

SAN JUAN CITIZENS ALLIANCE

SPRING 2023 NEWSLETTER

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We advocate for:



Clean
Air



Pure
Water



Healthy
Lands



Thriving
Wildlife

The foundations of resilient communities, ecosystems, and economies in the San Juan Basin.

COVER:
JACK BRAUER

DEAR SUPPORTERS,

The Four Corners region is on the cusp of a rapid transformation from coal to renewable energy. The massive coal-fired San Juan Generating Station near Farmington is slated for demolition later this spring, accompanied by the simultaneous construction of large utility-scale solar photovoltaic plants.

Decommissioning and demolition plans for San Juan Generating Station have been approved, and are in motion, with dismantling of the power plant under way. Soon this spring, **project developers will break ground on the San Juan Solar Phase 1 photovoltaic and battery storage facility** immediately northeast of the power plant.

Change is afoot with respect to Colorado's wildlife diversity as well. **Colorado's Parks and Wildlife Commission is moving forward with plans for reintroduction of wolves by the end of 2023,** and one pack of recolonizing wolves continues its tenuous existence in North Park, just south of the Wyoming border.

Meanwhile, we're ramping up opportunities for folks to roll up their sleeves and **get more directly involved:**

- ***Animas River Recreation*** – We are hosting an April kickoff event for our reinvigorated volunteer group, **Animas River Allies**. Look out for upcoming surveys regarding river recreation. Contact SJCA's Animas Riverkeeper, Sara Burch, for details: sara@sanjuancitizens.org.

- ***Local Energy Decisions*** - Help out by **assisting in efforts to keep the La Plata Electric Association on track to meet its climate goals** via committed directors on its board. Contact Emelie Frojen, of SJCA's Climate and Energy program staff, at emelie@sanjuancitizens.org.

- ***Public Lands Protections*** - If you're an avid backcountry user, help **track recreational use of the winter backcountry to identify areas of overlapping motorized and human-powered activities**. Contact John Rader, SJCA's Public Lands Program Manager, at john@sanjuancitizens.org.

We look forward to sharing exciting news of progress on all fronts – clean air, pure water, and healthy lands and wildlife – in the coming months.

We greatly appreciate the stalwart support of members like you!



Mark Pearson

Mark Pearson

Executive Director,
San Juan Citizens Alliance

A Win for GREATER CHACO

SJCA AND PARTNER GROUPS RALLY AGAINST OIL & GAS IMPACTS IN GREATER CHACO

San Juan Citizens Alliance has carefully scrutinized fossil fuel development projects across northwest New Mexico and southwest Colorado for many years. That scrutiny paid big dividends in February when a **federal court rejected 199 oil and gas drilling permits in the Greater Chaco** region. The court also placed on hold consideration of another 161 drilling permits. With Chaco Canyon at its heart, the Greater Chaco region is a living and ancient cultural landscape, encompassing northwest New Mexico and surrounding areas across the Four Corners.

BACKGROUND

Back in 2019, the Bureau of Land Management evaluated 370 new drilling permits for oil and gas development east of Chaco, relying upon a land use plan dating to 2003. The Greater Chaco landscape has experienced a proliferation of exploratory horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing of shale formations (primarily for oil) since 2014 that has left the landscape scarred from full-scale industrial development with no comprehensive analysis of what has transpired. After the BLM's approval of these hundreds of new drilling permits, SJCA along with Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment and other allies **challenged the approval through litigation**, represented by the Western Environmental Law Center.



A RULING IN FAVOR OF THE ENVIRONMENT

On February 1, 2023, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit agreed with us and ruled that the BLM had violated the National Environmental Policy Act by failing to account for the health effects of air pollution from oil and gas drilling and fracking, the impacts to the climate of added carbon pollution, and the cumulative impacts of expanded drilling activities. This is a precedent setting case for the 10th Circuit, with a **ruling for the first time in favor of citizen groups addressing the impacts of oil and gas.** The decision brought a halt to new oil and

gas permitting by the BLM pending updated analyses of oil and gas development impacts.

