



GROWING COLORADO'S OUTDOOR REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND
FEDERAL AGENCIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLORADO
OUTDOOR REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS INITIATIVE**

*University of Colorado Boulder - Masters of the Environment
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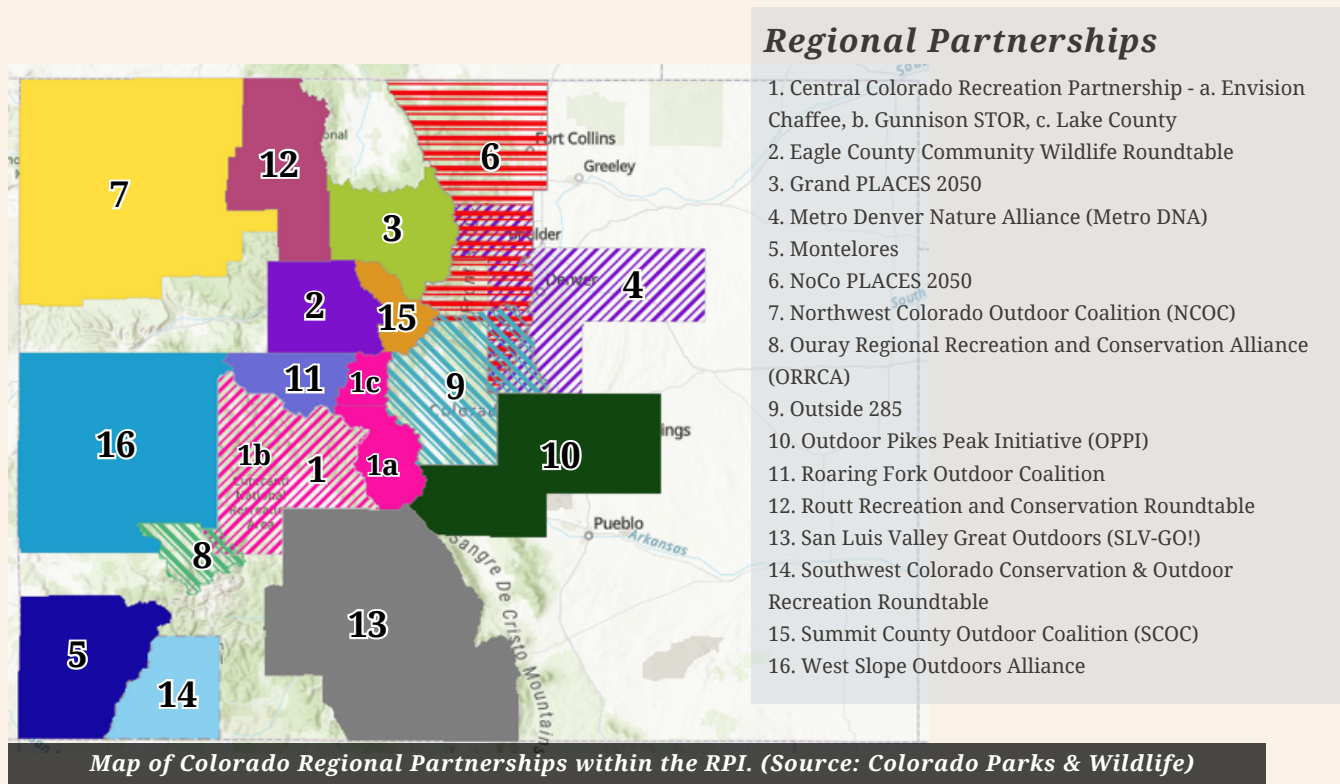
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BACKGROUND

In October 2020, Colorado State Governor Jared Polis issued [Executive Order B2020 008](#), which created the Colorado Outdoor Regional Partnerships Initiative (RPI) and formed the Inter-Agency Conservation and Recreation Council (Inter-Agency Council). The RPI is led and managed by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and receives funding support from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) to support the formation of regional partnerships in Colorado. The regional partnerships bring together relevant stakeholders and decision-makers to address the challenge of conserving Colorado's lands, waters, and wildlife while providing equitable and quality opportunities for outdoor recreation. The Inter-Agency Council is convened by DNR and helps to advance collaboration among state agencies whose work impacts outdoor recreation and the conservation of natural resources.



