partners pushed forward ambitious, forward-thinking measures to cut carbon pollution. We were thrilled that New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham delivered the keynote address at our annual Protect the West celebration so we could thank her in person for her leadership.

We were also part of historic progress for Western rivers, lands, and clean air in 2019. You can read more in this report, which appropriately is centered around 30 key moments in our journey together since 1989.

People often ask me what makes WRA successful. To answer that, I go back to our founding. The late Kelley Green, who started the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies in 1989, and the late David Getches, the first chair of the board, set the mold for effective support.

Today, our talented board members share their wisdom, guidance, and resources, and continue in that spirit. Anniversaries aren’t just a moment to look back; we are also looking forward at the challenges to come. There is much work to do.

First and foremost, we acknowledge that our organization and our field do not adequately reflect the richness of the communities we’re working in; not in terms of race or ethnicity, and not in terms of socioeconomic background. In order to truly win, and ensure that those victories address the needs of all in our communities, those wins must be durable and just. This year, WRA began an effort to own and address our shortcomings when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are committed to self-reflection, listening, and learning, and especially to real action at WRA and in our field.

We have big plans for the coming years. We must continue our ambitious work to decarbonize the West, ensure healthy rivers and streams, defend clean air, and protect and connect the West’s landscapes and habitat.

The last three decades have shown that we have the tenacity to stand up to the challenges we face and to provide solutions that last. We look forward to working with you, our supporters, to get it done.

As always, thanks for protecting the West.

Sincerely,

JON GOLDIN-DUBOIS
PRESIDENT
In 1989, Kelley Green created the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, and soon a loose network of pro bono attorneys fanned out across the West to defend communities from environmental harm. Within a few years, a subset of that group had formed programs devoted to conserving healthy rivers and lands and expanding clean energy. We evolved into Western Resource Advocates, and what we’ve accomplished together is amazing. We have secured hundreds of policy victories and legal wins. Our lives, landscapes, habitat, and wildlife are better off because of our shared work. And our region is better placed to address a climate-challenged future. ¶ We have saved landscapes and habitat from oil and gas, oil shale, and tar sands mining. Over 2 million acres of land are protected as habitat for sage grouse, for fisheries, and for migrating species. And now, we’re working toward new solutions to protect land—ensuring protection for sensitive ecosystems and helping create state offices of outdoor recreation with conservation as a central mission. ¶ Decades ago, our innovative Clean Energy Program changed the law to ensure environmental impact was considered in decisions about public utility energy choices. Then it helped states develop policies requiring a percentage of renewable electricity generation. This increased investment in renewables and created opportunities to replace coal with wind and solar energy. As of our 50th anniversary, our work has helped close 31 coal-fired units across our region. ¶ And we are crafting forward-thinking alternatives to dams and pipelines throughout the Interior West, so there will always be enough water for everyone, including our communities, agriculture, recreation, and fish. From securing a permanent water right in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park to protecting the endangered silvery minnow in the Rio Grande to helping communities find innovative ways to save water, our work helps ensure every drop counts—sometimes more than once. ¶ Our 50th anniversary annual report is devoted to imagery of 50 key moments in our work so far. Some are whimsical icons, while others are spectacular: a page devoted to Lake Powell, a painting of Black Canyon of the Gunnison, a close-up of a kestrel’s piercing gaze, and a graphic of the coal plants we have helped close. It isn’t intended as a timeline, but a collection of memories that jumps back and forth through our history. We hope you’ll enjoy immersing yourself in our shared work, and we look forward to our continued partnership to protect the West.
Xcel Pledges to Go Carbon-Free by 2050

WRA was instrumental in the creation of the 2018 Colorado Energy Plan, in which Xcel Energy agreed to retire two aging coal-fired power plants in Pueblo. The plan will dramatically cut carbon pollution, create hundreds of jobs, and lead to the investment of $2.5 billion in Colorado’s rural economy, including in wind, solar, and the nation’s largest utility battery storage project. This plan also laid the groundwork for the company’s 2018 pledge to generate 100 percent of its electricity from carbon-free resources by 2050.

A Win for the Uinta National Forest

Representing a coalition of conservation groups, WRA in 2011 protected more than 140,000 acres from oil and gas development, including 90,000 acres of roadless areas in the Uinta National Forest. WRA challenged leases in a region of the forest that provides drinking water for Wasatch Front cities and important habitat for many sensitive species, including the Bonneville and Colorado cutthroat trout, and that was the focus of millions of dollars of riparian habitat restoration efforts.

Establishing Climate Goals in Colorado

WRA worked to pass the 2019 Climate Action Plan, which placed Colorado among the top states fighting climate change. The law sets science-based targets to reduce greenhouse gas pollution across the economy 36 percent by 2025, 50 percent by 2030, and 90 percent by 2050, over 2005 levels.

