



Strategic Plan 2016- 2026



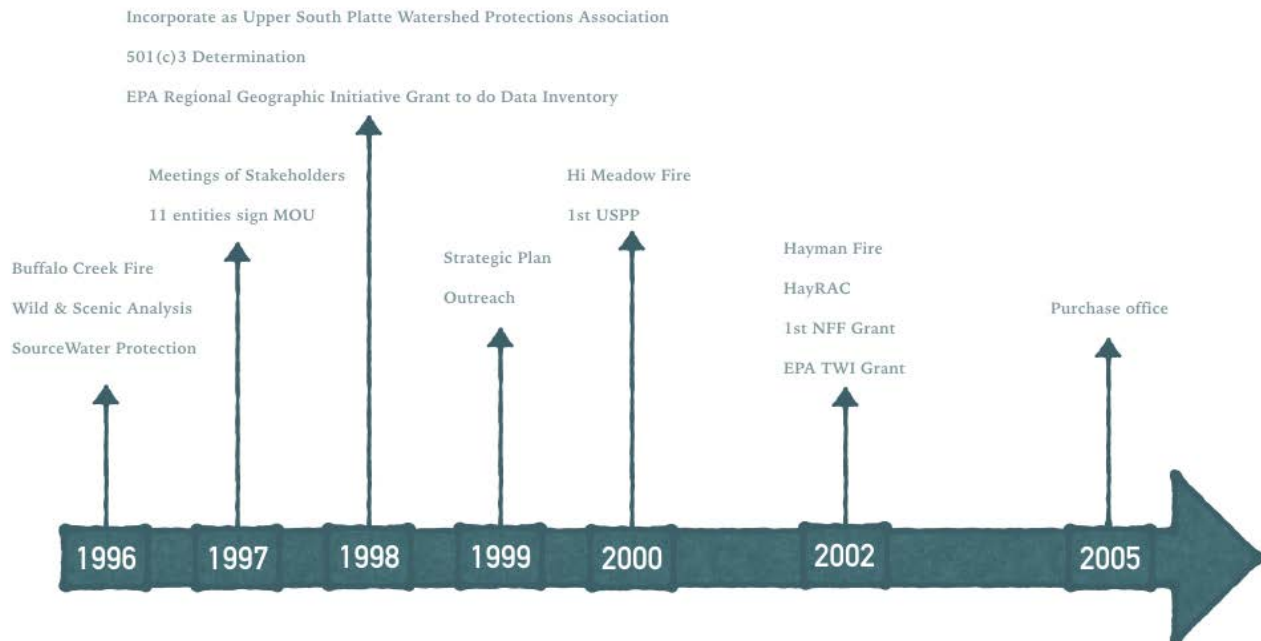
## Vision and Mission

### **A Healthy Watershed—Now and in the Future**

The Mission of the Coalition for the Upper South Platte is *to protect the water quality and environmental health of the Upper South Platte Watershed, through the cooperative efforts of watershed stakeholders, with emphasis on community values and economic sustainability.*

## History

### *Timeline: Ancient History*



During the 1990s, there was a watershed movement around the US, with groups forming in various areas of the country. These watershed organizations shared two fundamental beliefs:

- 1.) Environmental problems don't stay within jurisdictional boundaries; therefore solving them can't happen as long as we confine ourselves to lines drawn on maps, and;
- 2.) We need everyone who depends on a resource, who has a stake in the outcome, to come to the table and work cooperatively in order to succeed in addressing the most pressing environmental problems.

At the time that watershed groups were beginning to gain recognition as an effective

approach for addressing many environmental problems, three things happened that brought stakeholders with an interest in the Upper South Platte Watershed together:

1. In 1994/95, the USFS did a study of segments of the South Platte within Forest Service boundaries to assess whether any river segments within the boundaries might qualify for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, based on Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs). The Denver Water Board and other Front Range water providers were concerned that designation would require the abandonment of some senior water rights, and that designation would give the USFS operational control of the river, negatively impacting their ability to operate their water rights.
2. EPA issued guidelines on Source Water Assessment Programs (SWAP) that required water providers to look at areas that impact their water quality. As this watershed is a major source of municipal water for Colorado's Front Range municipalities, SWAP would require water providers to actively study this watershed.
3. The Buffalo Creek fire burned 11,700 acres within the watershed in 1996, and subsequent flooding resulted in the loss of life and serious impacts on municipal water systems. This fire was, at that time, the largest wildfire in Colorado history, and served as a wake-up call for agencies and entities dealing with forest health and fire issues that *worse could come*.