The court decision requires that BLM use accurate science in determining whether an action will have significant air quality, hazardous air pollution and cumulative environmental impacts. ***The court's ruling will help protect the Greater Chaco Region from arbitrary analyses, and enforce environmental justice safeguards.***

- Mike Eisenfeld, *Climate & Energy Program Manager*, mike@sanjuancitizens.org





The Beaver EFFECT

REIMAGINING OUR RIVERS WITH BEAVERS

Close your eyes and imagine you are sitting next to a stream. What do you see? What do you hear? You may be imagining noises associated with a babbling brook with water quickly moving down-gradient. Perhaps you see a bright green strip of vegetation next to the stream that transitions to sagebrush and pine as the ground rises away from the streambed. Do you see wildlife? *Do you see beavers?*

Before European settlement of North America, it is **estimated that the population of these landscape engineers was somewhere between 60 - 400 million.** Numbers dramatically declined throughout the 1700-1800s as demands from the fur trade put a high price on beaver pelts, and decreased the population to just 100,000 by the 1900s. As new styles entered the scene in the late 1800s, demand for beaver pelts declined and their populations slowly began to rise throughout Colorado. Rebounding was difficult, however, as headwater landscapes were altered with a framework of development that created relics that we still see today. Mining, logging, and agricultural practices encroached on beaver habitat, diverting and polluting streams, and removing materials required to build their lodges and dams.

THE LEGACY OF THE BEAVER

The legacy of beaver eradication can be viewed in riverscapes throughout the West. A riverscape is the part of the landscape where water is connected to its floodplain and adjacent habitat. **The functioning riverscape is naturally a messy system - it is intended to flood, sprawl across valley floors, contain braided channels and vegetated islands, and support a range of stream depths and velocities.** Is this the stream you imagined earlier? It probably isn't.

Trapping and habitat alteration have impacted the extent to which this keystone species has been able to operate throughout the landscape as **watershed engineers**. The modern view of a headwater stream is one that has incised into its channel, disconnected from the floodplain. Instead of sprawling, messy, and dynamic systems, many headwater streams are now narrow, and quickly move downstream without

biological infrastructure in place to slow their flow and promote natural flooding processes. By removing the biological process that promotes flooding, many streams throughout the west have been experiencing a decline in their ability to maintain saturated soils, leading to a loss of functioning riparian and wetland habitat. **In fact, the benefits of supporting healthy, functioning riverscapes is immeasurable considering the challenges our ecosystems are facing today.**

Promoting natural flooding processes can support the reemergence of abandoned wetlands, which can promote wildfire resilience and aquifer recharge, reduce storm flooding damage, sequester carbon, sustain soil moisture, filter sediment and excess nutrients, increase biodiversity, and provide habitat for critical terrestrial, aquatic, and plant species.

LOW-TECH PROCESS-BASED RESTORATION

Restoration practitioners have taken notes from the beaver and are working to restore riverscapes through low-tech process-based restoration (LTPBR) techniques. These methods utilize **low cost structural additions to riverscapes intended to mimic the functions that beaver dams and large woody structures provide**, and promote specific processes. The beaver dam analog (BDA) and post assisted log structure (PAL) are

common low-tech tools installed by practitioners to mimic the functions that beaver dams and large fallen trees once provided in areas that are now starved of wood input, or lack the presence of beavers. Restoration projects utilizing LTPBR methods have been gaining traction in some areas of Colorado. However, **more work needs to be done to assess the suitability of these methods for streams throughout the Animas River watershed.**



SVETOSAR CENISEV

WHAT'S NEXT?

Sara has been dedicated to learning more about the role of beavers in our watersheds, the history of riverscape degradation, and emerging tools to rehabilitate altered systems. Through partnership efforts, she is working to create opportunities for the community, as well as land and water managers, to

learn about the philosophy, benefits, challenges, and application of LTPBR techniques. ***To address the challenges that our Western watersheds are facing, we all must work together to sustain a brighter future by restoring the functions of the furry past.***