This report was written by a capstone project team from the Masters of the Environment graduate program at the University of Colorado Boulder. The project team conducted a year-long landscape analysis of the RPI, with assistance from CPW and the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC) as partnering agencies, to develop recommendations for the RPI and associated state and federal agencies. Through this project, the team engaged with over 45 representatives of relevant state and federal agencies and regional partnership leads, conducting interviews to gather their insight and perspectives on the RPI. This report presents the key findings and recommendations from these interviews as relevant to the Inter-Agency Council and two federal land management agencies.



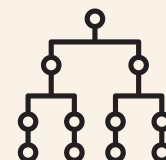
BENEFITS

The RPI landscape analysis identified numerous benefits and successes of the RPI. Interviews with regional partnership leads highlighted a range of program components that make the RPI successful and greatly benefit participating regions. These can be categorized into three major themes: funding, network, and structure.

Funding: At its core, the RPI provides grant funding to regional partnerships. There are two types of RPI grant awards: Partnership Capacity Grants and Plan Development Grants. Partnership Capacity Grants are up to \$150,000 to increase operating capacity for regional partnerships. Plan Development Grants are up to \$250,000 to support the completion of regional conservation and recreation plans by regional partnerships. Grants are awarded annually to both new partnerships and existing partnerships. This funding helps reinforce the work being done by existing partnerships and has also played an integral role in kickstarting efforts in regions that previously lacked conservation and outdoor recreation-focused organizations. As such, it is no surprise that all 16 regional partnerships mentioned funding as a key benefit.



NETWORK



STRUCTURE



FUNDING

Network: The RPI serves as a gathering place for regional leaders across Colorado to meet and share best practices for enhancing conservation and outdoor recreation management efforts. The RPI has allowed many new regional partnerships to draw inspiration from more established partnerships to ensure they are not reinventing the wheel when establishing impactful and engaging practices in their region. RPI lead meetings were explicitly mentioned as an excellent opportunity to share best practices and ideas.

Structure: The structure of the RPI acts like a state-supported grassroots initiative where regional decisions and projects are bottom-up in their approach, and state funding comes from the top-down. This dual approach is seen as one of the RPI's greatest strengths. Being a statewide effort managed by CPW also brings a degree of credibility that helps regional partnerships engage with external organizations and governing entities like The Nature Conservancy or the United States Forest Service.



COMMON CHALLENGES

Common challenges that regional partnerships identified include: **funding, role and program clarity, stakeholder engagement, and capacity.**



FUNDING

Funding: The first challenge of regional partnerships is acquiring long-term funding. Regional partnerships desire assurance of perpetual funding for their operations into the future. The current insecurity of funding longevity is evidenced by 71% of regional partnership leads stating in the survey that current funding from the RPI and all other sources is insufficient to remain operational long-term.

COMMON CHALLENGES CONT.



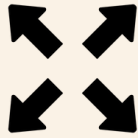
ROLE AND PROGRAM CLARITY

Role and Program Clarity: A lack of role and program clarity is another prevalent issue, with regional partners being unclear about the expectations of regional partnerships, statewide alignment, and decision-making authority when state and federal land management agencies are involved.



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder Engagement: Additionally, regional partnerships struggle with stakeholder engagement as desired efforts are not always feasible, requiring exhaustive resources, and there is difficulty building trust with historically excluded participants.



CAPACITY

Capacity: Finally, capacity pressures are felt on various levels involving paid staff and engaged contributors. Fatigue can be caused by the burden of the work falling on the shoulders of those already involved in planning processes. Find out more about these challenges in the [StoryMap](#).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Through an in-depth interview process with 26 state and federal state agency stakeholders and 16 regional partnerships, the team distilled aggregated takeaways and created recommendations for the RPI, the Inter-Agency Council, individual Colorado state agencies, and relevant federal agencies. The takeaways communicate key insights from the engagement process with state and federal agency stakeholders. This section provides an actionable framework for enhancing collaborative work between Colorado agencies and the RPI.

