

Colorado Beaver Summit

Melissa Leasia. August 30, 2021 :

[Colorado Headwaters](#) shared this information with us and invites Evergreen Audubon members to the online [Colorado Beaver Summit](#) Thursday, October 21 and Friday, October 22.

Colorado and the West face unprecedented drought conditions and water scarcity driven by climate change. The cumulative effects of natural resource exploitation and misguided land management policies have made matters worse. The removal of beavers from the landscape two centuries ago by the fur trade was one of our earliest and most costly mistakes because it dramatically altered critical ecosystems that naturally conserved water in wetlands and alluvial aquifers, which in turn sustained streams and rivers during drought years.



North American Beaver (National Park Service photo)

Without beavers maintaining the dams they'd built for millions of years, rivers began to flow faster, carving channels below their floodplains, and water drained out of the landscape, including the aquifers. The resulting ecosystem is drier, less resilient to drought, and more prone to catastrophic wildfire. A 2006 study conducted in Rocky Mountain National Park found that aquifer recharge “may be the most important beaver-related factor in mitigating effects from climate change.”¹

Re-establishing beavers in key areas of their traditional range will begin to restore the resilience of western landscapes. Beavers are a keystone species that likely numbered in the hundreds of millions in North America. Once nearly extinct, beavers now number around 10 million, far less than their natural population prior to the arrival of European pioneers and settlers.

Organized by Colorado Headwaters, the inaugural Colorado Beaver Summit will feature two days of online seminars bringing together scientists, policymakers, activists and concerned citizens. The Summit will foster collaboration, education, and the advancement of science-based policies that facilitate beaver re-establishment and other nature-based restoration initiatives to improve resilience to drought and wildfires.

On Thursday, October 21, the Summit will feature presentations that demonstrate the importance of beavers in creating long-term solutions to western water challenges. Thursday sessions will emphasize the scientific studies that are documenting the importance of beavers to healthy ecosystems and ecosystem services such as flood and sediment attenuation, temperature moderation and improved water quality.

Dr. Emily Fairfax will discuss how beaver complexes improve resilience to wildfire and drought. Sarah Marshall with the Colorado Natural Heritage program will provide a statewide perspective on beavers in Colorado. Tom Cardamone, also with CNHP, will discuss the challenges and opportunities of beaver restoration in the context of a biodiversity and wetland study of the 9-million-acre Roaring Fork Watershed. Additionally, speakers from each Western state will address regulations for beaver hunting, nuisance situations, and relocation as well as the biggest challenges they are working to address.

On Friday, October 22, the Summit will feature leaders from various agencies discussing policies and legislation needed to ensure beaver management programs are implemented in a positive and proactive manner. Most state and federal land agencies struggle with addressing beaver management due to a lack of staff capacity and budget, and federal legislation relating to forest management is remiss in failing to promote practices to strengthen strong watershed and wetlands resources.

Fires in close succession and habitat destruction, in general, are significantly altering our rich biodiversity, and drought is a persistent concern. Efforts and funding to reduce forest fuel loads are certainly required for mitigating fire risk, but just as important is the need to address the health of our natural water infrastructure (streams and wetlands in our forests) which provides about 80 percent of Colorado's drinking water.²

Public lands agencies need to address water resources policy to emphasize the importance of wetlands and the role of beavers in resilient ecosystems to improve water resources for people and nature. Understanding beaver management can transform this industrious animal from an uninvited guest to an untapped resource. Beaver stewardship of streams can make the West more robust, more resilient and less susceptible to climate change, drought and wildfire.

As climate change accelerates, Western states are experiencing drought conditions with greater frequency, intensity and duration. These changes threaten our water supplies, our food supply, our forests and our way of life. Please join us on ZOOM Thursday and Friday, October 21 and 22, to learn how beavers can help us avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Colorado Headwaters is a 501(c)(3) environmental nonprofit working to sustain, conserve and enhance Colorado's freshwater resources (www.coloradobeaversummit.org).

Sources:

¹ C. J. Westbrook, D. J. Cooper and B. W. Baker.

