

Water-wise Community Development: Growing water smart across Colorado



by: Waverly Klaw, AICP - Associate Director, Sonoran Institute

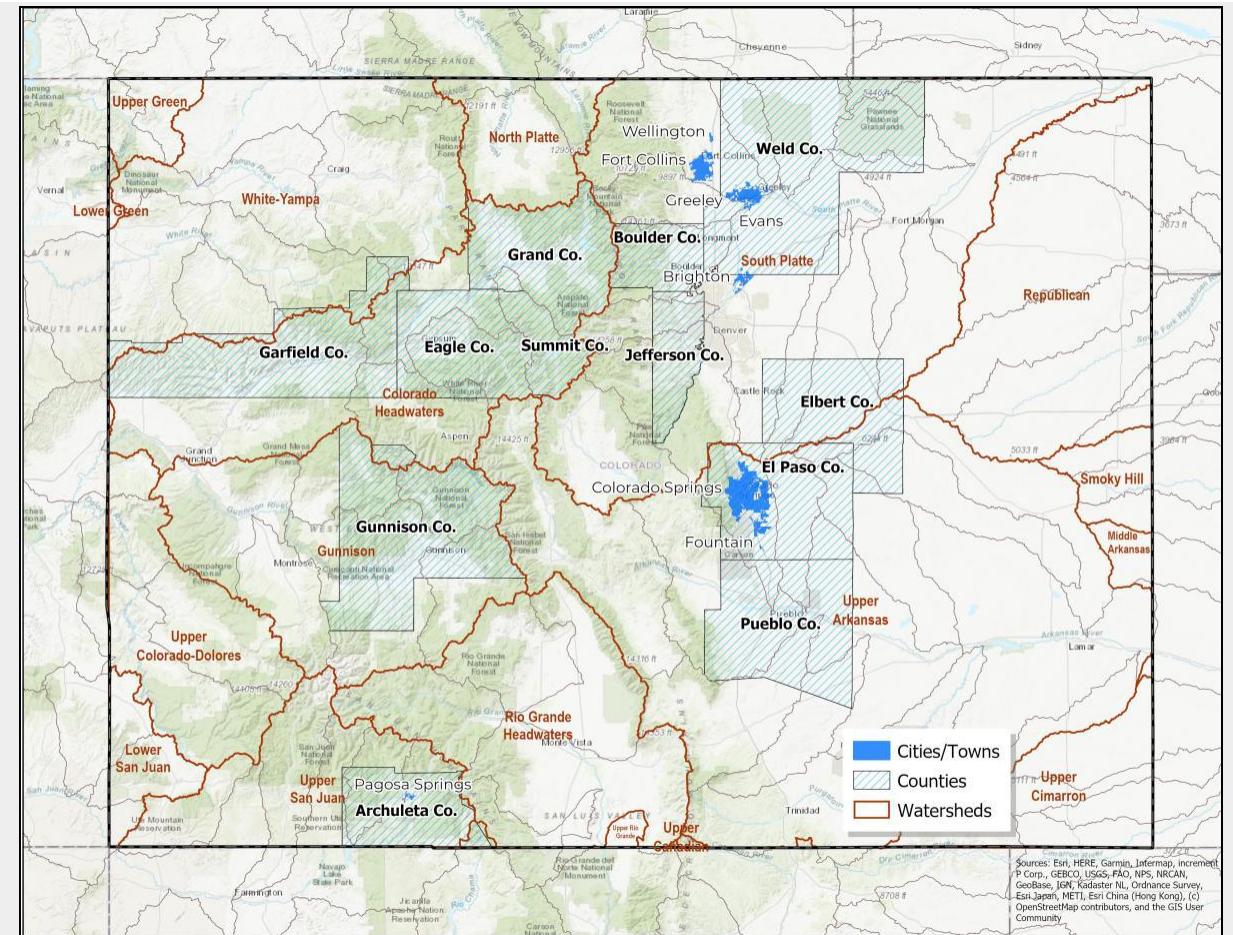
Water is essential to our survival, and to the sustainability of our communities' economic, social, and ecological health. In an era where climate impacts and growth strain already limited water supplies, planning for water is critical. The Colorado Water Plan estimates that the state's municipal and industrial users could experience a gap between water supply and demand of as much as 750,000 acre-feet by 2050, which could impact over 1 million Coloradans. Planners must play a role in ensuring that water is available for future generations. (*Above: Colorado Growing Water Smart workshop participants and subject matter experts in Estes Park, Colorado (2019).*)



Historically, water resource and land use planning have been conducted separately. Yet land use decisions around zoning, subdivision, landscaping, and building design have profound impacts on the quantity of water consumed as well as the quantity and quality of the water that enters our ecosystems and replenishes our water supplies. It is paramount that local governments assume new leadership roles and fundamentally rethink how they manage water demand, adapt to growth, and remain resilient in the face of longer drought and more frequent and severe wildfires. Using our limited water resources more wisely will require being more deliberate about how and where we build, how much water development uses, and how to best integrate ecosystem services to achieve multiple benefits. (*Left: A Growing Water Smart community team hard at work during a workshop at the Keystone Policy Center (2019).*)

In 2017, the Sonoran Institute and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy launched the Growing Water Smart program to address the disconnect between water resource management and land use planning. The cornerstone of the program is a 3-day Growing Water Smart workshop in which communities form a diverse team of planners, water providers, elected officials, and other subject matter experts to tackle local water concerns. Teams that participate in the workshops are then provided with technical assistance support to carry their work forward.

As a result of the workshop, projects to better integrate water conservation and efficiency into land use planning are now underway across the state. Elbert County is working to build public understanding of the implications of their Rural Water Supply Study and develop an action plan to link water and land use. Ft. Collins convened multiple water providers to explore growth scenarios and identify opportunities for regional collaboration around water conservation and efficiency. Jefferson County is working with the Colorado Geological Survey on how to best ensure reliable water supply in areas of the County that use groundwater. Archuleta County and Pagosa Springs established a working group to clarify water and population projections so they can coordinate their planning efforts. And Grand County is launching a community dialogue to inform the development of a county Drought Management Plan.



Above: Map of Colorado counties and municipalities that have participated in the Growing Water Smart Program, representing the population of 50% of the state (2019).

To date, the Growing Water Smart workshops have worked with communities that provide services to 50% of the state's population. While there is still much work to be done, this moves Colorado a little closer to the Colorado Water Plan goal of 75% of Coloradans living in communities that are integrating their water and land use by 2025.

We continue to seek communities that are motivated to explore and develop solutions to these water concerns. Does your community have those who work on water and land use issues talking to one another? Do you have the data and forecasting to understand your current and future water supply and demand? Are you ready to evaluate and update the ways in which you address water in your development regulations? If so, apply to the Spring 2020 Growing Water Smart workshop, to be held May 6-8, 2020 in Estes Park, Colorado. The RFP is available at www.resilientwest.org.

The Growing Water Smart program is supported by numerous partners and resource experts including the Department of Local Affairs, Western Resource Advocates, Keystone Policy Center, Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, Denver Water, Northern Water, and Terra Firma Planning, with consultant support from Del Corazon Consulting. The project is generously funded by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the Colorado Water Conservation Board, and the Gates Family Foundation.