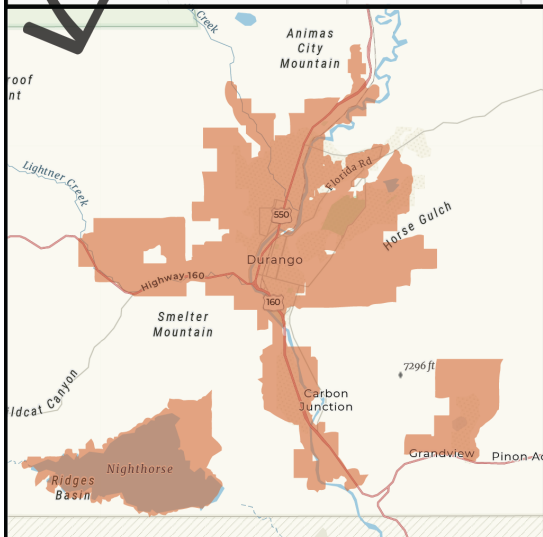
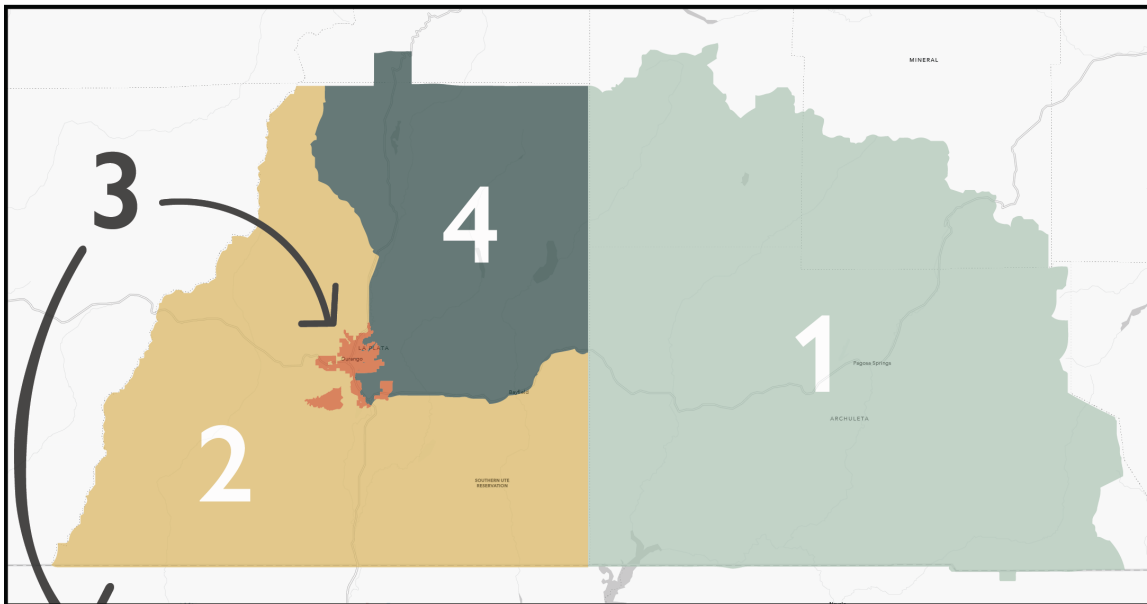
- Sara Burch, *Animas Riverkeeper*
sara@sanjuancitizens.org



La Plata Electric Association ELECTION

La Plata Electric Association (LPEA), is a rural electric cooperative that provides power mostly to La Plata and Archuleta counties. Members of LPEA, residents who purchase electricity from the cooperative, have the power to vote annually to elect board members for their district of LPEA. Board members make important decisions that affect our rates and LPEA's sources of power. Participating in LPEA's 2023 election is one of the most significant ways that you can reduce our community's climate impact.

WHAT DISTRICT AM I IN?



DISTRICT 1: Archuleta County

DISTRICT 2: South & West La Plata County

DISTRICT 3: City of Durango
(pictured left)

DISTRICT 4: North & East La Plata County

KEY DATES OF THE 2023 ELECTION:

LATE APRIL: STAY TUNED FOR OUR LPEA ELECTION KICK-OFF EVENT

EARLY MAY: YOUR BALLOT ARRIVES

JUNE 7: YOUR BALLOTS ARE DUE

JUNE 8: ELECTION RESULTS ANNOUNCED AT LPEA ANNUAL MEETING

WHY THIS ELECTION IS SO IMPORTANT:

LPEA Board Members are on the cusp of changing our power supply, and we need to elect board members who support the partial and possibly full exit from Tri-State. LPEA is in an increasingly expensive contract that forces us to buy 95% of our power from Tri-State, a generation and transmission provider that is heavily reliant on fossil fuels, through 2050. However, in February 2022, LPEA board members voted to pursue a partial exit from Tri-State. The partial buyout would reduce the amount of power we are required to buy from Tri-State to 50%, freeing up the other 50% for more affordable and sustainable

options. Unfortunately, the partial buyout, which has to get approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, is stuck in administrative limbo with no approval in sight for at least a year, likely two years. At the same time, Tri-State is in a precarious financial position that will result in rate increases. **Many of the co-ops who buy power from Tri-State are jumping ship by exiting Tri-State, and LPEA should not be the last aboard.** The board members who we elect this year will be voting members of the board that decides our energy's future. We must make the right choice.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED:

The number one thing you can do to get involved is make sure you and your neighbors vote in this election!