With these three issues looming large, the Denver Water Department and the City of Aurora Water Resources Department pooled some funds to contract with Brown and Caldwell, an environmental engineering firm, to facilitate a series of stakeholder meetings for the Upper South Platte Watershed. By early 1998, attendees to these meetings began working on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Bylaws establishing a watershed group. Under the MOU, everyone agreed that whatever came out of the newly created Upper South Platte Watershed Management Program should be looked at as voluntary, not regulatory. By August of 1998, Park, Jefferson, Teller and Douglas Counties, the City of Aurora, Denver Water, the State Trust Land Board, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the Center of Colorado and the Upper South Platte Water Conservancy Districts signed the MOU and began working on incorporating as a nonprofit entity.

Under the MOU, the parties agreed to the following preliminary list of water quality goals:

1. Protect water quality in the Upper South Platte River and its tributaries to support beneficial uses, which could include drinking water supply and cold-water fisheries
2. Sustain the productivity and diversity of the ecological systems within the watershed
3. Address water quality impacts related to water quantity management
4. Manage nonpoint pollutant sources including grazing, forestry, transportation corridors, mining, erosion, and septic systems

## 5. Minimize impacts of disastrous events, such as the Buffalo Creek Fire

In August 1998, Lisa McVicker, an attorney and Board member of the Center of Colorado Water Conservancy District, prepared Articles of Incorporation for the Upper South Platte Watershed Protection Association to submit to the Secretary of State's Office. In September, Lisa prepared an application for determination of nonprofit, exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service, that the group received in October, 1998. Once the Association received determination from the IRS, it began applying for grants.

The first grant to the Association was a Regional Geographic Initiative Grant from the EPA for development of a DATA INVENTORY AND ASSESSMENT (DIA). The DIA was completed by reviewing existing studies and information, and by making contact with a variety of entities and agencies. Craig Creek in the Lost Park Wilderness, was the only sub-watershed identified in the DIA as *not impaired*.

In late 1999, the Association applied for and received a Sustainable Development Challenge Grant from EPA. Based on the committee's recommendation, the Association's Board approved a one-year contract with Carol Ekarius, effective January 1, 2000.

The Association completed its first strategic plan in February of 2001. The plan identified the following overall goals: 1.) Create a water literate culture that understands where water comes from, what the water quality concerns are, and how water relates to the greater ecological good. 2.) Develop watershed education programs for students so they will go on to be water literate as adults. 3.) Act as a clearing house for information, and a trustworthy link between citizens, government entities, environmental organizations and others who wish to participate in a dialog about watershed issues. 4.) Provide expertise to other groups that need technical information (for example, BMP's, SWAP, etc.). 5.) Develop and implement restoration projects that will begin restoring the water quality and ecological health of the watershed. 6.) Coordinate monitoring and maintenance of data developed by the Association or other entities and organizations.

These goals would help address problems related to four contaminants of concern:

1. Sediment: Both natural conditions and human activities contribute to sediment loadings. Natural conditions that contribute to this problem include the results of wildfire, steep terrain and geological characteristics. Sediment from human activities is primarily impacted by land use and development, transportation, and agriculture.

2. Nutrients, in particular phosphorous: Phosphorous is a concern because the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission's Chatfield Reservoir Control Regulation places an annual allocation on the upper watershed. The allocation is flow adjusted, but base allocation is 17,930 pounds per year. Nitrogen compounds are also a concern because many of the watershed's residents utilize septic systems, and these systems are often old, usually un-maintained, and frequently located in close proximity to flowing streams.

3. Metals/acid mine drainage: Traditionally a great deal of mining took place in

the watershed. Several mines, such as the London Mine, are still licensed and have NPDES permits. The Association is also aware of 84 abandoned mines within the watershed (though more may exist that are undocumented).

4. Microorganisms: Though less of an issue than the others, coliform bacteria and other microorganisms may be a concern. These may come from natural sources (wildlife), livestock, septic systems, and/or wastewater treatment plants.

The plan identified dozens of strategies to work on that stakeholders supported as helping to reduce impacts from key areas, such as agriculture, fire, recreation, transportation, land use and development, or water system operations.

Between 2000 and 2002, the Association received several grants, such as a 319 Information and Outreach grant, which enabled it to develop a newsletter, sponsor environmental education efforts, and host a series of meetings for watershed stakeholders, and a Rural Community Assistance Grant, which enabled it to help coordinate monitoring information sharing meetings. In 2001, the Association added Theresa Springer as a part-time environmental education coordinator to the staff.

