

### 1. Executive Summary

“We’ve already done the hard part.”

#### **Wet Mountain Valley Outdoors Origin and Formation**

WMVO's origin story began as a Trails for All (Custer County 501 (c) (3) non-profit) board conversation about the potential of a membership in the Regional Partner Initiative. However, since Trails for All's focus was outdoor recreation, it was decided that a new "Outdoor Strategy neutral" organization was needed, leading to the formation of WMVO on September 14, 2024, as a Colorado non-profit corporation.

After researching other RPI partners, we landed on Envision Chaffee as a strong model of success for a RPI coalition partner and decided to use the same community outreach consultants (Civic Canopy and Smoyer & Associates) and their proven process as the core of our initial proposal. WMVO then applied for RPI membership, made its presentation to the selection committee on December 24, 2024, and received notification of an initial grant award (\$126,825) on January 24, 2025.

#### **The Regional Partnership Initiative and the Colorado Outdoor Strategy**

Our Mission as a RPI coalition partner is to help plan and implement the Colorado Outdoor Strategy through a local Custer County lens.

At a surface level this means that the RPI enterprise and our role in its implementation is about our community’s relationship to the land. However, at a more fundamental and essential level it is about our community’s relationship to each other. Like many rural communities, Custer County had become fractured along political and demographic lines. We had lost the ability to come together in a civil way to work together for the common good.


As a result, our primary and continuing role became one of community building. It also meant that as the local RPI implementation vehicle, WMVO needed to be neutral and not have an undue bias for any one element of the Outdoor Strategy. It was essential that we trust the outreach process and honor the will of the community.



## 1 Colorado Outdoor Strategy

### Summary of a year-long Community Outreach Process

When we engaged Civic Canopy and Smoyer & Associates we not only contracted with experienced community outreach professionals, we also bought an outreach process developed and refined over decades. This process map defined the terms of the contract and our four-phase roadmap for success.

(each symbol represents a meeting for that group)	Phase I April - June 2025	Phase II July - Sept 2025	Phase III Oct - Dec 2025	Phase IV Jan - March 2026
Planning Team	▲▲▲▲▲	▲▲▲▲▲	▲▲▲▲▲	▲▲▲▲▲
Core Team		●●●●	●●●	●●
Community Network		■ ■	■	■
Action Teams			●●● ●●● ●●●	
Deliverables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Stakeholder meetings</li> <li>✓ Understand readiness for collaboration</li> <li>✓ Identify key partners and form Core Team</li> <li>✓ Conduct analysis of existing conservation and outdoor rec landscape</li> <li>✓ Develop community survey</li> <li>✓ Develop initial draft of results statements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Gather feedback through surveys and outreach</li> <li>✓ Convene Community Network</li> <li>✓ Develop shared vision</li> <li>✓ Co-develop goals</li> <li>✓ Identify and prioritize indicators to measure progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Review data and identify root causes</li> <li>✓ Identify possible strategies to make progress toward goals</li> <li>✓ Form Action Teams</li> <li>✓ Crosswalk with other outdoor strategies</li> <li>✓ Develop innovative strategies to achieve goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reconvene Community Network to review Action Map</li> <li>✓ Formalize Action Teams</li> <li>✓ Support Core Team to guide overall effort</li> <li>✓ Formalize data dashboard/report card</li> <li>✓ Establish sustainable funding/infrastructure</li> </ul>

### Phase I - Getting Ready

During this phase outreach began in earnest. Our newly formed planning team consisting of our board president (John Van Doren), vice president (Andrew Todd), and design, marketing and communications contractor (Shelly Larson at Jo Studio, Inc.) with input from other board members began to recruit a politically and demographically diverse set of Core Team members to advise and help lead the process. We also developed our first community wide survey focused on outdoor recreation.

### Phase II - Developing a Shared Vision (our WHY)

This was the most challenging Phase of the process as we plowed headfirst into the murky waters of an uncivil, fractured, and distrustful community. As a result, the first two community network meetings were a bit contentious. Through this process we dealt with diverse perspectives and motivations, ensured marginalized voices were represented and respected, and began to transform disagreements into collaboration. We were able to develop a shared vision for the community. Out of what was a challenging process, the community landed on the following vision:

Our vision for Custer County is to ensure that the land and community we love can be enjoyed for generations to come, including:

- Our scenic beauty, agricultural lands, waters; and
- Our forests, wildlife, and outdoor recreation assets; and
- Our rural heritage, and community livelihood.

A major reason for this successful outcome was due to our planning team, board, and core team members working quietly in the background; investing their personal political and social capital in outreach to individuals and groups; actively listening and building new networks of trust and mutual support.

The bullet points of our community's shared vision became the project themes as we moved into Phase III. Defining OUR WHAT.

### Phase III - Developing projects consistent with our vision and the Outdoor Strategy

This phase started with our 3rd Community Network meeting in which we split the participants into three groups focused on brainstorming weaknesses, strengths, and potential enhancements the community envisioned around the themes of our relationship to the land.

- Our scenic beauty, agricultural lands, waters; and
- Our forests, wildlife, and outdoor recreation assets; and

- Our rural heritage, and community livelihood.

