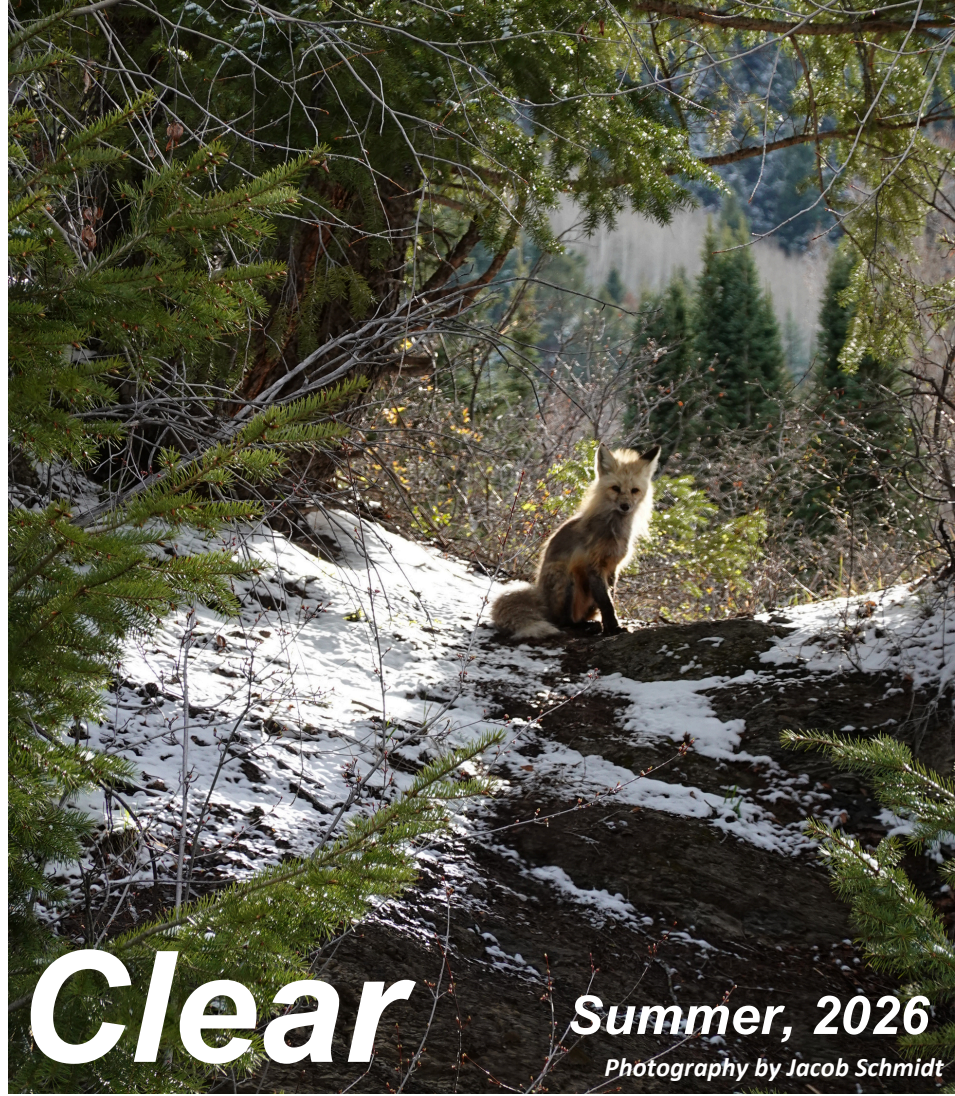


Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association

Crystal Clear

Summer, 2026

Photography by Jacob Schmidt



Published by CVEPA, the Environmental Watchdog for Colorado's Crystal Valley since 1972.