On June 8<sup>th</sup> 2002, the Hayman Fire started southwest of Denver, near Lake George. It was contained on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, and during its 25-day reign, it burned a 137,000-acre area within the watershed. As the Hayman was burning, the USFS and other partners called on the Association to help deal with the aftermath of the fire. The Association had been considering a name change, and decided that this was time to make the change if it was ever going to be made. The Board approved the change of name, and taking an active role in Hayman Fire recovery at its August, 2002 meeting. The Upper South Platte Watershed Protection Association was rechristened as the Coalition for the Upper South Platte, or CUSP.

At the same time, the CUSP Board began working on another important change to our bylaws: We increased the potential size of our Board from 11 members up to a maximum of 23, and increased the diversity of Board members by establishing positions for state and local governmental officials, environmental and business community representatives, and for interested individuals.

CUSP grew quickly in the months following the fire, as it took over operations of the Hayman Recovery Assistance Center. By October of 2002, two more full-time employees were added to the payroll, and CUSP opened an office on Highway 24 in Lake George. CUSP staff and partners helped coordinate 23,000 volunteer hours on fire recovery between August, 2002, and November, 2002, when weather shut down recovery operations for the winter. Staff also answered thousands of phone calls from fire victims, bureaucrats, academics, the media, donors, and volunteers seeking information after the fire, as well as coordinating distribution of supplies and donations for victims. CUSP continued its fire related efforts throughout 2003, with funds from a National Forest Foundation (NFF) grant, a Rural Community Assistance Grant (RCAG), and donations from various sources. Although the RCAG grant was to be used exclusively for fire rehab, the NFF grant also provided funds for green forest restoration, and organizational capacity building. This grant allowed CUSP to hire several more positions

in 2003, including Aimee Rathburn, as Development Director.

### ***Lessons Learned***

- **Understand the current and future conditions by using the best available science.**
- **Be as inclusive as possible – (All projects can easily be derailed by one person who does not support the project).**
- **Be willing to adapt and to change.**
- **Set realistic project goals – What are the objectives? (Small achievements are just as important as the large ones) A plan of action must be designed, articulated and presented to the KEY stakeholders.**
- **Get Creative with the Funding – look for unconventional sources - create networks of people who want to help and tell the story.**
- **Utilize volunteers where and when possible – (Ownership is not built by approving plans, but by getting dirty and working together).**
- **Consider all components (economics, property, safety, environmental processes, recreation, etc) of a project from day one, starting with planning.**

In late 2003, CUSP was chosen as one of 20 watershed groups nationwide (of 176 applications submitted to EPA Headquarters by governors and tribal leaders) to receive a \$600,000 grant under EPA's Targeted Watershed Initiative Grant. This was a three year grant that included funds for continuing fire rehab, as well as to undertake a variety of projects outlined in the Strategic Plan that was completed in 2001 such as river restoration, trail restoration, and environmental education.

CUSP updated its strategic plan in 2006, and again in 2016. For the 2016 update, CUSP's board, leadership staff, and several external stakeholders participated in a two-day retreat at Lost Valley Ranch. Generally, everyone agreed that our existing plan was on the right track, and had empowered CUSP to grow into one of the leading organizations of its type in the country.

Today, CUSP has grown to more than twenty (including part-time and seasonal employees). We have received

many national and regional awards and recognition for our efforts (see <http://cusp.ws/awards-honors/>). We have continued our leadership across the state and the nation, participating in a variety of larger initiatives, such as the national Fire Adapted Communities network. In recent years our budget has ranged from \$2.5 million to \$6.5 million (in years immediately following the Waldo fire, when we were overseeing much of the immediate emergency response).

### **Watershed Description**

The Upper South Platte Watershed is located southwest of the Metro Denver region in Colorado and covers approximately 2,600 square miles (Hydrologic unit 10190001 and most of unit 10190002). It represents approximately 26% of the entire South Platte Watershed within Colorado. Over 75% of Colorado's residents count wholly or in part on water that comes from this watershed (either native or transmountain diversion waters) for drinking, industrial, and agricultural use. The watershed begins at Strontia Springs Reservoir and

reaches the Continental Divide. It varies in elevation from about 6,000 feet to over 14,000 feet above sea level. There are five major municipal reservoirs within the watershed and several smaller reservoirs.

Residential Land uses are primarily rural residential; the communities of Fairplay, Bailey and Woodland Park are the largest “urban” areas within the watershed.