The work produced from this group exercise was then handed off to three smaller action teams that met three times for three-hour sessions to refine and focus the results of the broader group's brainstorming session. The first Action Team round distilled the initial work product down to 41 potential projects and in round 2 and 3 landed on 15 high potential projects that were shared in a community wide survey to garner feedback and set relative priorities.

The work product of Action Teams and the result of the community survey then became the agenda for the 4th Community Network meeting and the beginning of Phase IV of the process. OUR HOW and WHO.

#### Phase IV - Celebrating our Successes and setting the Stage and Framework for Implementation

We now had a shared community vision and a community vetted plan consistent with that vision; the next step was to begin to execute that plan; but the how and who of individual projects needed more development. Several questions remained. What role would WMVO and the Core Team play going forward? How would we build on the fragile trust we had established and maintain momentum? What would outreach look like now that we had done the hard part? How would we demonstrate to the community that together we could start to get things done on the ground? How would we make the best use of the next round of RPI funding; funding that was limited to capacity building?

Some of these questions answered themselves; others were in the category of it depends. Several conclusions were clear:

- o WMVO's primary role as a catalyst for collaboration, funding, and project capacity. We would be very unlikely to be the lead organization for any individual project.
- o Our Core Team would continue in an advisory role; helping us set priorities and convening collaborative project teams. Meeting cadence would remain monthly.
- o Outreach going forward would be centered around convening and supporting project teams and lead implementation organizations.
- o Quarterly newsletters would focus on keeping the broader community apprised of progress and engaged in feedback.
- o Having a grant writer on retainer would provide the additional funding required to maintain momentum and continue to build trust.

The following Action Map provides a concise graphic overview of our Regional Plan. WMVO will be responsible for the gray bar (capacity, funding, & collaboration) that cuts across all projects. The focus will be on the top six projects but depending on funding opportunities and organization energy any of the other projects may rise in prominence and be supported and prioritized.



## 2. Regional Context — The Conditions Driving This Plan

### A Brief History of Custer County and the Wet Mountain Valley

Ancient geological forces set the human stage for what is now Custer County Colorado.

In Colorado, “the Rocky Mountains consist of a series of ranges uplifted 60 to 70 million years ago. The western portion of the range, called the back range, is separated from the front ranges by a series of parks, or high intermountain basins.” The Wet Mountain Valley is Colorado’s 4<sup>th</sup> “park” and is framed by the Sangre de Cristo mountains (our back range) and Wet Mountains front range. Fed by the melting snow of both ranges, the Valley’s 4,000 to 6,000 deep aquifer is estimated to hold 1.2 million acre-feet of water.

The first humans were the indigenous Capote band of the Southern Ute tribe which summered in the Valley taking advantage of the abundant game, fish, and edible plant life. For thousands of years the UTE left little trace of their time on the land except for a healthy forest landscape shaped by indigenous burning.

Next came the mountain men and the fur trade in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of maximizing economic value from the land. This first wave of European "settlement" would lead to the decimation/extinction of the beaver, elk, grizzly bear, wolf, and bison.

The discovery of silver in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century created a brief population boom and the Town of Silver Cliff. The mining boom attracted a spur line of the Denver & Rio Grande railroad which in turn created the Town of Westcliffe. The railroad gave farmers and ranchers access to regional and national markets and the early open range beef cattle ranching in the valley evolved into a combination of beef cattle, dairy cattle, and sheep ranching, combined with lettuce, cabbage, pea, potato, barley, and oat farming.

In 1912 the San Isabel National Forest was established which brought an end to freelance logging, mining, and grazing in the forest. Grazing allotments become the primary income source for the USFS, and our current recreational trail system was originally created to serve as stock driveways to high altitude grazing allotments.

In 1938, the Denver & Rio Grande railroad closed its spur line to Westcliffe, and Wet Mountain Valley's diverse agricultural production is now dominated by beef cattle and hay production.

### **The "State of the Region" as WMVO began its Outreach Process**

As we began our four-phase community outreach process there were already "fire and water" initiatives in motion, but many of these lacked capacity and/or collaborations and had become "high centered" or stuck in place. Prominent examples included addressing our high wildfire risk amplified by 150-years of fire suppression and climate change; and Wet Mountain Valley watershed N/P nutrient loads contributing to toxic algae blooms in the warming waters of Lake DeWeese. Other land related issues like noxious weed abatement and the Sangre de Cristo mountain water delivery system to our agricultural valley would emerge as key concerns as we navigated through the outreach process.

Prior to the first Community Network Meeting we conducted an Outdoor Recreation survey which began to tell the community's story of our current "State of the Region". We used a short form and long form version of the survey. The short version (5 Questions) received 289 responses, and the long version (33 questions) received 101 responses.

Overall, the short version yielded 5 key takeaways:

1. Frequent outdoor use, often daily or weekly, especially by locals.
2. Core values include scenic beauty, solitude, and equestrian access.
3. Concerns focus on trash, crowding, poor maintenance, and tourism impacts.
4. Improvement ideas balance between education, conservation, volunteerism, and leave it alone sentiment.
5. High engagement potential with over half providing contact details for follow-up.