President's Letter

John Armstrong

Late May was a busy week for CVEPA. We met with the skeleton USFS Aspen Sopris District, the Town of Marble (TOM) and the Gunnison County Commissioners to request review of the implementation of the Lead King Stakeholders Group recommendations on the Off Road Vehicle use from Marble to the Lead King Basin. A review was assured after 3 years and we are now entering the fourth year. Gunnison Commissioners said at their annual visit / meeting in Marble that they want to reconvene the stakeholders. CVEPA demands the promised Sheriff's deputy enforcement of key OHV truck/trailer parking along County Road 3 and Town Park.

That same week, CVEPA met with AVL T and TOM hosted by the Trust for Land Restoration (TLR) of Ridgway. TLR became the saviour of our beloved Marble Wetlands when they accepted the donated property when no one else would. TLR had their annual retreat at the Beaver Lake Lodge in Marble and conducted both a meeting at the firehouse and then a site visit with said entities at Marble Wetlands. TLR's visit was a delightful exercise in co-operation and management of the Preserve. CVEPA also met with CPW on Wetlands access . TLR is on track to transfer ownership to TOM and CVEPA remains the local entity coordinating interests at the Preserve.

Would it be a surprise that water is the hot issue locally, regionally and nationally this year? One of the greatest causes for joy is the \$99 Million purchase of the Shoshone (Colorado River in Glenwood Canyon) non-consumptive Water rights by the Colorado River District. The deal will secure reliable flows in the Colorado River to support agriculture, recreation, and wildlife for millions of people.

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Letter, continued

Concurrently, the local intergovernmental agreement (IGA) for protections of the Crystal River, although spineless in its lack of commitment, is a signal that entities associated with the watershed are working together. Read Dale Will's article in this issue (pg. 6) for more information. CVEPA seeks more durable and comprehensive protections for the Crystal River.

Closest to home is the announcement from the West Divide Water Conservancy District (WDWCD) to supply augmentation to residents in the Crystal Valley. Members know that CVEPA battled with the WDWCD for years. It is the entity that for 50 years held conditional water rights for two dams over 250 feet tall that would have inundated the town of Redstone and the Placita section of the Crystal Valley. Our water would have been diverted out of our watershed for agricultural and oil shale development in the Colorado River Valley. About a decade ago the District relinquished these rights. The Rifle based WDWCD is a taxing district that has taxed residents for half a century for something most did not want any part of. It is an interesting development that they are now actively seeking sources of augmentation for valley residents. This age old system of augmentation is odd. Stored water can be released at a given time to fulfill the user's legal obligation to increase the river volume, but the one time pulse of this "paper water" would likely be indiscernible just a few miles downstream.

After years of negotiations, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, administrators for Beaver Lake in Marble, have agreed to supply a portion of those waters for augmentation through an agreement with WDWCD. Two other water impoundments, one at Rapid Creek on Darien Ranch and one at Treasure Mountain Ranch in Crystal (prospective developers of a ski resort in that area) may be built as part of this proposal, although both agreements are pending.

This is great relief to residents who have very junior, or inferior, water rights with the spectre of having their water shut off. Seemingly of little consequence, the evaporation rate of the reservoirs is stunning, as evidenced in the application in water court. CVEPA has always promoted robust water conservation efforts as the primary means of mitigation. It is not easy to change habits of centuries but as we stumble headlong into Dead Pool at Lake Powell the consequence of long term, widespread drought can no longer be ignored. To deny credence to conservation is arrogance.

McClure Pass has seen more development than in the last 50 years. The Pitkin County Open Space and Trails is converting the old pass road into a new hike and bike path including a tunnel under SH 133. The McClure Pass communications tower awaits approval from the USFS.

CVEPA encourages you to search and read Aspen Journalism, The Sopris Sun, and the Crystal Valley Echo to stay informed on issues critical to our environment and quality of life. Staying informed is the key to positive engagement.

CVEPA would like to applaud the Town of Marble and especially Kelsey Been as they move toward Dark Skies International certification. Look for events promoting Dark Skies as locals work for this certification which protects our ability to access our celestial wonderland.

CVEPA 54th ANNUAL MEETING!

