



HEALTHY HEADWATER'S SUCCESS STORY:

DENVER, COLORADO—SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE WATER

Fires spark ambitious partnership to finance headwaters restoration projects

Denver's skyline features the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains, which provide essential drinking water supplies to this large and fast-growing metropolitan area. The Forest Service describes the Colorado Rockies—which form the headwaters for seven major U.S. river systems—as “the nation's water towers.”



But the forested watersheds that are the heart and soul of those water

towers are at increasing risk from catastrophic wildfires on a scale far beyond what they experienced under natural conditions. Fuel buildup from century of fire suppression—and in some cases, infestations of bark beetles resulting from a warming climate—mean that Colorado's forests are primed to burn.

In 2002, following the largest forest fire in the state's history, heavy rains sent more than a million cubic yards of ash and soil downhill and into Denver Water's Strontia Springs Reservoir, an important link in the



water supply for 1.3 million people. Denver Water has spent more than \$40 million to deal with these impacts, including water quality treatment, sediment and debris removal, land reclamation, and new infrastructure. This experience led to a sea change in the way the utility thinks about its water supply. Ron Lehr, former President of the Denver Water Board, describes it simply: “we realized water doesn't come out of the stream—it comes out of the forest.”

**Profile of a Watershed Advocate:
Rick Cables Urges an “Earnest
Dialogue” About Water**



“Timing is everything,” remarks Rick Cables, recalling the conversations and sometimes-awkward meetings that laid the groundwork for the ambitious Forest-to-Faucet Partnership in Colorado. Noting the coincidence of strong leadership at Denver Water and extreme fire events in 1996 and 2002, he concludes, “I think the stars just aligned.”

Perhaps the timing was fortuitous, but there is little doubt that Cables’ individual enthusiasm for watershed health, and his tenacity in building upon common interests with others, played a large role in the successful negotiation of the landmark 2010 agreement between the U.S. Forest Service and Denver Water.

Although Cables now leads the Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife, he spent his career in National Forests throughout the country, culminating in a decade-long stint as Regional Forester of the Rocky Mountain Region. He has served as a close advisor to Carpe Diem West’s Healthy Headwaters Project since 2009.

Cables hopes the Denver partnership will “reframe the dialogue with the public about why they should care about forests at the headwaters of their water supplies.” He hopes to see the Forest Service be even more proactive in sparking what he calls an “earnest dialogue,” and in making water a primary driver in forest management throughout the country.

This sea change prompted Denver Water to look at the condition of national forest lands that produce the city’s water. Former General Manager Chips Barry initially blamed the Forest Service for allowing the conditions that led to catastrophic fires. But his thinking began to change when he met Regional Forester Rick Cables, who explained his agency had only a fraction of the budget it needed for forest restoration. Cables offered a solution: why not have Denver Water partner with the Forest Service to help pay for restoration work, to be funded by a surcharge on monthly water bills? Although Barry died suddenly in 2010, his successor Jim Lochhead was equally supportive of the concept, noting that “we saw this as one part of a larger investment program.”

On August 28, 2010, the two agencies announced the Forest to Faucet Partnership, agreeing to jointly fund five years of restoration work in watersheds critical to Denver’s water supply. The idea was not new — indeed, the partnership borrowed its name from the “Forest-to-Faucet” joint venture between the Forest Service and the University of Massachusetts in the Northeast. But the Denver agreement is far bigger than any other example of this approach, promising treatment and protection of nearly 40,000 acres of National Forest land. The \$33 million tab is split equally between the Forest Service and Denver Water, and the sheer size of the metropolitan service area reduces the burden on individual water customers to about 14 cents on the average monthly bill.



For his part, Rick Cables is pleased to see the Forest-to-Faucet concept spreading. In August 2011, another Front Range utility, Aurora Water, entered a similar agreement to split the costs of restoration work on 45,000 acres in the Pike National Forest. Cables would like to see the idea go even bigger—for example, to have cities such as Las Vegas invest in the headwaters of the entire Colorado River. He notes that a nickel a month spread among all the water users of the Rocky Mountain headwaters would provide tens of millions of dollars for watershed protection and restoration.

Top administration officials share Cables' enthusiasm for this approach. USDA Under Secretary Harris Sherman lauded the Forest-to-Faucet Partnership as “a model for forest managers and water providers throughout the country.” And, soon after assuming office in 2009, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced his vision for an “all lands approach” to forest restoration, emphasizing exactly this type of boundary-crossing cooperation. Forest Service officials, water utility, and conservationists across the West are hard at work meeting this vision and reality.

For additional information:

www.denverwater.org/SupplyPlanning/WaterSupply/PartnershipUSFS/



Map depicting areas of different priority for restoration work in Denver Water's Front Range watersheds: low (green), moderate (blue), moderate-high (yellow), high (orange), and very high (red).

Carpe Diem West leads a network of water decision makers and scientists in the American West that is developing collaborative, innovative actions and policies to create water security for our communities, the food we grow, our economy and our environment.

Carpe Diem West's Healthy Headwaters Project is an alliance of upstream land managers, downstream water utilities, and conservation advocates whose goal is to increase the climate resiliency of the headwaters systems that provide the West's drinking water.

325 Pine Street Sausalito, CA 94965

415.332.2112 | info@carpediemwest.org | www.carpediemwest.org



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