The long version yielded more in-depth response with the following key takeaways:

Respondents valued the natural beauty and rural character of Custer County and wanted outdoor recreation managed in a way that would protect environmental health, respect local heritage, and avoid overcrowding. The strongest concerns centered on balancing recreation with conservation, managing irresponsible use, and addressing governance and development pressures. While some welcome improvements in infrastructure and planning, others cautioned against overregulation or over-promotion that could damage the community's character and environment. Feedback centered around five major themes:

1. Trail Infrastructure & Access
  - a. Requests for more hiking trails, shorter/easier options, improved or increased parking and accessibility.
  - b. Concerns about crowding a popular areas (e.g., South Colony Lakes) and suggestions for permit systems or alternating-use days to manage impacts.
2. Environmental Protection & Conservation
  - a. Strong emphasis on forests, watersheds, wildlife, streams, and agricultural lands.
  - b. Concerns about climate change, fire risk, invasive species, and forest health.
  - c. Calls for balancing recreation with conservation and preventing overregulation while addressing environmental stewardship.
3. Outdoor Recreation Management
  - a. Frustration with irresponsible use, especially dog waste, off-leash animals, and litter at alpine lakes.
  - b. Suggestions for enforcement mechanisms (e.g., passes with quizzes, pledges, or pay-to-play systems)
  - c. Being strategic and sustainable about over-advertising (e.g., leading to crowding like the Front Range).
  - d. Desire for recreation opportunities across all ages and abilities.
4. Governance, Planning & Development

- a. Concerns over real estate development as a major driver of change in the county, more impactful than recreation.
  - b. Criticism of county governance as "combative" and "dysfunctional".
  - c. Calls for comprehensive planning and restoration of Forest Service funding.
5. Community & Stakeholder Engagement
- a. Appreciation for survey efforts and a desire to volunteer and contribute to stewardship.
  - b. Concern that recreation is prioritized over conservation and calls to include ranching and mining heritage voices in planning.
  - c. Tension between serving tourists versus prioritizing local community needs (e.g., not making the towns into a "vacation town").

These same themes were consistently repeated as we navigated the process and eventually identified the projects that would be the basis of our regional plan.

### **3. About WMVO & the Regional Partnership**

#### **About WMVO & the Regional Partnership**

Wet Mountain Valley Outdoors (WMVO) is not a single organization or agency effort. It is a **community-led regional network and partnership of individuals and organizations** intentionally built over the course of a year to ensure that local voices, land managers, ranchers, recreation users, and residents could work together to respond to increasing pressures on land, water, wildfire risk, recreation, and rural character in Custer County.

WMVO is structured around three interconnected groups that each play a distinct role in the partnership:

#### **Planning Team**

The Planning Team initiated the process and guided the early stages of stakeholder outreach, readiness assessment, landscape analysis, and survey development. This group ensured that WMVO began with a foundation of listening and understanding before moving into visioning or solution development.

#### **Core Team**

The Core Team emerged from Phase I as a representative group of partners and community members willing to steward the overall effort. The Core Team serves as the **backbone of**

**collaboration**, helping to coordinate communication between Action Teams, land managers, and the broader community while guiding the direction of the initiative over time.

### **Community Network**

The Community Network is the broadest circle of participation and includes residents, landowners, recreation users, and interested partners. This group convened at key milestones to:

- Shape the shared vision
- Provide feedback on goals and indicators
- Review the Action Map
- Stay engaged as projects move into implementation