Protecting River Flows in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

In 2006, WRA won a precedent-setting federal court case blocking a proposal to dramatically limit water for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. The decision established a standard that water cannot be withdrawn from national parks and other federal lands at levels that destroy resource values. In 2008, WRA ended an 18-month negotiation with water users throughout the Gunnison Basin, brokering a permanent water right for one of the most spectacular river gorges in the world, ending a 30-year battle, and restoring a more natural flow regime benefiting fish, habitat, and the roar of the river.
Defending Airsheds in National Parks in Utah

In 2009, WRA won a Utah Supreme Court decision rejecting an air discharge permit for the proposed Weir Generating Station Power Plant. Plant emissions would have harmed residents’ health and impaired visibility at some of Utah’s most popular tourist destinations, such as Canyonlands and Capitol Reef national parks. The plant was never built.
Fighting the Tererro Mine

WRA is part of a diverse coalition of local community members, business owners, acequia and land grant leaders, tribes, anglers, and hunters working to prevent a proposed hardrock mine in the Santa Fe National Forest near Tererro, New Mexico. A legacy of mining there caused a massive fish kill in the 1990s, and the area is now a Superfund site. A new mine would again threaten the land and water and the nearby community’s burgeoning recreation economy. WRA is helping the community pursue an Outstanding National Resource Waters designation for the nearby stretch of the Pecos River to protect the watershed from permanent damage.

Blocked Oil Shale Development in Utah

In 2015, WRA convinced the Utah Division of Water Quality and Oil, Gas and Mining to limit their authorization of expansive oil shale development. Oil shale companies, including Red Leaf Resources and TomCo, had proposed multiple plans. One called for construction of 226 giant encasements, called “capsules,” to cook oil shale at extremely high temperatures to generate crude oil. Each giant capsule would have been the size of a football stadium. WRA blocked the development and convinced Utah to allow companies to construct only a single prototype capsule. As of now, the project has not been built.

Keeping Water in Arizona’s San Pedro River

As part of a coalition working to keep the San Pedro River flowing near Sierra Vista, Arizona, WRA conducted a first-of-its-kind study evaluating an overlooked impact on rivers: domestic groundwater wells. Approximately 5,000 homes served by their own wells in proximity to the river created a significant impact on river flow. In 2014, as a result of WRA’s evaluation and in conjunction with the Cochise Water Project, a toilet replacement program was launched, decreasing well pumping by over 16 million gallons and helping keep the San Pedro River flowing and healthy.

Securing a Seat at the Table for the Environment in Energy Planning

A year after founding the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, attorney Kelley Green brought on Bruce Driver to begin an energy program on a contract basis. The energy program worked to establish that utilities and utility regulators need to consider environmental factors in planning processes. This work set up Western states to enact some of the nation’s first clean energy standards, and it remains at the heart of WRA’s effort to fight climate change.

Protecting a Montana Tribe from Gold Mine Pollution

In its first decade, the LAW Fund’s pro-bono attorneys set out across the region to defend communities on environmental issues. One early success was a 1997 lawsuit protecting an indigenous community in Montana whose water was threatened by cyanide heap leach mining.
A Historic Agreement to Avoid Water Shortages on the Colorado River

In 2019, history was made when the Colorado River Basin states reached a consensus on a collection of incentives and solutions, known as Drought Contingency Plans, to help avoid water shortages that would affect the 40 million people who rely on the Colorado River for drinking water, farming and ranching, businesses, and recreation. In Arizona, where the plan required legislative approval, WRA worked with a long list of stakeholders to educate lawmakers through in-person meetings and by testifying in legislative committee hearings. WRA then joined other partners in support of federal legislation to implement the creative new arrangements to avoid a crisis in the river. The legislation was signed on April 16, 2019.

 Crafting Western Renewable Energy Policies

In the early 2000s, WRA worked to help states create policies directing utilities to provide a certain percentage of their power from renewable resources. By 2002, WRA had helped create standards in Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico. In 2009, WRA played a lead role in drafting Colorado’s Amendment 77. It became the first voter-approved state Renewable Energy Standard in the nation.

 Finding Alternatives to the Lake Powell Pipeline

WRA has been working for many years alongside a coalition of citizen activists to block a proposed 140-mile-long pipeline that would pump 28 billion gallons of Colorado River water each year to southwestern Utah. Not only would the project be enormously expensive, it poses an unnecessary risk to tribal and public lands and the health of the entire Colorado River. WRA showed in a 2013 Local Waters Alternative analysis that Utah could choose a more sustainable path and save its taxpayers money by implementing local water conservation strategies, water reuse, and agricultural water transfers. Over many years, Utah has sought permits, but it has not successfully made its case for the pipeline. In fact, in 2019, the Army Corps of Engineers told the state of Utah that it should dismiss WRA’s Local Waters Alternative instead of the pipeline.
Pivotal Public Records Case in Utah

In 2008, WRA won a seminal case before the Utah Supreme Court, which prevents the state from hiding records from the public to claim that hiking trails and faint routes in roadless areas are open to road building and off-road vehicle use. WRA's defense of the National Forest Roadless Rule has shielded tens of thousands of acres from oil and gas development and protected native species like ponderosa pine forests.