Based on the project findings, there are five recommendations for the RPI:



1: Build Out Resource Hub



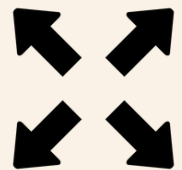
2: Broaden Funding



3: Enhance Alignment



4: Improve Collaboration



5: Increase Capacity

If your agency would like to read more about the RPI specific recommendations, refer to the [RPI section](#) of the [Recommendations StoryMap](#).

INTER-AGENCY COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Order B2020 007 formed the Inter-Agency Council to support the Regional Partnerships Initiative. The council meets semi-regularly to share updates and identify areas for collaboration. The following recommendations are intended to bolster support for the RPI by the Inter-Agency Council.

RESOURCE MENU FOR REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Since a key role of the Inter-Agency Council is to convene stakeholders to support the RPI, the council should create a resource menu for the regional partnerships. This would be an annually updated inventory of state agency efforts related to conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation so that the regional partnerships are aware of relevant initiatives at both the state and regional levels. Important information to include in the resource menu are as follows:

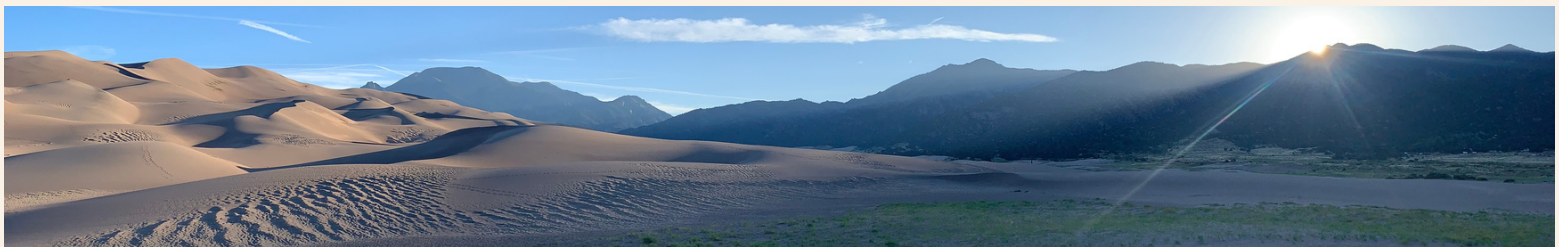
- Funding opportunities
 - E.x. grant programs for implementation projects, environmental justice, climate resilience, conservation and stewardship, etc.
- Technical assistance programs
 - E.x. Colorado Resiliency Office technical assistance, Rural Technical Assistance Program (RTAP), etc.
- Data sets that could be valuable to regional partnership planning efforts
 - E.x. CDPHE public health data and EnviroScreen, visitor/tourism data, GIS maps, etc.
- Best practices related to each state agency's focus area and guidelines for collaborating with that agency
 - E.x. which agency contact to reach out to for partnerships and collaboration
- Any locally/regionally focused initiatives that are relevant to the RPI
 - E.x. organizations receiving technical assistance or funding from the agencies related to conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation to identify any regional duplicative efforts. For example, the Colorado Tourism Office works with Visit Ouray and the Do Ouray Right campaign.

It is recommended that CPW & DNR compile this information with input from each state agency, publish it on the RPI resource hub website, and send it out annually to the regional partnerships in a newsletter.

CONVENING FREQUENCY

In terms of meeting frequency, it is recommended that the Inter-Agency Council meet quarterly each year. Anything less allows for duplicative efforts to start among state agencies or between state agencies and the RPI. By meeting more frequently, collaboration opportunities can be identified sooner. During these meetings, updates on the regional partnerships should be provided by CPW so that state agencies can offer support and resources where relevant. State agencies should also report on current and future initiatives so that duplicative efforts can be identified and state agencies can consolidate efforts to conserve resources and capacity by eliminating redundancy.

