On March 31, 2017, Carpe Diem West convened its twelfth Healthy Headwaters leadership meeting, bringing together scientists, policy makers, water managers, and regional leaders from around the West. We met in Aurora, Colorado, a city with a long history of collaborating with regional partners to provide water to their community.

Mayor Steve Hogan joined us to talk about those successes. “We try to be a good neighbor, to conserve and help where we can,” he said. In this part of Colorado, where wildfires of increasing size and frequency threaten the water supply, that attitude alone is worth its weight in gold. We presented Healthy Headwaters Innovation awards to Aurora Water and to Mike McHugh, Environmental Permitting Coordinator for Aurora Water.

Over the course of the day, we talked about getting the biggest bang for our headwaters investment buck, and about building diverse and inclusive partnerships to expand the effectiveness of this work. As always, we discussed the latest tools for clarifying and defining costs and benefits. But the topic that consumed much of the day involved what it means to listen—and how to break down cultural and organizational silos so that the effects of our work might more frequently match long-term restoration and protection priorities, rather than short-term political ones.

Ideas came up that blew our minds wide open. Could bark beetles be our friends? Could Goldman Sachs help
us in our quest for financing? Could the Aurora Chamber of Commerce partner with water justice advocates? Those questions and others offer breadcrumbs for inquiry in the coming months, but one thing seems clear: There’s no one recipe for success. It’s about remaining open to what’s possible, and staying committed to productive collaboration.

Here are the themes that stood out from the meeting:

**Prioritize smart choices and actions.**

Jeff Lukas, of Western Water Assessment at the University of Colorado, started off the morning with a presentation of large-scale climate trends, projections, and implications. He was followed by Dr. Tony Cheng, of the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at Colorado State University, who spoke about the local applications of that science. Cheng is a member of the Front Range Roundtable, a collaboration formed to help identify high-priority treatment areas for reducing fire risk and achieving ecological restoration in the Colorado Front Range.

Both Lukas and Cheng emphasized the fact that fire is as natural to our Western forests as sunshine and rain. “The increase in disturbances is a self-organizing response of our ecosystem,” said Lukas. “Bugs and fire are natural facts of life. We can’t manage ourselves completely out of that reality.”

In 15 years, the Front Range Roundtable has seen the treatment of just 8% of the 1.5 million acres they identified as high-priority in a 10-county area. “Natural events are going to treat more areas than we can,” said Cheng. The key is to prioritize treatment using tools that help isolate the areas and tactics that will provide the highest return on investment for water providers.

“How much do we, as a society, go in and intervene in natural landscape processes? How much do people living in stupid areas need to adapt? At the end of the day, it’s a matter of values.”

Dr. Tony Cheng
Colorado Forest Restoration Institute
Unfortunately, said Lukas, “Today’s fire suppression priorities are massively distorted.” Rather than treating forests based on watershed value, political forces often dictate that they be treated according to the most visible dead trees or the number of homes threatened.

Both Cheng and Lukas emphasized the need to take a harder line against Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) communities, and to change the way we address fires. “It’s already happening in the fire management community,” said Cheng “Five firefighters die per year, on average. That’s not working. You can rebuild homes. You can’t bring life back.”

Cheng urged more focus on loss avoidance. When a large fire shuts down the power grid for days, that has huge economic impact, for example. Today, those kinds of conflagrations can be avoided. “We have the tools,” said Cheng. “We can punch in any priority and spit out a range of solutions. So let’s do that. Let’s invest there.”

**Listen before doing, when building collaboration.**

To build support for science- and large infrastructure-focused priorities, talk turned to social license and the need for more sophisticated and effective communication with rate payers and community stakeholders.

“What is risk?” asked Cheng. “If we could clearly define and agree on that, we could drive resources in that direction.” But as Heather Bergman of Peak Facilitation and a Healthy Headwaters consultant pointed out, that kind of agreement involves a delicate balance of asking good questions of stakeholders, and listening to their answers.

Bergman, who coordinates the Front Range Roundtable, points to research on social licensing by the Mountain Resource Center. “What we say is truth turns out to be
anecdotal,” she said. “Communities are actually more open than we think to treatments, such as cutting trees or prescribed fires.”

It depends on how you approach people. If you go in with a solution at the ready, and try to shove it down their throats, don’t be surprised when you get push back. The best way to get people on board, said Bergman, is to guide them skillfully toward science-based solutions. “Our work is about 80% developing social engagement and trust,” she said.

Matt Zieper of the Trust for Public Land echoed that theme later on in his presentation. The Trust has a 20-year history of putting together successful ballot measures. Zieper’s list of steps for putting together such ballot measures starts with feasibility studies and public opinion research—listening to voters and hearing their priorities. According to Trust research, water supply and water quality top the list of reasons people vote yes on environmental measures.

When you bring diverse stakeholders to the table, said Kim Gortz of Colorado Springs Utilities, you inevitably encounter competing values. You must start by listening hard to understand those values. Then, you can move forward.

Build diverse partnerships.

