

Ag Talk: Annual Confluence Institute designed to help teachers learn all about water

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The Great Western Institute of Denver.

Most folks probably haven't heard of this organization, yours truly included, but earlier this month it conducted the first of what will be an annual Confluence Institute at the Poudre Learning Center in west Greeley. As Tracy Bouvette, director of the Great Western put it, participants spent a week immersed in Poudre River water, "figuratively and literally." That's because the Confluence Institute, designed to provide school teachers with water education, came at the height of flooding on the river this spring.

The Great Western Institute, Bouvette explained, has been around for the past five years. Its mission is to promote water conservation in the state through education, policy development and research. It organizes programs in the areas of water use efficiency, wise water use, water infrastructure management and water reuse. It also works with partner organizations throughout the state.

The Confluence Institute, however, is the brainchild of Ray Tschillard, who has been the director of the Poudre Learning Center since 2004, when the center opened.

The institute's first effort drew about 20 teachers from Greeley-Evans School District 6, Eaton Re-2 and Adams 12, Bouvette said. It was conducted as part of Project WET — Water Education for Teachers — which is an international teachers training effort. The Great Western Institute is the host organization for Project WET in Colorado, but Bouvette said it exists in 49 states and 26 countries.

Project WET, he said, builds networks to encourage effective and sustainable water education programs, and utilizes the core belief that water is important to all users, including business and industry, earth systems, energy, agriculture and a host of others — basically anyone who uses water, which is everyone. The project has developed and published more than 50 guides, kits and books for teachers and students that address a wide variety of topics.

The first Confluence Institute came to a close with a barbecue at the Von Trotha-Firestien Farm at Bracewell, just north of the Poudre Learning Center. Sponsoring organizations of that gathering included Ruth and Judy Firestien, the Central Colorado Water Conservancy District, the city of Greeley, West Greeley Conservation District, the Colorado State Conservation Board, the Poudre Learning Center and the Great Western Institute.

The Von Trotha-Firestien Farm gained listing of the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior on May 12 last year. The farm is located in the settlement of Bracewell, northwest of Greeley, and Firestien, noting the south pasture of the farm is under water from the Poudre, said she intended to put a "Lake Bracewell" sign next to the fence prior to the barbecue but didn't have time to get to it.

She also noted that Tschillard, during the height of flooding, noticed some beehives starting to float in the water. He attempted to rescue them, and did, but not without suffering more than a sting or two, one over an eye that closed that eye for a couple of days.

"I was doing pretty good until I dropped one of the hives in the water after the first couple of stings," Tschillard said, somewhat sheepishly. But, more importantly, he and Firestien were able to recover the hives and get them to higher ground.

Firestien and her mother, Ruth, have worked tirelessly in documenting the history of the farm, where members

of the Firestien family have lived and worked since at least 1917. The farm complex represents more than 109 years of European settlement in the Bracewell area and those at the barbecue were given the opportunity to stroll the grounds and view some of those historic buildings. It too has water history attached, including a private domestic water line, constructed by the Von Trotha brothers in 1951, that continues to serve a dozen residences in the area.

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