### **Action Teams**

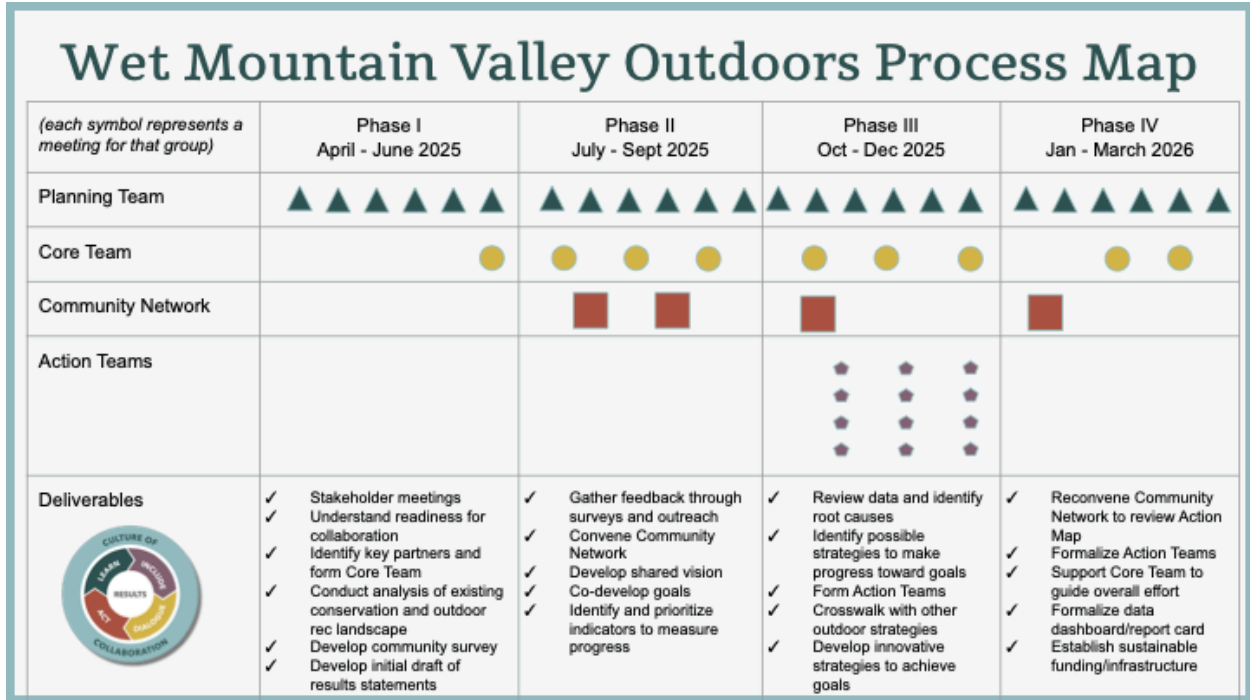
Action Teams formed in Phase III to focus on specific priority areas identified by the community. These teams translated survey results, goals, and root-cause analysis into practical, on-the-ground project concepts that now make up the WMVO Action Map.

Together, these groups create a structure that continuously connects **community voice, coordination, and action.**

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## **4. How This Plan Was Built (Process Legitimacy)**

*Moving together from values to our WHY, to WHAT, to HOW & WHO*



**How This Plan Was Built (The WMVO Road Map)**

The WMVO Regional Plan is the result of a deliberate, four-phase process conducted between April 2025 and March 2026. Each phase built on the previous one, moving from listening and learning to organizing and acting.

**Phase I — Listening and Readiness (April–June 2025)**

WMVO began with stakeholder meetings to understand whether the community and partners were ready for collaboration. During this phase, the Planning Team:

- Assessed the existing conservation and outdoor recreation landscape
- Identified key partners
- Formed the Core Team
- Developed and launched the first community survey
- Drafted initial results statements grounded in local realities

This phase ensured the effort was rooted in real community conditions before any planning began.

**Phase II — Vision and Goals (July–September 2025)**

During this phase WMVO expanded to the Community Network and focused on shared direction. The partnership:

- Gathered extensive feedback through surveys and outreach
- Convened Community Network meetings
- Developed a shared vision for the region
- Co-developed goals
- Identified indicators to measure progress over time

This phase created alignment around **what matters most** to the community.

During Community Network meetings, participants were invited to consider a simple but powerful question: *“What do you value most about Custer County, and what would you like to see strengthened or protected?”*

Hundreds of individual responses were recorded on post-it notes and clustered into three thematic groups that directly align with the WMVO Vision:

1. **Our scenic beauty, agricultural lands, and waters**
2. **Our forests, wildlife, and outdoor recreation**
3. **Our rural heritage and community livelihood**

These themes did not originate from WMVO. They were named, described, and prioritized by community members themselves. This exercise became the foundation for the WMVO Vision and later informed the survey design, Action Team focus areas, and ultimately the Action Map and project portfolio.

### **Phase III — Analysis and Strategy (October–December 2025)**

With data and vision in place, WMVO shifted to understanding root causes and identified practical strategies. During this phase:

- Survey and community data were reviewed in depth
- Root causes of identified issues were analyzed
- Action Teams were formed
- Strategies were cross-walked with other outdoor and conservation efforts
- Innovative approaches to achieving the goals were developed

This is where the work moved from vision to **solution design**.

### **Phase IV — Organizing for Action (January–March 2026)**

In the final phase, WMVO focused on turning strategies into an organized implementation framework. The partnership:

- Reconvened the Community Network to review the Action Map

- Formalized Action Teams around priority projects
- Supported the Core Team to guide the overall effort
- Established a data dashboard/report card concept
- Began building sustainable funding and coordination infrastructure

This phase produced the **WMVO Action Map** and the portfolio of prioritized projects that form the core of this Regional Plan.

The WMVO Road Map demonstrates that this Regional Plan did not begin with projects. It began with listening, moved through shared vision and analysis, and resulted in community-prioritized Action Teams and an Action Map ready for implementation. This progression provides CPW, GOCO, and regional partners with confidence that the projects outlined in this plan are grounded in community voice, careful analysis, and an established partnership structure capable of carrying the work forward.

## 5. What We Heard — Synthesis of All Surveys

The WMVO Regional Plan is grounded in one of the most extensive community listening efforts undertaken in Custer County related to outdoor recreation, conservation, and land stewardship.