For Front Range communities, the partnership conversation goes beyond the usual mandates to expand business community buy-in or to bring agriculture and urban interests together. More and more, it’s about recognizing changing demographics and including and supporting Latinos, Native Americans, and ethnic minorities into collaborations they’ve typically been left out of.
The people leading those collaborations sometimes counter with the argument that minority communities “don’t care,” but according to Belinda Griswold of Resource Media, the data says something different. “Latinos care more about environmental issues than white people do,” she said. In their presentations, Kendra Sandoval of Blue and Yellow Logic, and Hilda Nucete, of Conservation Colorado’s Protégete program, urged the group to take a more inclusive approach.

“We need to be invited to the table,” said Sandoval. Tapping into Latino ideas and social networks can have incalculable impact, but it’s important to go out into the community and build those relationships in person. To encourage participation, offer food and childcare, hold meetings in familiar community spaces, and speak in the language that the community is comfortable with.

“The fact is, you are reaching women, not men, when you reach out to Latino communities,” said Sandoval. “Speak from the heart. If Latinos don’t show up to your meetings, go out and ask community members directly, ‘What would make this more effective?’”

Nucete emphasized the importance of framing issues according to values that people care about. “Water quality is not just a tree-hugger issue,” she said. “It’s about workers’ rights, clean jobs with clean air, and social and economic health.” Often, kids in these communities suffer from asthma, lead poisoning, or other environmental ailments. Their parents are keen for information and advocacy that will help them fight back.

Engaging new communities for the long term means getting the attention of their youngest members. Aurora Water is already doing good work with its school outreach programs, which reach 20,000 kids each year—but Kevin Hougen, of
the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, stressed the need to increase those programs. “Schools don’t teach civics or geography anymore, and they seldom get to environmental issues,” he said. “They’re completely focused on STEM testing.”

Nucete emphasized the importance of mentorship, pointing to Sandoval as someone who helps her see herself in a position of leadership. Sandoval’s call for more paid internships directed to minority communities was met with immediate offers from our Healthy Headwaters audience. This networking stuff works!

**Cross-pollinate. Silos are the death of progress.**

An after-lunch panel explored the challenges and successes of today’s forest and water collaborations. It quickly became clear that, to maximize the level of information, effort, and effectiveness, facilitators should seek to engage partners across boundaries, at as many points as possible.

The value of getting together and talking isn’t always quantifiable, but as Carpe Diem West’s executive director Kimery Wiltshire said, “Process is an outcome.” When you engage people to clarify goals and make sure they’re not working at cross-purposes, you make systems more efficient. When you reach out to potential objectors hovering on the sidelines, you set your program up for less litigation and smarter decision-making. When you send a forest ranger out to the schools to foster a culture of stewardship, you influence public priorities now and into the future.

It’s great to have committed team members, but too much siloed focus can create blind spots and stagnation, as Kim Gortz, of Colorado Springs Utilities, pointed out. “When the same people keep showing up, new ideas don’t. People get burned out.”

Stagnation is at its worst when it’s not only the same people, but the same funding sources that take the weight again and again. Todd Gartner, of World Resources Institute, is

“**When the same people keep showing up, new ideas don’t. People get burned out.**”

Kim Gortz
Colorado Springs Utilities
out to change that model forever. He’s part of a team developing the Forest Resilience Bond (FRB) program—a public-private partnership and financial instrument designed to put private capital to work restoring the forests of the West. According to Gartner, finding private capital is the easy part. The group is actively searching for NEPA-ready headwater forest opportunities to put in the line-up. Their pilot project, in the Tahoe National Forest, has a 2018 target to demonstrate that the model works.

In the FRB case, the wall between investors and the public program managers needs to remain intact. But Gartner is confident that the program could change the scale of forest restoration dramatically, to finally address the billions of dollars needed to prevent catastrophic wildfires and protect watersheds. “We need to be thinking much bigger than we have in the past,” he said. “When we get to the scale of people trying to game the system, we will have won.”

Clarify and define costs.

For any successful public initiative, transparency is key. Funders, taxpayers, and collaborators need to know that their time, money, and hard work is being put to the use it was intended. Karl Morgenstern, of Oregon’s Eugene Water & Electric Board, offered an updated look into how he measures the threats of riparian development and the cost of the Pure Water Partners program against the ecosystem services that a healthy watershed offers. He calculates a return on investment of $440.40 per acre, per year, which means landowners, investors, and public partners continue to be happy to participate. The program is expanding into the entire Willamette Valley.

In Colorado and elsewhere, citizens need to understand the long-term infrastructure costs of big fires, as well as the more visible and immediate effects. When forests lose water and soil-holding capacity after a large conflagration, they require continuous maintenance—the “gift that keeps on giving.” As Cheng pointed out,
Denver Water has spent $28 million in the aftermath of the Buffalo Creek and Hayman fires, to protect its water supplies.

Firefighter lives, air quality health effects, and tourism dollars are other costs that must be factored in. As mean temperatures rise, snow melts earlier, and drought settles in, forests become less resilient. The fire season gets longer, and the fires larger and more devastating, overwhelming the resources of firefighters and turning pristine communities into places where it’s hard to breathe. Our unparalleled Western views become hazy harbingers of a world where the heat is forever turned up, and water is a scarce commodity.

The full meeting agenda, attendee list, and background material are available online.