

# *Saving the Platte River for Wildlife and People*

The Platte River plays a crucial role in providing water for Colorado residents. Downstream, the Platte provides important habitat for sandhill cranes, whooping cranes, millions of ducks, geese and other species. A strong recovery program under the Platte River Cooperative Agreement could be a good first step toward protecting people's water needs as well as the Platte's wildlife habitat.

## Colorado and the Platte River Cooperative Agreement

### The Quest for Water

The Platte River has a long history of serving people's water needs. By the 1880s, thousands of irrigation canals had been built along the North and South Platte Rivers, diverting water to farms, ranches and growing towns.

Today, millions of people living in Denver, along the Front Range and in northeast Colorado rely on the Platte for drinking water. The Platte, its tributaries and hydrologically connected wells irrigate about one million acres of Colorado farmland. Industry and electrical generation consume still more water.

Upstream water use has had downstream consequences. The Platte's flows have been reduced to a trickle of their historic volume. In Nebraska, flows have dwindled by more than half. An 80-mile stretch of the river that serves as a critical stopover point for most of the continent's sandhill cranes and millions of ducks and geese is in serious jeopardy. The drying of the Platte has destroyed 90% of the habitat needed by three threatened or endangered species along that stretch of river - the whooping crane, the piping plover and the interior least tern.



Platte River Trust

The Platte River (above) not only serves the water needs of people in Colorado, but also provides important habitat for millions of migratory birds as well as threatened or endangered species, including the whooping crane (right).



Bob Gress

### The Platte River Cooperative Agreement

The Platte River Cooperative Agreement, signed in 1997, is an effort by Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, the U.S. Department of the Interior, water users and conservation groups to protect what's left of the Platte's crucial wildlife habitat, while providing

regulatory certainty for water users in the basin.

Under the agreement, the parties are developing an innovative basin-wide program that will address the needs of rare species in the central Platte by restoring habitat and protecting river flows.



The 1900s saw the construction of dams (like this dam at Seminole Reservoir) and other massive projects in the Platte River Basin.



For More Information, visit [www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte)



Green-winged teal

### Tamarack Project Would Benefit Wildlife

The plan being developed under the agreement includes the Tamarack Project in northeast Colorado. The project would pump water from the South Platte River, near the Tamarack Ranch State Wildlife Area, into nearby upland areas in the winter and during other times of surplus. This would create wetland habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. The pumping would be timed so that the water, returning through the soil, would reach the Platte in the spring and fall when it could benefit wildlife downstream.

The project would also improve habitat for native Colorado fish species like the plains topminnow, stonecat, lake chub and brassy minnow.

The Tamarack Project includes the creation of an experimental live stream where native Colorado fish species that use the lower South Platte River and its tributaries would spawned and be studied.

### Protecting National Forests and Trout Streams

In Colorado, the headwaters of the North Platte and South Platte Rivers are guarded by the Pike, San Isabel, Arapaho, Roosevelt and Routt National Forests, and by Rocky Mountain National Park. Coursing through these forests are native trout streams that boast some of the best fishing in the world. The forests provide habitat for elk, deer and other high-country wildlife, as well as recreational opportunities for people.

### A Smart Choice for Colorado

A strong recovery program under the Platte River Cooperative Agreement would be a good first step for Colorado toward achieving a balanced, intelligent way to meet water needs while protecting wildlife. Without a basin-wide approach to managing the Platte River's waters, Colorado water projects could face lengthy and expensive environmental reviews. A basin-wide approach represents a better alternative.



Platte River Trust

The Platte River needs water to function as a healthy ecosystem for birds, fish, other wildlife and people. This picture shows one of the results of a dry river.

### Benefits for Colorado Cities and Agriculture

The proposed program would allow Denver Water and other growing front-range communities to obtain new water supplies without lengthy and expensive reviews of downstream environmental impacts. The program could reduce the need for cities to buy water rights from irrigators in northeast Colorado, allowing for the continuation of irrigated

farming that is important to the local economy.

To recharge groundwater supplies for area farms, Colorado officials plan to use the Tamarack Project facilities to pump river water during wet months onto nearby land.

### You Can Help

To find out how you can help Colorado secure a sensible solution for the future of the Platte River, visit NWF's Platte River Web site:

[www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte)

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