One of the four meetings a year should be a half-day statewide planning meeting that brings together stakeholders from state & federal agencies, regional partnerships, and relevant interest groups to determine statewide collaboration and consistency. This could be held in conjunction with the RPI annual summit.



STATE AGENCY RECOMMENDATIONS

Each state agency interviewed is doing exceptional work across the state in their focus areas. With a more targeted approach, the collective of state agencies represented by the Inter-Agency Council can increase their effectiveness in supporting regional partnerships by making resources, programs, datasets, and funding more readily available.

Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC) can leverage their existing resources to help regional partnerships holistically address the intersection of outdoor recreation and conservation. The following is recommended to be provided:



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- Insights on statewide outdoor recreation industry goals and plans
- Guidance on how outdoor recreation can help drive economic development
- Introductions to relevant outdoor recreation businesses and economic development partnerships that could be involved in regional partnerships
- Resources on how to engage with outdoor recreation stakeholders and businesses to improve collaboration within the regional partnerships



Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) and Colorado Tourism Office (CTO) have technical assistance programs and/or funding opportunities that could be relevant to the regional partnerships,

including the energy/mineral impact assistance grant and application-based destination assessment. These opportunities should be communicated to the regional partnerships through the Inter-Agency Council meetings and resource menu.

Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) has numerous environmental programs ranging from water quality, air & climate, and environmental policy & biological resources that have the potential for collaboration with regional partnerships. The following is recommended to be provided to the RPI:



- Access to GIS tools and wildlife data through the Inter-Agency Council resource menu because of the overlapping goals of increasing access to recreation opportunities while conserving wildlife
- Guidance on applying for and accessing Revitalizing Main Streets grant funding would also be helpful to include in the resource menu
- Collaborate on I-70 exit interpretation with regional partnerships located off of I-70



The Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs (CCIA) currently has a State-Tribal Consultation Guide for state agencies. Many regional partnerships want to build relationships with Colorado's Tribes and integrate Tribal considerations into their work and collaborations. Therefore, a similar guide for regional partnerships would be helpful since they are not state agencies. This information could be relayed through a tribal engagement workshop or

discussion session at a Colorado Outdoor Partnership (CO-OP) meeting or RPI lead meeting to discuss best practices for ensuring reciprocity within formal consultations with tribes.



STATE AGENCY RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) has a comprehensive database of public health information that some regional partnerships may not be aware of. Other regional partners have also noted that this database can be difficult to navigate. Including health and demographic data interfaces in the Inter-Agency Council resource menu will increase awareness of regional partnerships of this valuable resource and provide easier access to information. Additionally, providing training videos on how to utilize CDPHE Open Data could alleviate challenges with CDPHE and user end capacity limitations. More regional partnerships are beginning to add public health to their prioritized focus areas, so an outline of best practices for addressing public health concerns as regional efforts that align with CDPHE's work would be very beneficial.



Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) is a major funding partner for the RPI, with funding highlighted as a key benefit for the regional partnerships. This funding helps regional partnerships as they create strategic plans and hire facilitators to increase their capacity. With the success of the RPI, in the short term, it is recommended that GOCO provide additional funding options for “Early Win” projects based on the identified challenge of finding funding sources to support implementation work. Alternative and additional funding models to support regional partnerships should be considered in the long-term.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) oversees the Inter-Agency Council, and it is recommended that DNR and **Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW)** compile the resource menu for regional partnerships and incorporate it into the RPI Resource Hub. The resource menu should be updated annually and include contacts for each of the agencies on the Inter-Agency Council so that regional partnerships have up-to-date information. It is important to note that a resource toolkit is currently being compiled as a part of Colorado's Outdoors Strategy (COS) and that this proposed resource menu could reference and link to the COS resource toolkit. With planning efforts happening at the local, regional, and state levels, DNR and CPW should be the organizers and hosts of the above mentioned half-day statewide planning meeting to bring together all the stakeholders to ensure alignment and identify areas for collaboration. This meeting could be held in conjunction with the RPI annual summit.