Land ownership within the watershed is mostly public. The USDA Forest Service is the largest landowner within the basin, owning approximately 50 percent of the land. The Forest Service manages the Pike National Forest which covers roughly a 1,400 square-mile area of the watershed. National Forest lands are managed in accordance with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Pike and San Isabel National Forests, Comanche and Cimarron National Grasslands, approved in November 1985, and which is currently under revision. The second largest public landowner is the State of Colorado, managing approximately 155 square-miles. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) operates 98 square-miles. Other significant public land owners include the National Park Service (NPS), Denver Water, and the City of Aurora. Private landholdings make up the remainder of land ownership within the basin.

The majority of the watershed is sparsely populated with several small towns located near historic mining, recreation, and agricultural areas. There are approximately 25,000 platted, vacant building sites in Park County. Bailey, Alma, Woodland Park, Fairplay, and three sanitation districts operate wastewater facilities. The remainder of homes are on septic systems. Commercial lands are primarily located adjacent to major transportation arteries. There are increasing commercial areas in the basin, mostly confined to the towns of Fairplay, Woodland Park, Aspen Park, and Bailey.

In the eastern portion of the watershed, agricultural land consists primarily of riparian and mountain grasslands situated on private lands along the rivers. These areas are used primarily for livestock grazing and a minor amount of hay production. The USFS has 25 grazing permits for approximately 3,000 head of cattle on over 1 million acres. Grazing primarily occurs during a four month period from mid-June through the beginning of November. According to the Colorado Department of Agriculture, Park County has 132 ranches with approximately 13,000 head of cattle. Small scale livestock husbandry on private properties less than 35 acres has steadily increased over the past five years.

The Forest Service manages timber harvest lands within the Pike National Forest. Logging in the eastern part of the watershed peaked around 1880, with nearly all of the forest from Elevenmile to Strontia Springs Reservoir having been forested at some time. However, in the past 50 years there have been no large commercial timber sales. At this time harvesting is limited to cutting dead and/or down timber for firewood, several stewardship contracts, and small scale salvage logging operations. Minor timber sales have occurred on several private lands within the watershed to minimize accumulation of forest fuels.

Mining played an important part in the history of the basin and occurred throughout the entire basin. Numerous mining operations in the watershed have been worked and later



abandoned. Mining has included the extraction of silver, lode and placer gold, aggregate/sand, coal, gemstones, and peat. Heavy mining has occurred in three major locations in the Upper South Platte Watershed. First, the Mosquito and South Mosquito Creek subbasins



of the Middle Fork have had heavy mining in the past. The London Mine is one of the major mines in this area. Placer mining has occurred farther downstream near Fairplay. Mining was also prevalent in the upper reaches of the North Fork, especially in the Geneva Creek, Handcart Gulch, and Hall Valley areas. Current Mining operations are primarily for sand/gravel, with small scale mining for gemstones, gold/silver on the rise.

Wildlife areas within the watershed located in the Pike National Forest include elk calving areas, critical elk and deer winter ranges, bighorn sheep range areas, bighorn sheep lambing areas, and turkey winter ranges. The DOW has developed overview maps for approximately 107 sensitive vertebrate species in Park County.

## **Potential Contaminants**

Sources of contaminants and specific constituents of concern, listed below, can alter aesthetic acceptability of the water or pose a threat to human health, aquatic life, and habitat. Contaminate sources are from either point or nonpoint sources.

**1.Sediment**—Both natural conditions and human activities contribute to sediment loads. Natural conditions that contribute to this problem include the results of wildfire, steep terrain, and geological characteristics. Sediment from human activities is impacted by:

- Land use and development
- Transportation
- Agriculture
- Recreation

**2.Nutrients, in particular phosphorous**—Phosphorous is a concern because the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission's Chatfield Reservoir Control Regulation places an annual allocation on the upper watershed. The allocation is flow adjusted, but base allocation is 17,930 pounds per year. Nitrogen compounds are also a concern because many of the watershed's residents utilize septic systems, and these systems are often old, usually not maintained, and frequently located in close proximity to flowing streams.

**3.Metals/acid mine drainage**—Traditionally, a great deal of mining took place in the watershed. Several mines, such as the London Mine, are still licensed and have NPDES



permits. The Coalition is also aware of 84 abandoned mines within the watershed (though more may exist that are undocumented).

**4. Microorganisms**—Though less of an issue than the others, coliform bacteria and other microorganisms may be of concern. These may come from natural sources (wildlife), livestock, septic systems, and/or wastewater treatment plants.

