

CRYSTAL CLEAR

Fall, 2021

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CVEPA Looks to the Future

About 40 CVEPA members and friends gathered on the sunny bank of the Crystal River behind Propaganda Pie the last Sunday in August to celebrate the valley and learn about the challenges it faces during CVEPA's annual meeting.

Board president John Armstrong began by conducting a business meeting that covered necessary changes to bylaws, a treasurer's report, and board changes. Armstrong and Dale Will both renewed for three year terms, and Suzy Meredith-Orr agreed to serve as a second Vice President. Francie Jacober will move from her position on the board to serve as liaison between CVEPA and the Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners. Armstrong made an impassioned plea for the participation of younger folks on the board to ensure the continuance of CVEPA's mission well into the future, and to relieve those board members who have, in some instances, served for decades. Anyone interested in learning more about joining the board should write cvepa@outlook.com.

Some passionate discussion ensued about CVEPA's profile in the community and how best to use its limited funds to improve the 49 year old organization's recognition in the area. Armstrong stressed the importance of supporting local newspapers that have generously provided space for CVEPA columns and covered the organization's activities. He also emphasized that area non-profits fighting the good environmental fight deserve CVEPA donations as well. While a motion to advertise monthly in both local

papers failed, board members made the case for developing a marketing plan that will support local media while bringing attention to the many issues that impact the Crystal Valley and CVEPA's involvement with them.

The extent to which CVEPA is engaged in those issues was made clear by Armstrong's summary of recent activity.

Four CVEPA representatives participate in the steering committee that is currently working to obtain Wild and Scenic designation for the Crystal River. CVEPA is in favor of a transparent effort to gain that status and believes that grassroots support is a critical part of making it happen. Supporters were encouraged to talk to their friends and neighbors about the importance of protecting the Crystal from dams and diversions. (See "Fourth Effort" on page 2.)

OHV overuse in the upper Crystal continues. CVEPA is encouraged by the Gunnison BOCC's responsiveness to community concerns, but is still waiting for the educational component of their three-pronged approach to materialize. CVEPA and the Marble Town Council support a permit system on the Lead King Loop, but the USFS has been slow to support the concept, though permit systems exist for Hanging Lake, Conundrum Hot Springs Zone, and potentially Four Pass Loop.

Armstrong recognized Alex Menard for bringing the Hepola wetlands project to CVEPA's attention over a year ago after Aspen Valley Land Trust passed on acquiring the 55 acre site because of concerns over potential toxicity of the slag heap at the Hoffman

smelter. CVEPA decided to take the project on and recently secured environmental approval through the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment that certifies the area meets AVLT criteria. After it is transferred into AVLT conservatorship, CVEPA will partner with them to develop a management plan and educational signage.

The Colorado Department of Transportation has been busy in the Crystal Valley this summer. Rock scaling work and the mudslides that ravaged both ends of the valley in late July meant the Horseshoe dump site was filled with the equivalent of years of debris in only a couple of months. CDOT began dumping debris at Placita, an area that is off limits according to the management plan ratified by CVEPA, USFS and CDOT in 2015. To address the violation, Armstrong initiated a meeting with CDOT's landscape experts to come up with a new plan.

CVEPA hopes to re establish the open lines of communication we have historically shared with USFS. We also recognize that climate change will continue to present many challenges to the valley in the future, and that we all have be realistic about expectations of CDOT.

After breaking for dinner (Propaganda Pie's delicious pizza), the keynote speaker, historian, author and Western Colorado University professor, Dr. Duane Vandebusch, held attendees in rapt attention as his booming voice relayed the fascinating story of water rights in the west, and in particular, the history of the Colorado

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“Future” continued

River Compact. According to Vandebusch, “mining, railroads and ranching are considered the sexiest topics of the west, but water tops them all.” He described the many backbreaking efforts to move water from where it flowed, through tunnels and diversions to where it wasn’t, and the legal and political efforts to decide who could ultimately get it. Western Colorado “has about 10% of the population, 33% of the land area, and 80% of the water.” There are now 38 diversion from the Western slope to the Eastern slope.