Over the course of this process, WMVO conducted:

- A **Short Community Survey** (289 responses, 5 questions) to capture broad community sentiment and values  
WMVO Short Survey Summary V1
- A **Long Community Survey** (101 responses, 33 questions) to gather detailed insights into behaviors, stewardship practices, management preferences, and demographics  
WMVO Long Survey Summary V1
- A **Comparative Analysis** of both surveys to understand common themes and strategic implications  
WMVO Comparative Summary Report...
- A **Community Project Prioritization Survey** (151 responses) to determine which of the proposed Action Map projects the community considers most critical  
Prioritization Survey Summary

Together, these surveys provide both **breadth and depth** of community voice and form the foundation of the WMVO Action Map and Top 15 Project Portfolio.

### 5A. How Often and Why People Recreate

Across both surveys, the majority of respondents reported recreating outdoors in Custer County **daily or several times per week**. Scenic beauty, solitude, wildlife experiences, proximity to home, and equestrian access were consistently identified as the most valued aspects of the region's outdoor spaces.

### [WMVO Short Survey Summary](#)

This demonstrates that for residents and property owners, outdoor spaces are not occasional amenities—they are part of daily life and identity.

## **5B. Core Values Identified by the Community**

Both surveys confirmed a remarkably consistent set of values:

- Scenic beauty and natural features
- Solitude and low crowd levels
- Wildlife and dark skies
- Rural character and agricultural heritage
- Access for horses and families
- A strong sense of stewardship and pride in place

### [WMVO Short Survey Summary](#) & [WMVO Comparative Summary Report](#)

These values directly informed the Community's Vision and the structure of the Action Map.

## **5C. Top Concerns Raised Across Surveys**

The same concerns appeared repeatedly across both surveys:

- Trash and litter
- Dog waste and off-leash dogs
- Crowding and tourism pressure
- Poor trail maintenance and lack of signage
- Environmental degradation and wildlife impacts
- Frustration with unmanaged motorized use
- Concern about growth, development, and loss of rural character

### [WMVO Short Survey Summary](#) & [WMVO Long Survey Summary](#)

These concerns directly shaped the Recreation, Ecosystem Health, and Sustainable Tourism priorities.

## **5D. What the Community Wants Done**

When asked for solutions, respondents consistently prioritized:

- Education (Leave No Trace, dog etiquette, wildfire awareness)
- Conservation funding and stewardship
- Trail maintenance and signage
- Volunteerism and “adopt-a-trail” style programs
- Practical improvements over expansion
- Protection of water, wildlife, forests, and agricultural lands

#### [WMVO Long Survey Summary](#)

This feedback is visible in the Recreation, Ecosystem, and Capacity sections of the Action Map.

### **5E. Nuanced Insights from the Long Survey**

The long survey revealed important subtleties that shaped how projects are framed:

- Strong support for protecting water, wildlife, and forests (99% priority)
- Divided opinions on fees, enforcement, and regulation
- Preference for maintenance over new development
- Mixed views on tourism promotion
- Strong willingness to volunteer and practice stewardship personally
- Older demographic profile and high representation of full-time residents and long-term users

#### [WMVO Long Survey Summary](#)

These insights explain why WMVO emphasizes **education, stewardship, and restraint** rather than expansion.

### **5F. Comparative Findings — What Both Surveys Agree On**

The comparative analysis confirmed that despite different formats and response sizes, both surveys point to the same strategic direction:

- Protect what makes the valley special
- Fix persistent practical issues (trash, dogs, maintenance, parking)
- Balance recreation with conservation
- Build sustainable funding and governance
- Engage the community in stewardship

#### [WMVO Comparative Summary Report](#)

## 5G. From Values to Projects — The Prioritization Survey

After developing the Action Map and initial project list, WMVO conducted a **Community Project Prioritization Survey** to determine which projects the community considers most urgent.

The results were decisive:

### Top Focus Areas (in order):

1. Water
2. Wildfire Mitigation
3. Ecosystem Health & Wildlife
4. Agriculture & Ranching
5. Recreation & Tourism

### Top 5 Individual Projects Identified:

1. Grape Creek Watershed Health Assessment (clear #1 overall)
2. Community Wildfire Implementation Support
3. Neighborhood Fire Mitigation
4. County-wide Trail Infrastructure Safety & Maintenance Planning
5. Forest & Wildlife Habitat Health Strategy Identification

### [Project Prioritization Survey Summary](#)

The survey also revealed critical guidance for sequencing:

**Science → transparency → targeted action**

and highlighted strong skepticism toward abstract planning, branding, or externally driven initiatives.

## 5H. Key Takeaway from All Survey Work

The surveys reveal a community that is:

- Deeply protective of land, water, and autonomy
- Pragmatic and wary of abstraction
- Supportive of stewardship, education, and volunteerism
- Willing to invest in essentials (water, fire, ecosystem health)
- Resistant to hype, branding, or over-management

This is why the WMVO Regional Plan focuses on a **disciplined set of practical, community-prioritized projects organized** through the Action Map and supported by a clear implementation structure.

The surveys are not background information — they are the **direct foundation** of this plan.

## 6. Uncovering the Community's Shared Vision

During Phase II of WMVO Process Map we reached out to the Community Network and focused on shared direction. We:

- Gathered extensive feedback through surveys and outreach
- Convened Community Network meetings
- Developed a shared vision for the region
- Co-developed goals
- Identified indicators to measure progress over time

This phase created alignment around **what matters most** to the community.