#### **CUSP Values Board/Staff**

- Integrity
- Innovative
- Doing the right thing for the resource
- Resourcefulness
- Adaptive & adaptable
- Ethical
- Visionary
- Persistent
- Dedicated
- Flexible

### **Organizational Values**

#### ***Protection of ecological health and water quality.***

We believe that ecological health and water quality are essential to society and we are dedicated to their protection and enhancement. We must ensure the sustainability of the natural resources within the watershed. We strive to maintain options for future generations.

***The power of coalition.*** We believe in bringing together many interests.

***Community.*** We respect the values of the people we serve. We recognize the unique values of different communities and interest groups. We believe in grassroots action.

***Voluntary action.*** We believe in a voluntary, non-regulatory, non-mandated approach

***Economic sustainability.*** We recognize the economic needs of the local communities and the dependence upon the natural resources and will support local businesses in our purchasing to the extent practical.

***People are our most important resource.*** The Board of Directors, staff, and stakeholders are the most valuable asset the organization.

### **Driving Forces & Threats**

Driving Forces are those that pull or push CUSP. These forces can at times be beneficial and at other times detrimental to the organization's ability to follow its mission.

- **Social**—Rapid growth in residential development, bigger recreational demand, we have a volunteer cadre that wants to stay engaged
- **Eco-Illiteracy**—The public often has little or no understanding of ecosystems, their importance to our lives, and how/what can be done to take care of the systems that support us
- **Technological**—Biomass technology, carbon sequestration tech
- **Economic**—Availability of project funds; need for matching funds, future federal funds for projects, fire and flood insurance costs and availability, state of the economy and its effects on fundraising, stewardship and state of agricultural industry.
- **Ecological**—Fire and forest health, riparian resilience, invasive species, and particularly moving forward, climate change, fragmentation of habitats, and water demand vs supply for both consumptive (municipal, ag.) and nonconsumptive (environmental,

recreation) uses.

- **Political**—Regulatory environment e.g. phosphorus loads downstream, regulations about project permitting, local political forces looking for guidance and information-we're on their screen; the politicalization of natural resources, such as the give land back to the locals movements in the west.
- **Sustainability**—Fluctuations within staffing; cash flow challenges
- **Market Forces**—CUSP fills a niche nobody else does (personnel on the ground); macro-vs-micro economic issues (e.g. federal funding moving to or from our type of work, recession and growth periods, etc); need to diversify funding for CUSP; developing approaches to pay for ecosystem services (e.g. carbon markets)

### ***What drives Board/Staff?***

- Future generations/family
- Doing the right thing for the resource
- Pressing need to protect resources
- Leave this place better than I found it
- Creativity
- Educating the public
- Protecting/preserving resources
- Fulfillment
- Gratitude of people we serve/ helping others
- Quality of CUSP
- Collaboration/opportunities
- Fragmentation
- Meaningful contributions
- Eco-security
- Actual projects being completed
- The spark of understanding

### ***What has/is changing that impacts your/ our work and decisions***

- Impacts/Urgency
  - o Climate
  - o Extreme events
  - o Local-global
  - o Tight budgets
  - o Bureaucracy
  - o Growing populations
  - o Strains on resources
  - o Geo-politics/ politicization
- Change
  - o Climate
  - o Economic/do more with less
  - o Social
  - o Landscape approaches
- Accountability
- To be the voice of those not heard
- Diminishing/wasted resources
- Increased competition

### **Strategic Imperatives**

These are the overarching strategies and methods that will direct our work in coming years.

1. Identify problem areas of degraded water quality or ecological health and strategic targets for on-the-ground projects through effective monitoring, analysis, and planning processes.

2. Identify actions to protect and restore water quality and ecological health that can be implemented with local stakeholders.

3. Facilitate or perform successful on-the-ground projects.

4. Coordinate monitoring and maintenance of data (including GIS and mapping data) developed by CUSP or other partner entities and organizations.

5. Educate and engage residents, upstream

and downstream stakeholders.

6. Ensure the viability of the organization, including increasing non-grant funding.
7. Clarify the relationship between CUSP and Coalitions & Collaboratives.