Vandebusch cautioned that the water situation in the West is dire, “underline it seven times,” and the future will force all who live here to make difficult and unavoidable choices. To read an article by Vandebusch that expounds on the content of his fascinating talk, go to <https://www.gunnisontimes.com/articles/water-the-lifeblood-of-colorado/>

In the unenviable position of following the enthralling professor was Chris Cox of Treasure Mountain Ranch and the Crystal Mill Foundation, who admirably held the attention of all while describing the early stages of planning for his 760 acre ranch that surrounds Crystal. Cox is the fourth generation of six who have spent their lives enjoying the spectacular setting and caring for the place. Cox secured controlling interest in the ranch after a five year court battle to protect his family’s legacy. Cox, along with Stuart Gillespie, an attorney from Ouray, hope to build 20 four season vacation cabins at a rate of four per year, and eventually a dining lodge. They propose moving 85% of the property into a conservation easement, and hope to place an historic preservation overlay over the town of Crystal. The intention is for the operation to be carbon neutral.

The final speaker of the meeting was Katie Todt, of Lewicki

and Associates, who answered questions on behalf of Colorado Stone Quarries. She admitted there had been a lapse of communication from CSQ about its activities and indicated that will improve. CSQ has a new general manager with 20 years of experience and from 22 to 30 workers on site at any given time. Todt explained that the Franklin Quarry will continue to operate for 15-20 years, however, the quarry as a whole has 100 years of mining left in its permit and its resources.

Armstrong expressed CVEPA’s concern that the US Army Corp of Engineers didn’t require an enforcement action after CSQ moved Yule Creek, and suggested CSQ could partner with AVLT on improving Hepola as one form of compensatory mitigation. He also said CVEPA resents their lack of transparency. Todt explained that the USACE process drives the distribution of information and that has forced even she and CSQ to use FOIA requests. Armstrong asked if CSQ could arrange a public event at the quarry to educate the public on their future plans, but Todt replied that MSHA limits public access. She reminded all that the .3 mile trail at the top of the quarry road is open year-round.

The hot sun had moved behind the mountains by the time the meeting adjourned, leaving a gentler view of the valley and the river that continue to inspire the protective instincts of so many. CVEPA is proud to be the environmental watchdog of the Crystal Valley, and happy to count so many as supporters. The next annual meeting, scheduled for August 28, 2022, will mark CVEPA’s 50th year.

Thank you to the “Gunnison Country Times” for providing the link to Dr. Vandebusch’s article for use in the “Crystal Clear.”

Fourth Effort For Wild & Scenic

Gaining Wild, Scenic & Recreational (WSR) designation for the Crystal River has long been a goal for CVEPA. The first real efforts were led by then CVEPA board members Kathleen Menke and Jack Snobble in the early 1980s. That effort was the basis for the United States Forest Service determining the Crystal as eligible for designation, but opposition, mainly from some vocal local ranchers, was sufficient to thwart prospects for Congressional action.

A second attempt for designation lasted for many years in the 1990s as CVEPA board members Mike Mechau and Peter Westcott engaged with residents and property owners representing diverse interests, including ranchers and others opposed to designation, to draft and circulate a community survey to residents of the Crystal Valley to ascertain what sort of future residents wanted for the valley, and ascertain the level of community support for WSR designation. The effort was overseen by the National Park Service, and the results showed quite strong support for keeping the Crystal River free from dams or diversions, the aim of WSR

designation. There seemed to be an effort to quash the report as the National Park Service never formally released the results and only released them informally years after the survey was taken. Unfortunately, no use was made of the survey which clearly provided the positive evidence needed for Congressional action. A third attempt was made by a committee of local residents several years ago, including CVEPA board members Chuck Downey and Dorothea Farris and members Bill Jochems and Chuck Ogilby. A bill was drafted for Congressional action that expressly placed all land use regulations under local control. This was done to address the often-voiced fear that designation would put the



Federal government in control of private property. Although much of the local ranching opposition had disappeared by this time, some private property owners remained opposed and very vocal. One rancher mounted a campaign to discourage Marble area residents from supporting designation. His effort succeeded when the Marble Town Council withheld its support, and as a result the Gunnison County Commissioners failed to back the designation.

A new effort is now underway with a wide coalition of partners, including Pitkin County, Wilderness Workshop, American Rivers, and of course CVEPA. Four CVEPA board members (John Armstrong, Chuck Downey, Dorothea Farris and Peter Westcott) and two former board members (Bill Jochem, John Emerick) are among the roughly 25 member Wild and Scenic Steering Committee. The committee meets every two weeks on Zoom.

