



What new directions is Trout Unlimited charting in its new strategic plan?

TU's 2021-26 strategic plan reflects two realities: Not only has Trout Unlimited grown significantly over the past 20 years, but so have the challenges our streams and rivers face. More than 1.5 million miles of trout and salmon waters are degraded. Streams that supply drinking water, irrigation, and recreation are at risk. The effects of climate change pose real and immediate threats. On the flip side, huge opportunities have emerged for TU and its partners to protect, reconnect, and restore trout and salmon waters using tried and true strategies. We must scale up our efforts to both avert threats and seize opportunities.

To meet the challenges we face, we will:

- Identify shared Priority Waters for native and wild trout and salmon across the country and take strategic action to care for and recover them.
- Inspire people and communities across the country to care for and recover their waters.
- Invest in our staff, volunteers, and partners so we have the tools, technology, training, and resources necessary to achieve our shared goals.

What are Priority Waters?

Trout Unlimited is most successful when we pull together as staff, volunteers, and partners to focus our resources on shared priority areas—and stick with the work long enough to achieve an ambitious conservation vision. We have done this in Bristol Bay, Alaska, where everyone from local communities to Tribal partners to TU members in the Lower 48 is playing a part in the conservation of a globally significant fishery. We have done it in the Driftless region in the Midwest, where a strategic, all-hands-on-deck approach has leveraged \$50 million to restore hundreds of miles of spring creeks. We are doing it in the Klamath along the California-Oregon border, where we are restoring hundreds of stream miles and removing four mainstem dams to reconnect 400 miles of habitat.

By identifying and conserving a set of Priority Waters, TU will take this approach national under our new strategic plan.

Earlier this year, staff and volunteer leaders in Oregon and New Hampshire piloted the development of Priority Waters for their states. Those pilots provided a blueprint for applying the best available science and engaging with partners to identify the places where TU can make the greatest contribution to the health, resiliency, and viability of our nation's trout and salmon fisheries.

What will change at TU under the Priority Waters approach?

First, let's be clear about what will *not* change, and that is the kind of work we do at TU. We will continue to protect intact habitat, reconnect fragmented rivers and streams, restore degraded waters, and engage anglers and communities as stewards of their local watersheds.

What is new is that we will be concentrating our efforts—and amplifying our impact. State by state, TU staff and volunteers will ask a series of questions about the places where we work:

- What waters are most likely to remain healthy for wild and native trout and salmon amid a changing climate?
- Where are the greatest needs—and the greatest opportunities for TU to have an impact?
- What waters are most important to the people and communities who care about wild and native trout and salmon and the waters they depend on?

The first question provides the science framework for the Priority Waters. The others ensure that TU is being pragmatic, forward-thinking, and responsive.

By answering these questions about trout and salmon waters across the country, we will create a truly comprehensive portfolio of places where TU can work toward positive change at a meaningful scale.

How will science inform the selection of Priority Waters and our strategies for their care and recovery?

Diversity promotes resiliency. Borrowing from the financial planner's maxim that a diversified investment portfolio reduces risk, we will use a science-based "portfolio" approach to prioritize genetic diversity, life history diversity, and habitat diversity across the range of trout and salmon species.

What that means is that, as a starting point, Priority Waters will include populations:

- in large, intact, "stronghold" habitats;
- with unique life histories; and
- in habitats where our work can ensure their resilience in the face of climate change.

The last point is particularly critical. The urgent threat of climate change demands that TU, across the organization, from program staff to councils and chapters and supporters, be strategic in prioritizing our conservation efforts.

To build this scientific foundation, TU will aggregate existing assessments of native and wild trout and salmon species, taking into consideration the strategic priorities of state and federal agencies, tribes, and other partners.

Having used the best available science to identify potential priorities, we will consider other important questions: Is there an opportunity for TU to have an impact? Will our work be significant enough to speed the pace or scale of the work in these watersheds? What matters to local communities that care about and depend on wild and native trout and salmon waters?

As we seek answers to these questions, we will engage with, and learn from underrepresented communities and peoples with rich histories of watershed stewardship. Communities of color have long led conservation efforts in the very same places where TU works. Consider the efforts of the Apache tribe to keep their namesake fish from going extinct. Or the heroic efforts of Questa, New Mexico, which long relied on mining, to advocate for restoring populations of the native Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

In the coming years, as we work in the context of the new strategic plan, we will put a premium on partnerships like these. Learning from and working with communities of color will be an integral element of our Priority Waters work.

How can volunteers, supporters, and communities get involved in the Priority Waters work?

In states where TU has an active staff presence, TU's conservation staff will work with grassroots leaders to identify Priority Waters; where applicable, council leaders will take the lead in representing volunteers through this process.

In Oregon and New Hampshire, we've piloted the process of identifying Priority Waters. Over the course of many collaborative discussions, a cross-section of field staff, scientists, and the states' grassroots leaders debated which rivers and streams fit the bill. Staff and volunteers who participated in that effort walked away excited and inspired about the possibilities ahead. As we move forward this year and next, we expect to our approach to evolve and improve as we incorporate feedback from volunteers, stakeholders, and local communities where we work.

Once the Priority Waters are established, it will be all hands on deck. We know that whether or not you have a Priority Water in your backyard, you care deeply about these special places. We have all been inspired by the outpouring of support for campaigns to protect trout and salmon in places like Bristol Bay in Alaska, the Snake River Basin in the Pacific Northwest, the Driftless region in the Midwest, and the Penobscot in Maine. Now, we will marshal that energy on behalf of important wild and native trout and salmon waters in every state, and pull together on a regional and national level to increase our impact.

How will TU continue to support local efforts in states without TU staff?

One of TU's greatest strengths is the work our grassroots volunteers do, from planting trees and cleaning their streams to educating and engaging their communities. TU's Priority Waters effort provides new avenues for TU's volunteers to participate in our mission by helping us care for and recover high-quality wild and native trout and salmon rivers and streams in your region and across the country. We are staffing up with regional engagement managers, who will work to

connect volunteers with our Priority Waters work and, in the process, diversify our conservation community.

TU has grown tremendously over the past two decades, but the reality is that our national field staff can't work everywhere. In some places, TU may not be able to make significant impacts with finite staff resources. We are piloting ways to support council and chapter leaders in states where TU does not have dedicated staff.

As we do now, we will continue to support our grassroots as they work on their local waters and continue to assist chapters with guidance, tools, and funding to work in their local communities.

More than ever, our organization is engaging broader, younger, and more diverse communities in the work of caring for their rivers and streams. That happens everywhere, from city classrooms where we teach the next generation about trout, to suburbs where we train volunteers to do community science on their local waters, to rural communities with beloved tailwaters. TU will continue to invest in our network of 400+ community-based chapters to help them deliver on the mission at the local level, wherever that might be.

TU's mission statement is changing. Is TU's mission changing?

Fundamentally, no. But in a lengthy and collaborative strategic planning process—during which we worked with board members, partners, the National Leadership Council, chapter and council leaders, partners, and other stakeholders—we saw that something was missing from our existing mission statement: people.

Our new mission statement reflects the fact that we have long worked to engage meaningfully with parties that may not always see eye to eye and build collaborative partnerships to get things done. And it recognizes that we are committed to equity and inclusion—to building spaces where all individuals and communities are valued, heard, respected, and empowered.

All of which is captured in our new mission statement:

“To bring together diverse interests to care for and recover rivers and streams so that our children can experience the joy of wild and native trout and salmon.”

What will this mean for my council or chapter?

Please visit the [Tackle Box](#) on TU.org to learn more about what TU's new strategic plan means for your council and chapter.