A Strong Nevada Outdoor Recreation Office

In 2019, WRA helped the state of Nevada develop legislation to create one of the most conservation-oriented state offices of outdoor recreation in the country. The outdoor recreation economy in Nevada generates over $2 billion every year in consumer spending and supports 87,000 direct jobs. Nevada’s new Division of Outdoor Recreation is charged with a variety of conservation-related responsibilities, including promoting the outdoor economy so that it supports stewardship and conservation in addition to economic growth, creating and maintaining a list of lands to be conserved for outdoor recreation, and advocating for Nevada to receive the maximum amount of money from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Protecting River Flows in Colorado

In 2008, WRA crafted an innovative water rights formula to protect water for Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area in Colorado, assuring water flows through the 66,000-acre expanse of sandstone canyons, important wildlife habitat, and archaeological resources. Over the years, WRA’s experts have worked closely with the Colorado Water Conservation Board to secure permanent flows for the environment to benefit anglers, whitewater boaters, fish, the environment, and the local economy in several important rivers. In 2013, WRA helped protect flows on a 20-mile stretch of the scenic San Miguel River. In 2019, WRA secured instream flow rights for Disappointment and Himes creeks. Himes Creek supports habitat for the San Juan lineage cutthroat trout, which was previously thought to be extinct.

Boosting Nevada’s Renewable Portfolio Standard

WRA helped develop and pass 2019 legislation to boost Nevada’s Renewable Portfolio Standard to 50 percent by 2030, with a goal of producing electricity from zero-carbon emission resources, equal to 100 percent of the state utilities’ sales, by 2050. Increasing the RPS to 50 percent is expected to spur new investments and innovation in Nevada’s clean energy sector, which employs more than 24,000 Nevadans. It also would reduce utility reliance on fossil fuels, save customers money, curtail air pollution, and improve public health.
Dedicating Space for Wildlife

Scientists have long observed that wildlife move, migrate with the seasons, and depend on new and less-expensive GPS technology has expanded our knowledge of when, where, and how. We’re increasingly aware that these corridors—and the wildlife that rely on them—are being threatened as the West develops and becomes more populous. Wildlife don’t recognize state boundaries, and it is critical to protect large areas of essential habitat and ensure that these habitats are connected. WRA is working with states and local governments to identify and protect these critical corridors so our wildlife can stay wild and thrive. Our work has helped states take meaningful steps to protect wildlife corridors across the West.

Nation-Leading Climate Action in New Mexico

In 2015, WRA played an essential role in advancing the effort to retire half of the San Juan Generating Station’s coal-fired units. Four years later, WRA helped pass New Mexico’s nation-leading Energy Transition Act, which requires the state’s utilities to produce 100 percent carbon-free electricity by 2040, boosts renewable energy production, and helps diversify the Four Corners economy. The ETA also enables Public Service Company of New Mexico to exit the last coal units at San Juan.

Protecting Air Quality on the Wasatch Front

WRA, representing partner groups, challenged plans by Kennecott Utah Copper to build a new rock crusher plant on the Wasatch Front. The plant would have added 33 tons of PM2.5 (fine particulate matter) and 267 tons of PM10 (coarse particulate matter) emissions per year to the Salt Lake City area, worsening its air quality. In 2015, WRA and partners celebrated Kennecott’s decision to abandon its plant. Four years later, WRA successfully argued to the Utah Air Quality Board that the Clean Air Act required Kennecott to stop burning coal in its power plant, and shortly after, Kennecott announced its decision to forego coal in favor of renewable energy.

Leading the Transition Away from Coal

Since the early 2000s, momentum has been building across the Interior West for shutting down coal-fired power plants and replacing the generation with renewable energy. WRA has been at the forefront of this transition and, through legal and policy advocacy, has played a critical part in plans to retire 31 coal units—so far—in Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada.
A Plan to Meet Colorado’s Water Needs

WRA led a team of conservation organizations in helping shape the state’s first-ever plan for meeting Colorado’s water needs. The work ensured the 2015 plan included action items for protecting rivers, urban conservation and reuse, land use planning, and upgrading aging infrastructure, all to set the stage for Colorado to ensure enough water for everyone and protect its environment in creative new ways.