The committee has drafted a Statement of Support which, while short, outlines both the many benefits of WSR designation and addresses much of the misinformation put out by

those who fear the designation. A new WSR website specifically for the Crystal River holds all the details on what designation means and, even more important, information on how private landowners remain largely unaffected.

The committee will soon reach out to key stakeholders – local towns, counties, private land owners, businesses – to address issues and try to find wording that satisfies all concerns. The goal is to gain wide community support that is needed to achieve WSR designation for the Crystal.

Valley Voices:

“Where Restoration Meets Recreation ”

New trail system at Coal Basin Ranch connects mountain bikers and hikers to the land.

By Trina Ortega

On the crumbling edge of the Elk Mountains, under a June sun softened by day’s end, I sat on the shore of the pond at Coal Basin Ranch. I watched a kettle of sparrows flitting and darting. They looked like they were playing, but it’s about survival: They were skittering across the top of the pond to pick bugs off the surface. Flit-flit-flit. Then up and away into the cloudless sky.

Lavender-colored lupine, blue-green grasses with tufted flowers, and young aspen trees cover the hillsides above the pond. Most of the vegetation was planted just two years ago as part of the restoration efforts at Coal Basin Ranch, a new trail system five miles west of Redstone.

Managed by Crystal Basin Holdings (an LLC held by the Carbondale-based Catena Foundation), Coal Basin Ranch comprises 221 acres of private property. It’s difficult to imagine that for many decades, this now-quiet pond area was the very busy base operations for Mid-Continent Resources, which operated five mines in the area from 1956–1991 and yielded 23 million tons of medium volatile coal for U.S. steel mills.

Today, the vision for Coal Basin Ranch is to provide a rehabilitated natural landscape where individuals can connect with nature through recreation, while gaining a deeper understanding of how trails can be an integral part of restoration. More than 1,000 trees have been planted, along with willows, silver berry, twin berry, and other shrubs in the last two years. Native grass and flower seed has been spread, and the growth is starting to color a landscape that was once coated in coal dust. Plant growth returns nitrogen and other nutrients to the soils and helps stabilize hillsides. Water has been routed through the property to boost plant life. And trails are strategically designed to help prevent erosion.



“It’s a little gem up here,” said Teresa Swann of Glenwood Springs during her first visit to the ranch in early August. While giving her youngest child, Dylan, the okay to make another lap around the pump track, she adds: “It’s super fun, great trails. The kids are loving it. They’re just doing a bunch of laps and having a ball.”

The ranch celebrated its soft opening in early July, with about 300 mountain bikers and hikers in attendance to test the trails, and we’ve experienced a steady flow of visitors since opening weekend.

Families from different towns have met at Coal Basin Ranch to ride and picnic.

Environmental science teachers have taken pictures and talked about how they want to bring their classes to the ranch for outdoor education. Fitness junkies have come to lap the recommended loop or extend their rides into White River National Forest via Coal Basin Trail 1953.

Toddlers enjoy cruising

along the pond’s shore on their balance bikes. Even the youngest — some of whom haven’t even taken their first steps — get to experience the trails while sitting in shotgun seats mounted to parents’ bike frames.

The trails are open to mountain biking and hiking, and the family friendly system includes a 3.9-mile recommended loop with singletrack trail along a creek and a long descent through scrub oak and aspen. There are jump lines, a pump track and a Strider track encircling the pond and all nestled in the woods at 8,085 feet elevation.

Jorma Cox of Glenwood Springs says he has been bringing his two boys to Coal Basin long before Coal Basin Ranch installed the mountain bike-centric trails. When the boys were little, they escaped the heat of summer to jump bikes and climb the shale piles. Now, with the ranch’s pump track, it’s a

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spot where both boys can thrive.

“Since my oldest son is disabled, he uses a walker,” Cox said. “He really likes that the Coal Basin Ranch parking lot area and the bike trails are good enough for him to get around on. He can challenge himself on the terrain and get some real exercise while his little brother jumps and races around the pump track. They get to support each other and still be together.”

Coal Basin Ranch is open to the public, free of charge. In addition to being a recreational asset for the public to enjoy, it will serve as a location for local schools and organizations that have mountain biking programs and outdoor education programs to have an optimized place to ride, run and hike while learning about restoration, sustainably built trails, stewardship and conservation. Groups like the Roaring Fork Cycling youth program have used the ranch for coaches’ clinics and youth day camps, and Colorado Mountain College will visit in fall with students in the experiential education program.