Only one in four people in LPEA's territory votes, help increase that by spreading the word about this election. On top of that there are many other ways to help forward-thinking candidates succeed. Volunteers are the key to any successful campaign and you can reach out to Emelie Frojen if you are interested in canvassing or phone banking! You can also visit lpeaelections.org to donate to our LPEA specific work. Your donations help fund us getting the word out about the candidates we

endorse. Speaking of endorsement, stay tuned for our announcement of the candidates we are supporting this year and for our election kickoff event in late April.

The LPEA board has made significant progress over the past decade, and is doing great work. **The board members elected this year will play a significant part in making sure we move away from our expensive contract with Tri-State.** We are excited to work with all of our members to keep the ball rolling towards a future with affordable, reliable, renewable energy!

- Emelie Frojen, *Climate & Energy Program Associate*
emelie@sanjuancitizens.org



Landscape-Sized SURVIVAL STRATEGY

THE PEOPLE FACTOR IN WILDLIFE MIGRATION

Colorado's Western Slope hosts landscapes that span rugged peaks, steep gorges, and wide open rangelands. This varied topography supports epic migrations for Colorado's ungulates – large, hooved mammals like elk, mule deer, and pronghorn.

Ungulates migrate to survive harsh seasonal changes. As food sources green up in the spring, they travel from basins to high alpine meadows. There, when forage is plenty, they birth their young and put on fat for the winter ahead. As daylight wanes, they descend to the lowlands where snow is less deep and food remains accessible. It's a game of feast and famine.

Colorado's diverse habitat supports the largest elk population in North America and largest mule deer population in the country. The San Juan Basin alone is home to about 24,000 mule deer and 24,000 elk. Each year they repeat the same ancient cycle, valley to mountain and back along the same well worn routes.

PEOPLE IN THE PATH

Humans are intimately related to these patterns. Indigenous peoples have followed game along migrations since time immemorial. Hunters and wildlife advocates track them still as they descend through the aspen and conifers. And today, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Southern Ute Tribe have collected data through dozens of collar studies.

CPW maps the most important spots – migration corridors, winter range, and production areas where ungulates calve – and makes data available to the Forest Service and BLM. In theory, this wealth of traditional knowledge and scientific evidence informs our land management.

But trouble is afoot for our cloven-hooved kin. **The same terrain that supports our herds attracts humans to the San Juans. We hike, bike, hunt, fish, ski, climb, and ride the same slopes that**

ungulates rely on for survival. Colorado's human population of about 6 million is on track to reach 8.5 million by 2050. La Plata County's population increased about 10 percent over the last decade. Archuleta County is up 15 percent. Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit each year, and most of us, residents and visitors alike, spend time in the hills. According to Colorado's Statewide Recreation Plan, about 92% of Coloradans recreate regularly outdoors.

These demographic trends pressure deer and elk as they navigate a patchwork of federal, tribal, state and privately-held lands.

Development in the basins spills into recreation demand in the backcountry, as an ever expanding network of roads and trails fragments migrations that predate European settlement. We've moved in, and we're crowding out our ungulate neighbors.

HEALTH OF THE HERDS

Cracks are already forming. Elk and deer populations are about 10 percent below CPW objectives for the San Juan Basin. More concerning is the declining elk cow:calf ratio. **Herds need about 40 calves per hundred cows to self-sustain. The ratio on the San Juan has declined to about 28 calves per 100 cows.** Thousands of highway collisions occur each year, and CDOT has identified Highway 160 from Durango to Wolf Creek Pass as top priority for wildlife crossings.

Despite these concerns, multiple projects are proposed on the San Juan National Forest within the most sensitive CPW designated habitats – mountain bike trails in an elk migration corridor on Jackson

Mountain, downhill trails in winter range up Junction Creek, and oil and gas projects on winter range in the HD mountains to name a few.

Collectively, these projects and inevitable proposals to follow fragment habitat, displace animals, and compromise their ability to survive and reproduce. Studies repeatedly show that human disturbance harms ungulates. As development and recreation proliferate across critical habitats, we push elk and deer onto highways and into deep snow, burning off their precious fat stores. **Without intact migration routes, our herds cannot employ their age-old survival strategy.**

THE LAY OF THE LAND MANAGEMENT

Managing conflicts can be convoluted. CPW is responsible for Colorado's wildlife, but the federal government manages much of their habitat. CPW can only make recommendations to avoid, or at least mitigate, the worst impacts. The feds review the environmental risks of projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), but NEPA is site specific, and a single project on winter range might not cause "significant impacts" that would warrant stricter environmental review. Migrations suffer from this myopic approach.

