

Celebrating World Water Day

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By Sally Collins

Saturday is World Water Day—a day for remembering the global importance of water. We sometimes take water for granted, but nearly half the people on Earth lack the clean water and sanitation services enjoyed by the people of ancient Rome. After 2,000 years, you'd think we'd do better.

Coloradans know the importance of water and its connection to forests. After all, much of the water you use in your daily lives originates on Denver's forested horizons. Less well known is how many citizens outside the state are served by the water that comes from your Colorado mountains. More than 175 counties in 13 western states depend on water flowing from the Rocky Mountains. Home to over 33 million, these counties stretch clear to Los Angeles, where one quart of every gallon piped from the Colorado River begins in Rocky Mountain national forests.

The role of forests in sustaining abundant flows of clean water deserves our attention on World Water Day and every other day. Forests capture, store, filter and slowly release the clean water you drink every day. But that capacity is now threatened by changes in climate, population, and land use. Large fires and bark beetle outbreaks also affect the ability of forests to store and filter the water you drink. It all adds up trouble: This winter's stellar snowfall is a wet blip on a prevailing trend line of declining snowpacks, aquifer levels, and resulting low streamflows.

Together, we can do something about it, and we have made a start. Working with partners, the Forest Service is caring for headwaters like the Upper South Platte River Basin, which serves 2.5 million people in the Denver area. Together with our state, city, and private partners, including the Upper South Platte Coalition, we have treated over 18,000 acres of pine forests to protect and restore the watershed, with 26,000 more acres of planned work. We are controlling erosion, planting trees near streams, repairing damaged roads and trails, removing vegetation to prevent severe wildfires, and giving everyone a chance to learn why all this is so important.

We are making progress, but the challenges we face are enormous. It will take generations of work to meet them—generations of children growing up to appreciate the

role of forests in protecting headwaters and who are willing and able to step up to the task.

Many are concerned, as I am, that today's children are growing up estranged from nature. Our children need the same opportunities we had to roam in forests and fields, to fish and find frogs, to watch and wonder about birds and other wildlife. They need to see firsthand how their homes and communities are connected to the natural world around them.

The Forest Service has many ongoing activities to reach children, from Smoky Bear to our "More Kids in the Woods" program. We are delighted to help fund Denver's Environmental Learning for Kids, which helps urban kids connect to nature from an early age. I am personally looking forward to joining some of these kids on March 27 as they do field work on the South Platte River near Deckers.

History will judge us by how well we step up to the great conservation challenges of our day—climate change, water, and kids. Every one of us can help in ways big and small, from joining a watershed restoration partnership to taking a kid for a day in the woods. When enough of us take even the small steps, like saving water and using it mindfully, then we will be well on our way to a future of clean, abundant water for all.

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