Macey Swann, 12, of Glenwood Springs made her first visit to the trails in August and was describing her first time on the recommended loop. “I think it’s really fun,” she said. “I liked the part that went all the way up high. We went all the way around on Bear Ridge Trail. The descent was really fun. I like it all.”

Most visitors to Coal Basin will take note of the striking landscape that encompasses roughly 25 square miles: Hillsides covered with bright green aspen, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and spruce contrast the grays and browns of the rugged, steep headwalls of Huntsman’s and other ridge lines. Near the ranch’s parking lot, Coal Creek and Dutch Creek flow year-round and come together in a symphony of water tumbling over mountain rocks. The ranch’s pond is home to Mallards in spring, and penny skippers, dragonflies, swallows and more throughout the season.

Long before the area was accessed for its rich coal deposits in the exposed Mesaverde Formation, the indigenous Utes called the area home. The Utes (or Nuche in their language, meaning “The People”) migrated annually from the region’s river valleys to Colorado’s high country during the summer hunting season.



In the late 1800s, coal magnate John Cleveland Osgood built the company town of Redstone and employed hundreds of men to work the steep tunnel mines above what was known as Dexter Park just west of this site. The Highline Railroad hauled the coal to the coke ovens (along what is now Highway 133) and heated to burn off impurities. During that same era, President Theodore Roosevelt hunted bear and

cougar in the Coal Basin region and was among the dignitaries who stayed at Osgood’s Cleveholm Manor (Redstone Castle) south of Redstone.

Roughly four decades later, Mid-Continent Resources launched its large-scale operation to mine the high-quality coal, which was shipped to steel mills in California, Utah, Texas and South Korea. Innovative mining techniques, such as the long-wall system, which used a large blade to shear off coal onto a conveyor belt, made mining the steep and geologically tenuous terrain of Coal Basin more efficient.

Over the decades, agriculture has also supported the settlement of the Crystal River Valley, and local families continue to carry on their cattle ranching heritage with grazing leases on the surrounding national forest.

Public access to the trails is possible through an easement with Pitkin County. Gary Tennenbaum, director of Pitkin County Open Space & Trails, says the private-public

partnership is the first of its kind in the county and has introduced residents to a new area.

“A new network of really fun bike trails up Coal Basin will introduce folks to this area and showcase how it is being restored from former mining activities,” he added. “The Crystal Valley is one of the most beautiful valleys in all of Colorado and has been found by the public. Well-managed recreation can help with the tourist economy while protecting the vast array of natural resources that makes the Crystal Valley so special.”

Trina Ortega is the ranch and trails manager at Coal Basin Ranch. Formerly the editor-in-chief of Mountain Flyer Magazine, Ortega also has a wealth of experience working in the outdoors, including a stint as a Colorado Outward Bound School instructor and program assistant for Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers.

For more information about the ranch, follow Coal Basin Ranch Community Trail System on Facebook and @coalbasinranchmtb on Instagram. The ranch phone number is (970) 510-6857.

Message From the President



Occasionally, I try to imagine what Marble Valley would look like today had the ski area developers prevailed. Permits for a schlock alpine village of 25,000 residents were being fast tracked. (In comparison our expansive town of Carbondale has a population of 7,000). Half a century has passed since CVEPA activists and founders galvanized to defeat this greed-fueled and poorly conceived development proposal. My imagination of the

development is terrifying but it inspires gratitude and motivation.

What if the West Divide Project actually pursued their conditional water right and built a 301 foot tall dam in the Placita Gap? A CVEPA trustee succeeded in getting them to relinquish those rights after almost 40 years (with the help of Pitkin County).

What if the reclamation of Coal Basin was left half-finished after the State spent the inadequate bond money Mid-Continent Coal Corporation was required to post?

CVEPA trustees influenced and teamed with the State to complete the project.

What if no one questioned CDOT's continued dumping of landslide debris in Placita Valley which was scheduled to bury upland sage habitat for half a mile along Highway 133? CVEPA alerted the Forest Service, demanded a halt to the dumping and helped the departments find a suitable dump site.