**August 23, 2026 At the Thompson Barn In RVR
333 River Valley Ranch Drive**

**Please join us for a drink at 4:00 with a light
dinner and keynote speaker TBD!**



Taking the veil off Treasure Mountain Ranch

Jay Engstrom et. al

Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Agency (CVEPA) does not support land swaps of National Forest for private land - especially with the intent of profit and personal gain by developers. This is exactly what the current developers with Treasure Mountain Ranch (TMR) above Marble intend to do to make an elite and exclusive private snow cat ski area. The project is being presented by TMR throughout the valley as a “best case scenario” for the future of Crystal, with skewed interpretations of land use, development, and a minimized look at the potential disturbance of wild places. TMR’s language tries to portray the situation as an either-or scenario. Either an exclusive ski area, or mass development. This is not the case however, and it’s important for valley residents to understand the nuances of TMR’s proposals.



Treasure Mountain Wildernes



Human Powered Skiing near Marble

For a quick summary of the project brought forth by TMR; for years, the ranch has been attempting to find a path to create a luxury, boutique ski experience for about 30 guests who would own or stay in luxury cabins built around Crystal. Thus far this has included glading the forests around Crystal, billed as fire mitigation, illegal reopening of decommissioned roads, and a recently approved land use application with Gunnison County for four new “cabins” and a 5,000 square-foot maintenance facility to be located just outside of Crystal. Given all this progress, they believe their project is entirely dependent on a ~350-acre land swap with the Forest Service, which would give them the ability to run a snow cat into upper Bear Basin on the Northside of Treasure Mountain. This is the lynch pin of their ski operations. This area in Bear Basin is currently part of the proposed GORP Act wilderness expansion. It is wild and has never seen development like this – if GORP passes, that area would be protected from any development, period. TMR claims that the portion of the ranch they would like to swap would protect Crystal from up to five developable home sites.

However, this area is steep and rugged and CVEPA is currently working with land planning professionals to assess the feasibility of building in this area. We believe, however, that much like the rest of the developer’s language, presenting this as a win-win for conservation is misleading. TMR is actively collecting letters of support to prove to the Forest Service that their project has enough local buy-in to justify the trade in land.

To get that local buy-in, the developer has been presenting this project as the “best case scenario” for the future development of Crystal. They argue that if this commercial enterprise is not approved, they will be forced to sell the ranch in 35-acre parcels to recoup their financial investment in the property. They claim that could mean up to 35 luxury homes in Crystal. However, much like the proposed land swap site, CVEPA is skeptical about the feasibility of this development given the physical constraints of the area, including steep hillsides, avalanche paths, debris flows, river and riparian setbacks, wetlands, as well as countless development codes and regulations of Gunnison County and the State of Colorado. This is also under the assumption of feasibility that 30 to 35 homes could be constructed, maintained, and accessed in cases of emergencies, and that the fire department and the county would approve these extremely remote residences. Additionally, finding an insurance provider that would even consider a policy for anything built up this valley will be a real challenge. Very few would consider development in Crystal a “financially smart” decision. TMR had an internal cost evaluation completed that estimated the value of the property at 15.6 million dollars. This would be assuming that the 35 acre lots could sell for ~500k, which seems expensive for a lot that has so many constraints.

A Dried Up Crystal River

Bill Jochems

The United States Drought Monitor classifies the Crystal Valley in a state of exceptional drought. Even though River Valley Ranch is within this exceptional drought zone, diners on the deck of the Homestead Restaurant can enjoy the magnificent, luscious green view to the south. They will not see the slightest hint of drought and could easily imagine themselves in Scotland, with a distant mirage of Mt. Sopris. The peak flow in March is earlier than the riparian vegetation and the hayfields have their greatest needs for water. Bad timing.