During Community Network assemblies, we asked participants a simple but powerful question: *“What do you value most about Custer County, and what would you like to see strengthened or protected?”*

Hundreds of individual responses were collected on post-it notes and clustered into three thematic groups that directly align with the WMVO Community Vision:

- **Our scenic beauty, agricultural lands, and waters**
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These themes were not developed by WMVO. They were named, described, and prioritized by community members themselves. This exercise became the foundation for the community’s Shared Vision and later informed the survey design, Action Team focus areas, and ultimately the Action Map and project portfolio



## How the Vision informed the Action Team development of Projects

### Action Team 1 - Scenic Beauty, Ag Lands, and Waters Theme

Residents emphasized:

- 80-acre zoning, Master Plan, viewsheds
- Ranchers as best land stewards
- Clean water, Lake DeWeese, Grape Creek
- Riparian restoration, beaver systems, weed control
- Protecting working lands from development pressure

[Outcomes By Team 1](#)

### Action Team 2 - Forests, Wildlife, and Outdoor Recreation Theme

Residents emphasized:

- Rainbow Trail, Trails for All, signage improvements
- Forest health, deadfall, fuel reduction, prescribed fire
- Wildlife corridors, fencing, beaver, elk foundation
- Trailhead toilets, parking, waste, accessibility
- Education on Leave No Trace and forest safety

[Outcomes By Team 2](#)

### Action Team 3 - Rural Heritage and Community Livelihood Theme

Residents emphasized:

- Ranching, history, museums, Beckwith Ranch
- Protecting zoning, avoiding “Vail-ification”
- Small-scale tourism, authenticity
- Youth education in ranching and heritage skills
- Community spaces and better communication from local government

[Outcomes By Team 3](#)

## **7. The WMVO Action Map — Organizing Framework**

See Section 9.

## **8. Regional Priorities**

See Section 9.

## **9. Community Action Project Portfolio**

### **Community Vision**

Our vision for Custer County is to ensure that the land and community we love can be enjoyed for generations to come, including:

- Our scenic beauty, agricultural lands, waters; and
- Our forests, wildlife, and outdoor recreation assets; and
- Our rural heritage, and community livelihood.

**Our Community's Vision is supported by Six Conservation, Restoration and Outdoor Recreation Pillars**



**1. Water:** During the community visioning exercise, participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of clean water, Lake DeWeese restoration, Grape Creek health, riparian protection, beaver systems, and the role of ranchers in watershed stewardship. These values emerged as top concerns in both surveys and resulted in the Grape Creek Watershed Health Assessment Project ranking first in the prioritization survey along with two additional Water related projects.

- Grape Creek Watershed Health Assessment Project
- Mountain (snowpack) to Valley (irrigation) Water Delivery Project
- Water & Beaver Education Project

**2. Wildfire:** During the early visioning sessions, community members repeatedly referenced the need to “fix the forest,” remove deadfall, allow responsible grazing and selective timber practices, reduce fuel loads, and create fire-adapted communities rather than relying solely on emergency response. Participants emphasized that ranchers and long-time land stewards historically played a key role in supporting forest and grassland health and expressed concern that current conditions—beetle kill, dense timber, and unmanaged debris—have increased wildfire risk to homes, watersheds, and wildlife habitat.

These values appeared again in the survey data, where wildfire mitigation ranked as the second highest overall priority, and respondents called for implementation support, neighborhood action, and alignment with CWPP efforts. These themes directly informed

the Community Wildfire Implementation Support Project and the Neighborhood Fire Mitigation Project shown in the Action Map.

- Community Wildfire Implementation Support Project
- Neighborhood Fire Mitigation Project

**3. Agriculture & Ranching:** Comments about ranching, zoning, museums, avoiding over-tourism, and protecting rural character shaped both the Agriculture/Ranching projects and the careful framing of the Sustainable Tourism priority.

- Conservation Easement Encouragement Project
- Ag/Ranching Education Project
- Community Food Hub Project

**4. Ecosystem & Wildlife:** Community members highlighted deadfall removal, forest health, wildlife corridors, fencing, Rainbow Trail safety, toilets at trailheads, and Leave No Trace education during early vision discussions. These ideas reappeared in survey results and now form the basis of the Forest & Wildlife Strategy, Weed-Eater Project, and Trail Infrastructure Plan.

- Forest & Wildlife Habitat Health Strategy Project
- Weed-Eater (Noxious Weed Abatement) Project

**5. Recreation:** In the community vision exercise, participants celebrated the Rainbow Trail, Trails for All (non-profit), improved signage, and the variety of hiking and riding opportunities in the Valley. At the same time, they identified specific practical needs: toilets at trailheads, better parking (especially for horse trailers), safer trail segments, improved maintenance, waste management, and more accessible options for families, elders, and people with disabilities. Many emphasized that visitors often lack mountain awareness and called for stronger education around Leave No Trace, forest safety, and proper waste disposal—especially in sensitive areas like South Colony Lakes.