The list goes on and on but the lesson is that if you see something that doesn't look right, it is because it isn't! If you don't speak up who will? In short, what would our valley be today without the commitment of our predecessors who recognized the unique and often fragile beauty of the Crystal Valley and were willing to fight to protect it?

One of CVEPA's greatest challenges is facing us right now. CVEPA is seeking the next generation of environmentalists. Engagement of the next group of people who are devoted to defending our valley is critical to our future. Succession is a vital component of our mission. The past fifty years has taught us well. Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much!

—John Armstrong

Debris Disposal Along HW133

Statement from CDOT

"Slide material from mudslides along CO 133 this summer has been moved to the Horseshoe disposal site and Placita disposal site. There is also a rockfall mitigation project underway along CO 133 on the north side of McClure pass. Rocky material from that project is being moved to the Horseshoe disposal site, and clays and organic materials from the project are being moved to the Placita site. Materials at the Placita disposal site are inclusive of a reclamation plan per Forest Service and CDOT agreement, which will blend to the natural terrain and vegetation."



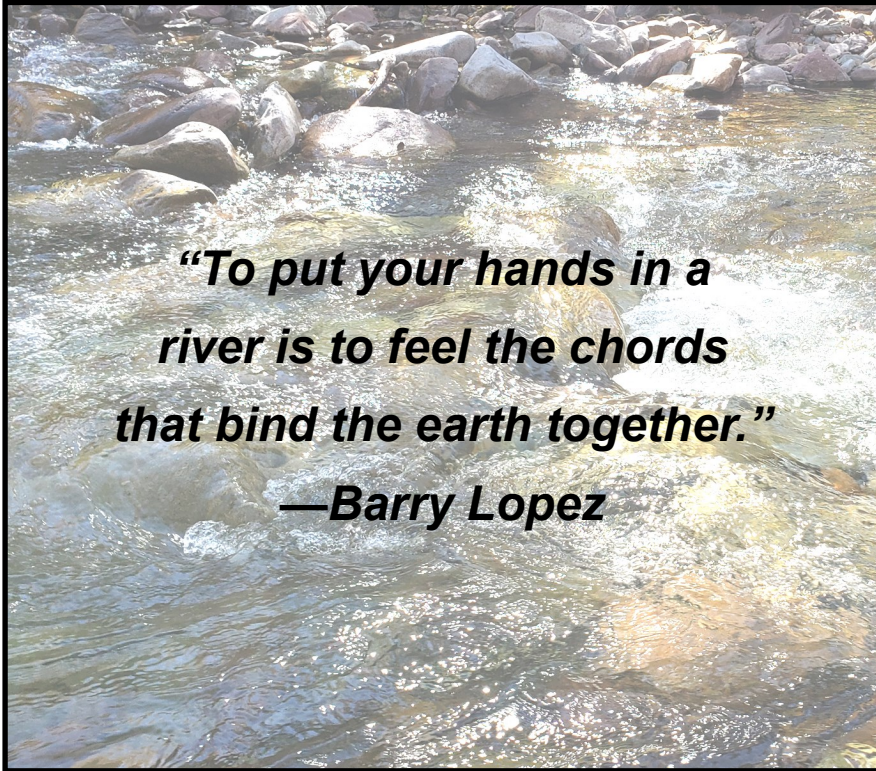
Dumping at Placita in August.

Statement from CVEPA:

CDOT renewed dumping debris at Placita this summer. Five years ago the area was decommissioned for further dumping and was specified for Reclamation per CDOT and USFS management plans.

Deliberately, CVEPA requested to view the CDOT revegetation plan for Placita before the beginning of the busy fire and flash floods season. The USFS Sopris District did not respond to our numerous calls or emails. The CDOT statement above, that their contractor would fix it on their way out, dismisses the plan that was put in place in 2015. This area, and the designated McClure Pass Horseshoe Bend Site, is along the West Elk Scenic Byway.

Fearing that there was no revegetation plan, CVEPA contacted the White River National Forest Supervisor's Office Landscape Specialist. Within two weeks CDOT and USFS staff convened a joint meeting. CDOT is now developing a plan for revegetation of the Placita Site. A united voice is a strong voice!



The “Crystal Clear” is published quarterly by the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association, a 501c3 organization. CVEPA has been the environmental watchdog of the Crystal Valley since 1972. Meeting minutes are available at cvepa.org/cvepa-minutes

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