But this comforting illusion would be shattered if the diners could see the stretch of the Crystal River, a few miles away, just upstream from the fish hatchery. The poor Crystal River has been reduced to a paltry trickle, between small pools of very warm water. In the 1970s, the Water Court in Glenwood Springs determined and decreed that the minimum instream flow to protect the health of this stretch of the Crystal River was 100 cubic feet per second (cfs). That flow today appears less than 1 cfs, leaving most of the bed of the river bone dry.

At last week's meeting of the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association (CVEPA) board, we decided to express our grave concern for the river, and our hopes that something can be done about it. That job fell to me, knowing I must make some generalizations and simplifications that limited column space in this newspaper requires.

Obviously less snow and rain and increasingly hot temperatures are a principal cause of the Crystal dry-up, but is "drought" really the correct description? Drought sounds like a temporary situation, something we will get over. Yet scientists see no end in sight. The opinion of many scientists is that our climate will worsen throughout the lives of everybody alive today. Seems better to say: "This is our climate. Get used to it."



If we can't do anything about the weather, can something be done about the diversions — about how much water is being taken out of the Crystal River? Waters diverted from the Crystal River have hugely benefited our valley. Diversions (ditches) allow enough hay to be grown to feed the cattle herds through the winter, and support year-round ranches. Without ditches, the Crystal Valley would be good for summer grazing only.

Diversions support more wildlife and return flows in the winter. Diversions support the River Valley Ranch golf course and Carbondale's trees and lawns and gardens and parks. Most of us enjoy the sight of irrigated hayfields. Is there a way for these benefits to continue, without drying up stretches of the Crystal River?

Aspen Journalism has investigated and reported on diversions of water from the Crystal River by the eight major irrigation ditches. These articles, in March 2024, were entitled "Why the Crystal River runs dry" and "Crystal River mapping project." The major ditches are rated according to their efficiencies. The most efficient was the Sweet Jessup Canal, rated at 30%. In other words, for every 100 gallons this ditch, the largest on the Crystal, diverts from the River, 30 gallons are beneficially used in the hayfields. The least efficient, according to Aspen Journalism, was the Carbondale Ditch, at less than 1%. For every 100 gallons this ditch diverts, less than 1 gallon irrigates the lawns, trees and parks of Carbondale. At some point, does inefficiency become waste?

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A Dried Up Crystal River, *continued*

There is no mystery to these figures. Ditches dug through rocky soils leak like sieves. The Sweet Jessup is the most efficient because miles of it are in pipes and lined ditches. Not all ditch owners are as willing, or able, to make these improvements. Pitkin County Healthy Rivers Fund has helped improve some ditches, perhaps Carbondale can do the same for its ditches. The owners themselves can improve their ditches. Times have changed, and some of the old ways of irrigating must change as well.



Finally, our water laws are from the 19th century and our infrastructure from the 20th century. Maybe now, in the 21st century, with way less water and way more people dependent, everything should be reconsidered.

This article was submitted to the Sopris Sun last August, when a stretch of the Crystal River above the fish hatchery was reduced to a trickle. This most recent winter, there was even less snow that fell on even drier and thirstier ground. So, despite presidios of greater "monsoon" rains this summer, water managers expect even lower flows this August. So there will be a greater need for

conservation and efficiency. Let us hope the hay growers obey the Colorado law which provides that taking any more water from a stream than your crop absolutely needs, is unlawful. As you can see from the photo above, one irrigator is blasting his water cannons, and taking all the water he can, from the Crystal River.



Crystal River, August 2025



Crystal River headwaters, June 2026

A free-flowing river, and the need for continuing vigilance

Dale Will

According to Ute elder Roland McCook, the Ute name for the Crystal River Valley was “Nuche-Mu-Gu-Avatum-Ada’he,” or “The People’s Place of the Heart.” The first white settlers who arrived in the Valley somewhat unimaginatively named the river “Rock Creek.” The contrast in cultural sensitivity was palpable. It was soon realized by early settlement boosters that “Rock Creek” wasn’t great advertising. John Osgood and his burgeoning interests in Redstone promoted a name change, eventually persuading the Department of the Interior in 1901 to rename it the Crystal River.