## **Goals**

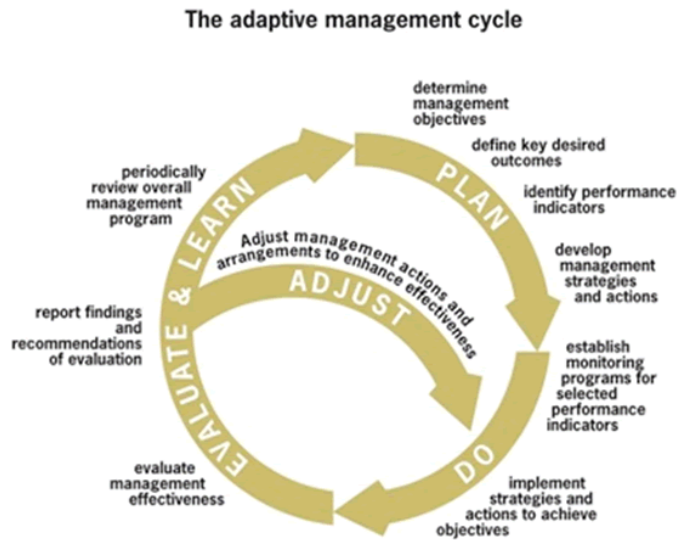
1. Protect water quality in the Upper South Platte River and its tributaries to support beneficial uses, including but not limited to drinking water supply, fisheries, recreation, agriculture, etc.
2. Sustain the productivity and diversity of the ecological systems within the watershed.
3. Address water quality impacts related to water quantity management.
4. Manage nonpoint pollutant sources including grazing, forestry, transportation corridors, mining, erosion, and septic systems.
5. Minimize impacts of disastrous events, such as the Buffalo Creek Fire.
6. Effect a measurable improvement in ecosystem health against available baseline conditions in targeted areas
7. Improve forest and watershed health through fire rehabilitation of moderately and severely burned areas, fuel reduction, flood mitigation, and trail and stream rehabilitation
8. Educate and engage residents, and downstream stakeholders to create a more water literate culture.
9. Generate adequate levels of funding through budgetary and fundraising plans and activities to carry out programs and meet expenses while working toward a permanent funding base.
10. Increase understanding of prescribed fire use and application on the ground
11. Increase engagement with **local** volunteers
12. Improve staff ops and efficiencies, and provide continue training and education to sustain high quality outcomes.
13. Make sure to have a clear divide between CUSP and COCO

## **Objectives**

1. Develop a Coordinated Watershed Management Program to coordinate planning and development, optimize data collection, involve the public in planning, and give first priority in planning to cooperative projects among members.
2. Understand the watershed by identifying current and future contamination trends that jeopardize water quality, use the best scientific information for resource allocation and land management discussion, incorporate the effects of growth and development in the basin, and protect historic and cultural resources.
3. Prioritize watershed issues to incorporate diverse community values, incorporate



desired ecosystem conditions based on historic and current considerations, and prioritize contamination concerns using water quality standards as preliminary objectives. Implement effective management strategies and practice adaptive management to bridge the gap between science and management, and to blend the objectives of the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Acts.



4. Maintain and improve water quality and related resources for human health, healthy streams, and to sustain or improve habitat to protect critical values.

5. Create an annual operating plan that looks out three years at a time, and is updated annually, in order to keep our planning processes current.

6. Utilize appropriate monitoring at project and program levels to assure positive outcomes, consistent with this and other planning efforts, and to document the impacts of our

activities.

7. Utilize adaptive management in order to continually learn and improve in our efforts!

## Process

- CUSP Articles of Incorporation, By-laws, Policies, 2006 Strategic Plan, Annual Reports, Project Reports, etc (see <http://www.cusp.ws>)
- Upper South Platte River Watershed Data Inventory and Assessment
- South Park National Heritage Area Feasibility Study
- The Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative Strategic Plan
- Assessment for Sustainability (Conservation Impact)
- Colorado Climate Plan (<http://cwcbweblink.state.co.us/WebLink/ElectronicFile.aspx?docid=196541&searchid=243b8969-739b-448c-bd2d-699af9b7aea0&dbid=0>)
- Climate Change in Colorado (<http://cwcbweblink.state.co.us/WebLink/0/doc/191995/Electronic.aspx?searchid=e3c463e8-569c-4359-8ddd-ed50e755d3b7>)
- Colorado Water Plan (<http://www.coloradowaterplan.com>)
- South Platte Basin Implementation Plan (<http://www.southplattebasin.com/pdfs/ExecutiveSummarySouthPlatteBasinImplementationPlan-April-17-2015.pdf>)
- Denver Water Source Water Plan (<http://www.denverwater.org/SupplyPlanning/WaterSupply/watershed-protection/>)