The Forest Service has tools to better protect migrations. Land managers can consult with

CPW to site projects outside sensitive habitats. They can work with local governments and nonprofits towards comprehensive mapping of trails. They can apply best practices that CPW has outlined for trail development, enact seasonal closures for winter range and production areas, decommission illegal trails, and designate Special Management Areas, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and other administrative areas to protect habitat. Forest Managers can even communicate across jurisdictional boundaries to ensure consistent management, since critters don't know where one district ends and another begins.

HOW WE CAN HELP

The 92% of Coloradans who regularly play outside can help. We can play by the rules – respecting seasonal closures and using existing trails instead of blazing our own. We can participate in the NEPA process, voicing our values and concerns. We can help gather and provide user data to better

understand our impacts, educate our communities about responsible recreation, and call on land managers to protect the wildlife we know and love.

Contact John Rader to get involved, and learn more about SJCA's work to protect wild migrations.

- John Rader, *Public Lands Program Manager*
john@sanjuancitizens.org



Quick HITS

The aftermath of closing **SAN JUAN GENERATING STATION**

Clear skies! San Juan Generating Station closed last September, officially **eliminating one of the largest sources of pollution in the United States.** In the aftermath, we have to note that Enchant Energy quickly abandoned its plan to enact carbon capture and sequestration

on the plant. This false promise wasted a lot of tax dollars and ultimately distracted from the goal that mattered: **ensuring an equitable energy transition that helps create jobs and focuses on renewable energy replacements.**

What's happening with the **WOLF RESTORATION PROCESS?**

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission (CPW) in February completed its public meetings to solicit feedback on Colorado's Draft Wolf Management Plan. The plan is to direct management of wolves once they are reintroduced to Colorado by the end of 2023. **In a significant improvement, the Commission responded to public feedback and removed references from the plan to any potential future hunting season.** A recreational hunting season would require changing the classification of wolves from a non-game species (as they are now designated in the citizen-initiated law directing the restoration of wolves) to a game or furbearer species. Wolves are currently a state endangered species, and while the Commission can change the status to state threatened and eventually to non-game, it cannot override the law that designated wolves as non-game and allow for future hunting. A final draft of the plan will be supplied to the Commission at its April meeting, with final approval in May.

Meanwhile, a proposed federal rule and the accompanying draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that would relax federal Endangered Species Act restrictions was released in February by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. **Wolves are listed as a federal Endangered Species in Colorado, and the proposed rule is necessary to allow for harassment and lethal take of wolves, easing concerns of livestock producers about their ability to protect their animals.** The allowances include lethal take for wolves "in the act" of attacking livestock or dogs, and "shoot on sight" permits under limited circumstances. Wolf advocates view some of these allowances as overly permissive. There is also a provision discussed as optional in the DEIS that would allow for lethal removal of wolves if they were shown to be limiting deer and elk populations. That provision will likely not make it into the final rule, and it's curious that it was even included in the DEIS.

Public comments are being accepted through April 18 on the DEIS.

- Gary Skiba, *Wildlife Program Manager*, gary@sanjuancitizens.org



STAFF PHOTO

WAYS TO Give

Support SJCA in a way that works for *you*. Your contribution will help fight to preserve clean water, protect wild places, transition to local clean energy, and restore wildlife here in Southwest Colorado and Northwest New Mexico.

SJCA is a member-based organization, supported by donations from over a thousand of your friends and neighbors. Please consider joining us!

sanjuancitizens.org/donate

1 BECOME A MEMBER

As a regional member-based organization, we rely on individuals like you to support our work. Join or renew with a financial donation.

2 MONTHLY GIVING

Spread out your contributions in monthly payments. It's easier for you and evens out SJCA's income across the year.

3 QUALIFIED CHARITABLE DISTRIBUTION

Account holders who are 72 or older can donate to a qualified charity directly from a traditional IRA, effectively lowering your adjusted gross income and avoiding paying taxes. Contact your accountant for details.

4 INCLUDE SJCA IN YOUR ESTATE PLANS

You can provide an ongoing legacy of support through the creation of a bequest in your will. Contact us for assistance.

We would not exist without you - thank you!

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THANK YOU *for your* **SUPPORT!**

The heart of the Alliance lies in our incredibly involved and steadfast members. You enable our work to protect this area we all know and love. When you read the achievements and goals we share in this newsletter, we hope you are aware of the part you play in our work. Thank you again.



JACK BRAUER

Your support makes all the difference. To increase your impact, go to sanjuancitizens.org/donate.