We provided technical input to shape the plan’s chapters and helped 30,000 Colorado residents find their voices and weigh in with their vision of the future. It remains the largest public participation effort on a water issue in state history.
Defending Great Salt Lake

WRA has been an important part of a coalition of conservationists working to ensure Great Salt Lake continues to be a remarkable natural legacy for Utah. Our work has included blocking mining operations from diverting hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water and preventing development from disrupting wildlife habitat. In 2019, the Utah Supreme Court ruled in a lawsuit brought by WRA on behalf of 13 conservation and user groups that the Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands was required to initiate site-specific planning to address the potential impacts of industry’s proposal to construct and operate mineral evaporation reservoirs on 30,000 acres of the lake bed. The court ruled that conservation groups are entitled to participate in the planning process, which must consider whether the project would impair the lake’s public trust values, such as recreation, navigation, water quality, wildlife, and aesthetic beauty.

The Land and Water Fund of the Rockies

In 1989, attorney Kelley Green founded the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, dedicated to developing legal and policy solutions tailored to the unique environment of the Interior West. Within four years, the LAW Fund had donated more than $1 million of pro bono legal services on behalf of citizen groups. By its 10th year, it had assembled a network of 300 lawyers in eight states who had volunteered more than 30,000 hours of service, worth over $4 million.

Legacy Parkway Halted

In 2002, the LAW Fund teamed up with Sierra Club and others to force the state of Utah to halt initial construction of the Legacy Parkway through important waterbird habitat bordering the eastern shore of Great Salt Lake by successfully arguing in court that the state had failed to study alternative routes that would have reduced the harm to impacted and nearby wetlands. Ultimately, the state was required to ban trucks from the highway, increase the amount of land in the preserve, and protect the wetlands that are critical habitat for shore and migratory birds, like the American Kestrel.

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Stopped Dams Near the Maroon Bells Wilderness Area

In 2019, WRA joined the city of Aspen, Pitkin County, and others in celebrating an agreement to avoid proposed dams at the foot of the iconic Maroon Bells Wilderness Area in Colorado. Working collaboratively with Aspen city leaders, WRA convinced the city that it could withdraw its proposals to build the dams. The city is now working hand-in-hand with WRA to explore ways to meet the community’s water needs and improve streamflows in the Upper Roaring Fork Valley.

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Blocking the Green River Pipeline

Since 2008, numerous state and federal agencies have rejected proposals by Aaron Million to build a pipeline to divert 81 billion gallons of water annually from the Green River in Utah or Wyoming 500 miles to Colorado’s Front Range. In 2011, WRA objected to permit applications for the pipeline before both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Both agencies denied Million’s applications. WRA has continued to fight subsequent pipeline applications, which threaten to damage Utah’s ability to meet river flow targets for endangered fish recovery efforts, interfere with recreation and tourism; and increase the risk for Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming to meet their water delivery obligations under the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

Honored with the 2002 EPA Climate Protection Award

In 1999, the LAW Fund created a Green Power Marketing Program to build customer demand and public awareness and support for renewable energy. That work between 1999 and 2002 directly led to the development of 60 megawatts of wind generation, with 25,000-plus residential customers and 500-plus businesses participating in the programs in Colorado. The LAW Fund successfully transferred its green pricing model to Utah through its Utah Wind Power Campaign, with 5,000 residential customers and 50-plus businesses participating in PacifiCorp’s Blue Sky Program, leading to the construction of 3 megawatts of wind generation (and the subscription of 5 megawatts). In recognition of its efforts, the program was awarded the 2002 EPA Climate Protection Award.

In Memoriam

We are thankful for the contributions of the late David Getches, Rudd Mayer, Kelley Green, and Charles Benjamin, and we hold them in our memories.
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Brendan Witt
Digital Communications Coordinator
Revenue

- Grants: $7,766,725
- Individuals and Family Foundations: $2,021,658
- Net Investments/Interest Income: $235,839
- Organizations and Businesses: $142,447
- Special Events: $106,112
- In-Kind and Other: $69,992

Total Revenues: $10,342,773

Expenses

Program Services
- Clean Energy: $4,679,194
- Healthy Rivers: $1,545,773
- Western Lands: $517,489
- Air and Water Quality: $83,442
- Total Program: $6,825,898

Supporting Services
- Development: $768,412
- Administration: $413,927

Total Expenses: $8,008,237

Assets

- Change in Net Assets: $2,245,808
- Net Assets at Beginning of Year: $9,798,814
- Net Assets at End of Year: $12,044,122
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To learn more, call us at (303) 444-1188 or visit our website westernresourceadvocates.org

Sustainability is central to our mission at Western Resource Advocates. We're proud to say that our 30th Anniversary Annual Report is printed on rapidly renewable hemp fiber paper with algae-based ink.