For over a century, water users south of Silt and Rifle have dreamed of impounding the Crystal, one of the last undammed rivers in Colorado. These dreams were formalized in the Colorado River Storage Act of 1956. In 1957 the Colorado River Water Conservation District obtained conditional water rights for the “West Divide Project,” which would use Crystal water for “generation of electric energy, domestic and municipal purposes, industrial purposes, including but not limited to the production of oil shale, irrigation purposes and stock watering purposes.”

The proposed Placita Dam would have created a reservoir that would have flooded a huge area which includes the largest and most ecologically valuable wetland in the Crystal River Valley. The West Divide Water Conservancy District was formed in 1964 with taxing authority to make it happen.



Meanwhile, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed in 1968 as one of several keystone environmental laws enacted with bipartisan support during that era. This act required federal agencies to determine the eligibility of waterways for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

In 1972, the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association (CVEPA) was founded out of opposition to dams on the Crystal River. In the 1980s, the White River National Forest deemed the Crystal River eligible for permanent protection as a Wild and Scenic river.

Local concern for our rivers and streams led to the creation of the Pitkin County Healthy Rivers program in 2008. With new support from the Pitkin County Attorney’s Office, a coalition of river advocates succeeded in getting the West Divide Water Conservancy District to let go of most of its conditional water rights in 2001. And efforts by this group finally persuaded the Colorado River District to drop the West Divide Project altogether in 2013.

All that is now required to permanently protect the Crystal is Congressional action. However, such designations are unfortunately rare, as Congressional delegations require virtual unanimity from locals before proceeding. While a passionate group of river advocates has continued to push for this protection for the Crystal, the effort has thus far been stymied by misplaced paranoia of some influential landowners afraid of federal protection of the river.

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Originally published in the June 3, 2026 “Sopris Sun.”

A free-flowing river, and the need for continuing vigilance, *continued*

This political deadlock led to the formation of the Crystal River Collaborative Steering Committee, with representatives from Gunnison County, Pitkin County, Marble, the Colorado River Water Conservation District and West Divide Water Conservancy District. While the committee has not been able to agree on permanent protections, it recently approved the Crystal River Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) whereby the five government entities agree not to support any new reservoir or impoundment of water on the main stem of the Crystal and to oppose any water rights application that would remove water from the Crystal River basin.

CVEPA lauds the commitment of these five agencies to respect the sanctity of our river. The present political consensus has been hard won and a long time coming. However, we are disappointed that a more durable protection has not yet been achieved. Paragraph 3 of the agreement provides that each signatory may simply “terminate their participation” at any time. David Brower once famously quipped that environmental protection requires constant victories where even a single loss is often permanent. There is nothing in this agreement that would bar the Colorado River Water Conservation District or West Divide Water Conservancy District from again proposing dams and diversions.



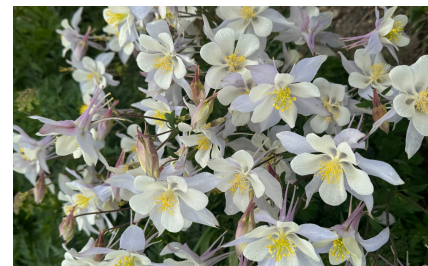
For this reason, the CVEPA Board remains cautious. Given the stated transience of the commitments made in the Crystal River IGA, we must remain vigilant to protect “Nuche-Mu-Gu-Avatum-Ada’he,” or “The People’s Place of the Heart.”

*****Attention Members***
We need your email!**

As we grow our membership and scale our communication, CVEPA is looking to go paperless.

If you receive our Crystal Clear in print today and are interested in email communication going forward, please send an email to: cvepa1972@gmail.com

Thank you!



Board of Directors President John Armstrong, Vice President Dale Will, Vice President Jay Engstrom, Jacob Schmidt, Bill Jochems, Tait Andersen, Greg Albrecht



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