These concerns reappeared in both the short and long surveys, where trash, dogs, trail maintenance, and crowding were top issues, and where respondents favored education, stewardship, and maintenance over expanding recreation infrastructure. These consistent themes informed the County-wide Trail Infrastructure Safety & Maintenance Planning Project and the User Experience Education Campaign.

- County-wide Trail Infrastructure Safety & Maintenance Planning Project
- User Experience Education Campaign Project

**6. Sustainable Tourism:** During the vision sessions, participants expressed pride in Custer County’s authenticity: no fast-food chains, historic museums, ranch rodeos, the Beckwith Ranch, and a Tourism Board that promotes the area responsibly without over-marketing. At the same time, many voiced concern about unmanaged development, housing pressure, and the risk of the Valley “becoming a Vail.” Residents called for keeping tourism small-scale, respectful, and aligned with local culture and zoning protections, while also recognizing the importance of local businesses and year-round jobs.

Survey results showed strong support for tourism’s economic importance, while rejecting over-promotion and aggressive branding. This feedback directly influenced how WMVO framed the “Keep Custer Quaint & Quirky” project—not as marketing, but as a way to protect rural character, heritage, and authenticity while guiding respectful visitation.

- Keep Custer Quaint & Quirky Project

### **Our Pillars in turn rest on a Foundation of Funding, and Collaboration projects**

**Funding, & Collaboration:** In the visioning exercise, participants emphasized the importance of open dialogue, better communication from local jurisdictions, support for small ranchers, and collaborative forums where residents could discuss growth, land use, and stewardship while protecting local values. Some called for WMVO support, others expressed skepticism, but nearly all comments pointed to a desire for clearer coordination, transparency, and practical action rather than abstract planning.

These themes reappeared in the surveys, where respondents showed strong interest in volunteering, supporting stewardship efforts, and ensuring that any funding or coordination efforts remain transparent, locally grounded, and purpose driven. This feedback directly shaped the “Find Funding” and “Community Collaboration Initiative” projects that sit at the base of the Action Map and support all other priorities.

- Find Funding Project
- Community Collaboration Initiative Project

## **10. Implementation Framework & Responsibilities (governance)**

### **❖ WMVO Board and Planning Team**

- ☐ WMVO & Project Team Capacity building
- ☐ Project Map overall project management
- ☐ Funding and funding strategy
- ☐ Project team collaboration & facilitation
  - Who needs to be at the table?

- ☐ Custer Community quarterly progress communication
- ☐ Project level Score card dashboard
- ❖ **Core Team**
  - ☐ guidance
  - ☐ strategy feedback loop
  - ☐ funding and project prioritization
- ❖ **Project Teams**
  - ☐ project level project management
  - ☐ action plan refinement
  - ☐ implementation
  - ☐ feedback loop for capacity and funding needs
- ❖ **Community Network**
  - ☐ Progress, Strategy, and Values feedback loop

## 11. Sustainable Funding Strategy & RPI Alignment

WMVO’s funding approach is intentionally broader than any single grant program. While the Colorado Regional Partnership Initiative (RPI) provides an important starting point, the projects identified through the WMVO Action Map require a diversified and strategic funding approach that blends RPI resources with state, federal, foundation, and partner-supported funding streams.

As shown during Community Network Meeting #4, WMVO is already engaged in active funding support for projects that align with the Action Map, including:

- Supporting ARWC’s WRAP Upper Arkansas Watershed grant proposal
- Supporting Custer County in pursuing a Colorado Wildfire Defense grant (~\$8 million)
- Preparing project teams to refine plans for RPI funding
- Developing a broader foundation-focused funding strategy

These efforts show that the Regional Plan is not aspirational—it is already tied to live funding opportunities and partner initiatives.

### Alignment with Colorado’s Outdoors Strategy

The Wet Mountain Valley Outdoors (WMVO) Regional Plan is intentionally designed to align with **Colorado’s Outdoors Strategy**, the statewide collaborative vision guiding conservation, outdoor recreation, climate resilience, and coordinated planning across

Colorado. The Strategy articulates shared goals that regional partnerships are expected to advance through community-driven planning and implementation.

Colorado's Outdoors Strategy has three core goals:

1. **Climate-Resilient Conservation and Restoration** – Protecting and restoring lands and waters so that wildlife, biodiversity, and ecosystem functions thrive, with landscapes that are resilient to climate impacts and beneficial to communities and working lands.
2. **Exceptional and Sustainable Outdoor Recreation** – Supporting a diverse range of outdoor recreation opportunities that are *accessible, equitable, inclusive, and sustainably managed* to enhance benefits while minimizing ecological and community impacts.
3. **Coordinated Planning and Funding** – Advancing interdisciplinary planning, robust and strategic funding, inclusive engagement, and meaningful implementation that connects local and regional efforts with statewide objectives.

WMVO's community vetted vision, priorities, and projects are directly aligned with these goals:

**Climate-Resilient Conservation and Restoration:**

- Projects such as the *Grape Creek Watershed Health Assessment* and *Forest & Wildlife Habitat Health Strategy* reflect the statewide focus on resilient ecosystems, functioning watersheds, and biodiversity protection.