CPW's Wildlife Movement team identifies priority wildlife migration areas. Any accessible wildlife data that can be shared with the regional partnerships would be a good addition to the Inter-Agency Council resource menu so that regional partnerships can utilize the data. CPW can also collaborate with regional partnerships on wildlife protection efforts that align with the office's work.



FEDERAL AGENCY RECOMMENDATIONS

Knowing that the relationship between regional partnerships and federal land management agencies (primarily the USFS and BLM) is of utmost importance, the following recommendations have been developed to improve alignment and collaboration between regional partnerships, associated state agencies, and the USFS/BLM. These recommendations are in the form of a four-step process and are intended to be followed sequentially:



1) FOSTER TRUST AND RECIPROCITY BETWEEN REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND FEDERAL AGENCIES

Partnership representatives should engage with federal agency staff as early as possible and begin to develop positive working relationships with federal employees of local USFS districts or BLM field offices. Representatives of regional partnerships and federal agencies should invite one another to sit in on each other's meetings where appropriate and participate to discuss how to address relevant issues/topics.

2) ALIGN GOALS AND PRIORITIES ON A LARGE SCALE

Regional partnerships should improve their understanding of the local goals and priorities of federal leadership and should become familiarized with the primary objectives of relevant federal decision-makers. This is especially important for the goals of local decision-makers, such as USFS district rangers or BLM field office managers, or respective conservation or recreation planning specialists. Similarly, it is recommended that regional partnerships increase their understanding of existing federal management plans and strategies and determine where the overlap lies between existing federal goals and the goals of regional partnerships.

3) COORDINATE INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS ON A GRANULAR SCALE

Regional partnerships and federal agencies should begin coordinating on a more focused, project-specific level and determine where priorities and goals are aligned in planning or implementation processes. It is recommended that comprehensive planning processes are collaborative where appropriate. This is especially important for significant planning processes that may affect both regional partnerships and federal agencies, such as NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) planning or creating federal resource management plans under laws like the National Forest Management Act or the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

4) PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE AND COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT

It is recommended that regional partnerships prepare for how the current turnover of leadership, either within federal agencies or within a partnership, could alter the trajectory of a regional partnership's collaboration with federal agencies. Therefore, it is recommended that regional partnerships create guidelines for coordinating with local federal jurisdictions such as USFS districts or BLM field offices. Similarly, it is recommended that regional partnerships work closely with federal leaders to develop similar guidelines for federal employees to collaborate with regional partnerships. Along those lines, it is recommended that federal agencies create new partnership coordinator positions at the forest and regional levels to manage partnerships with the RPI. The creation of these permanent positions would increase collaboration between regional partnerships and state and federal agencies and eliminate the need for existing regional land managers to take on extra responsibilities coordinating with regional partnerships. The final step is to merge or consolidate existing plans and strategies between regional partnerships and federal agencies where feasible and strive for collaborative planning processes going into the future. If consolidating plans is not yet feasible, regional partnerships should be included in relevant federal planning processes to the greatest extent possible.

CONCLUSION

The Regional Partnerships Initiative is an incredible and innovative program designed to address the modern and complex challenges of conserving Colorado's lands and resources while also providing for quality opportunities for outdoor recreation. As the need for proactive and interdisciplinary management of conservation and recreation issues continues to rise, the RPI and associated agencies will serve as a powerful tool for addressing such modern challenges. Even though this program is relatively new, it is expected to grow and expand. Therefore, relevant agencies must continue to be involved and engaged with the RPI to ensure that Colorado's lands, waters, and wildlife thrive while maintaining excellent opportunities for outdoor recreation for current and future Coloradans.

If you want to learn more about the landscape analysis project, you can do so in this [StoryMap Collection](#).



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If you have any questions about the Regional Partnership Initiative, please contact the Regional Partnership Program Manager at CPW. Contact information can be found on the [CPW Regional Partnerships Initiative webpage](#).



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