

New Threat to Greenbacks and Other Trout in Rocky Mountain National Park!

Urgent Action Needed by Colorado TU Members

The Problem:

Ongoing studies by National Park Service and U.S. Geological Survey scientists reveal that air and water quality in Rocky Mountain National Park are declining. Specifically, increased levels of nitrogen deposition in the park are saturating the Park's soils, and changing the pH balance in lakes and coldwater streams. Annual nitrogen deposition levels in the park are now 15 times greater than pre-industrial, natural levels! These pronounced increases, which have already begun to change algae species composition in Park streams, are disproportionately affecting the eastern side of the Park. The major sources of nitrogen pollution (usually in the form of NO_x or NH₄) are industrial emissions, motorized vehicle exhaust, and agriculture. Fortunately, as shown by the improvements in air quality achieved in Denver in the last 15 years, there are ways to reduce nitrogen and ozone producing emissions that would improve air and water quality in important fisheries such as Rocky Mountain National Park.

Rocky Mountain National Park is a fragile ecosystem in the sense that it has a naturally low acid buffering capacity. This means that as further nitrogen deposition occurs and waters begin to acidify, certain pH sensitive species such as trout may become the first victims of nitrogen loading. One recent Park publication stated, "Eventually these resources become acidic and cease to support sensitive species such as fish." The Park is the largest protected management area of the federally threatened Greenback Cutthroat Trout, Colorado's state fish and a species formerly on the brink of extinction. Dedicated Colorado Trout Unlimited members have already put some 7,000 volunteer hours into Greenback Cutthroat habitat restoration and conservation, but this work could be undermined if we do not act now to improve the Park's air and water quality.

What You Can Do:

Write a letter urging the U.S. Department of the Interior to stop air and water quality degradation in Rocky Mountain National Park, and to protect sensitive Park resources such as the Greenback cutthroat trout from further nitrogen loading of soils and waters. Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton is a former resident of Colorado, so remind her how special the Park is and what it means to our state. The following outlines a sample citizen letter that can be used as a base for your own thoughts.

Ask Secretary Norton To:

1. Formally recognize the adverse air and water quality impacts in Rocky Mountain National Park.
2. Establish standard nitrogen levels for the Park that must not be exceeded.
3. Call for the Environmental Protection Agency and State of Colorado to lower nitrogen levels in the park and to prepare a plan to decrease inputs in the future.

Talking points for your letter:

- Park and USGS scientists have reported increased nitrogen loading that jeopardizes the Park's soils, lakes, and streams. Observations have also shown heightened levels of ozone in the area.
- Scientists believe that these increases, if not slowed and eventually remediated, could have serious adverse impacts on both ecosystem and human health.
- Ecological consequences of nitrogen loading are already evident, as species within different communities are changing.
- Federally threatened species such as the Greenback Cutthroat Trout could be put at further risk because of their sensitivity to these environmental factors.

Letters should be sent to:

Gale Norton, Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240
Phone: (202) 208-7351

Please send a copy of your letter to CTU (actco@tu.org) or otherwise let us know you've sent a letter. Thank you for helping Colorado Trout Unlimited save trout in Rocky Mountain National Park!