**Exceptional and Sustainable Outdoor Recreation:**

- Recreation-focused projects emphasize maintenance, stewardship, education, and user experience, which align with the Strategy's emphasis on high-quality, sustainable recreation that balances use with stewardship and access equity.

**Coordinated Planning and Funding:**

- WMVO's collaborative structure (Planning Team, Core Team, Community Network) and multifaceted funding strategy reflect the Strategy's emphasis on inclusive planning, robust funding alignment, and ongoing coordination.
- The Action Map and Top 15 Projects provide a portfolio of implementable actions that can be matched to strategic funding opportunities, including but not limited to RPI.

By anchoring local priorities in a statewide framework, this plan not only reflects community values and data but also helps ensure that WMVO can compete effectively for

RPI and other funding opportunities by advancing measurable outcomes that support Colorado's Outdoors Strategy.

### **A Structured Funding Funnel**

WMVO uses a staged funding strategy to ensure that time and effort are focused on the most viable opportunities:

#### **Stage 1 — Define the Search**

Initial research identifies a wide range of potential funding opportunities across foundations, agencies, and programs that align with WMVO priorities.

#### **Stage 2 — Initial Scan and Screen**

Projects are evaluated for alignment with funder priorities, eligibility based on geography and organization type, and historical funding patterns. WMVO looks closely at a funder's past giving behavior as the best indicator of fit.

#### **Stage 3 — Deep Dive**

WMVO assesses the competitiveness of grant programs, reviews funding guidelines in detail, and initiates direct outreach to select funders to confirm alignment and build relationships.

#### **Stage 4 — Develop a Funding Roadmap**

A 12-to-18-month calendar and funding roadmap is created to sequence applications, partnerships, and project readiness over time.

This process allows WMVO to be disciplined, strategic, and efficient in pursuing funding that directly supports the projects prioritized by the community.

### **Role of WMVO in Funding**

WMVO, through its Board and Core Team, plays a coordinating role in:

- Grant writing and reporting
- Funds management
- Convening project teams and partners
- Aligning funding opportunities with Action Map priorities
- Ensuring transparency and communication with the community

This structure ensures that funding efforts remain closely tied to community priorities while reducing the burden on individual partners and agencies.

### **RPI as a Launch Point, Not the Only Path**

The WMVO Action Map was not built to fit a single funding source. Instead, it provides a portfolio of projects that can be matched to multiple funding streams over time. RPI serves as an important early implementation partner, but WMVO's strategy is to braid together:

- RPI funding
- Watershed and wildfire grants
- Foundation & Corporate support
- Agency partnerships
- Local and regional funding opportunities

This diversified approach increases the likelihood that projects move forward steadily rather than waiting on any one funding source.

### **Immediate Next Steps**

As identified in the Community Network meeting:

- Project Teams are being convened to define organization structures and refine project plans
- Active support is underway for watershed and wildfire grant opportunities
- WMVO is initiating a CSU, foundation and corporate funding scan and screening process
- A coordinated funding calendar is being developed for the coming 12–18 months

These steps demonstrate that WMVO is prepared to move from planning into sustained implementation.

## **12. Metrics, Dashboard, and Ongoing Monitoring**

### **Key Metrics for Success**

Across the 15 projects, 230 Actions and 172 KPI's were identified for an average of 15.3 actions and 11.5 KPI's per project. Each project team will be responsible for tracking and reporting progress based on their own project metrics.

### **Dashboard and Ongoing Monitoring by WMVO and Project Team Leads**

All the projects have common milestones that will be tracked on a WMVO Dashboard and shared with the community via a quarterly newsletter. These milestones will typically include:

- 1) Project kickoff meeting with collaboration partners and definition of organization structure
- 2) Refine project action items and organize into Gantt chart

- 3) Identify funding and paid staffing needs and create funding strategies
  - 4) Begin to implement action plan
  - 5) Track process and KPI's
  - 6) Project completion
  - 7) Project maintenance
- 

## **13. Appendix**

- A. Water Project Summary Links
  - a. Grape Creek Watershed Health Assessment
  - b. Mountain to Valley Water Delivery System
  - c. Water & Beaver Education
- B. Wildfire Project Summary Links
  - a. Community Wildfire Implementation Support
  - b. Neighborhood Fire Mitigation
- C. Agriculture & Ranching Project Summary Links
  - a. Conservation Easement Encouragement
  - b. Community Food Hub
  - c. Ag/Ranching Education
- D. Ecosystem & Wildlife Project Summary Links
  - a. Forest & Wildlife Habitat Health Strategy Identification
  - b. Weed-Eater (Noxious Weed Abatement)
- E. Recreation Links
  - a. County-wide Trail Infrastructure Safety & Maintenance Planning
  - b. User Experience Education Campaign
- F. Sustainable Tourism Link
  - a. Keep Custer Quaint & Quirky
- G. Capacity and Collaboration Links
  - a. Find Funding
  - b. Community Collaboration Initiative