



Water Education Colorado's Executive Director Jayla Poppleton (left) presents UGRWCD General Manager Sonja Chavez (right) with award. All photos and video courtesy of Water Education Colorado.

WATER EDUCATION COLORADO HONORS UGRWCD GENERAL MANAGER SONJA CHAVEZ AS “EMERGING WATER LEADER”

Sonja Chavez, general manager for the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District, was recently awarded the *Emerging Water Leader Award* from Water Education Colorado, a statewide nonprofit organization charged with the important task of ensuring a sustainable water future for Colorado by educating and engaging Colorado citizens around this limited resource.

Each year, Water Education Colorado (WECO) invites friends and colleagues to its President's Reception, an evening of celebration, networking and awards honoring water leadership across the state and raising money for WECO's operations. The 2022 Reception was held on September 8, 2022, in Denver at Balistreri Vineyards.

WECO's Executive Director Jayla Poppleton explained that the *Emerging Water Leader Award* was first introduced in 2010 to honor young Colorado professionals whose work is making a significant difference for Colorado's water future and for water education.

Kelly Romero-Heaney, the recipient of the 2021 *Emerging Water Leader Award* introduced Sonja Chavez to the sell-out crowd stating, “Those of you that know Sonja also know that beneath her poise and elegance is a warrior,” said Kelly. “She is a warrior for her community, for her watersheds, for her local ranchers, and most importantly, she is a warrior for her family.”

Kelly also commended Sonja on her leadership skills, noting Sonja’s willingness to listen to the ideas of others, taking in data points from all before pitching an idea or potential solution to a water issues. Kelly also said that Sonja’s work towards wet meadows restoration in the Upper Gunnison River Basin reflects her willingness to embrace new ideas to help pave the way for a sustainable water future for the basin and beyond.

Sonja was hired as the general manager of the UGRWCD in December 2019 where she leads the operations of the District in conjunction with an 11-member Board of Directors who are appointed by a district judge to represent eight divisions of the watershed within the District. Prior to joining the UGRWCD staff, Sonja previously worked for the Colorado River Water Conservation District as a Water Resource Specialist. Throughout her career, she has served in both the private and public sectors in Colorado, sharing her expertise and consulting on water quality issues, water resources management, funding acquisition, and environmental and natural resource sciences, policy and planning for a variety of individuals and organizations.

In addition to overseeing operations at the UGRWCD, Sonja also serves as a member of the Water Quality Control Commission (a division of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment), the Gunnison Basin Roundtable, the Gunnison County Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Committee and Colorado’s Water Equity Task Force. Sonja holds a BA in Environmental Biology and an MA in Limnology (the study of freshwater systems) both from the University of Colorado.

“Sonja is certainly deserving of this award and our District couldn’t be prouder of all of her many accomplishments,” said Michelle Pierce, president of the UGRWCD Board of Directors. “Sonja is one of the hardest working women in this industry and has such a heart for our watershed and environment and it’s great to see her rewarded for her commitment.”

To learn more about Water Education Colorado, please visit their website at: <https://www.watereducationcolorado.org/>



Sonja Chavez accepts award



2021 Emerging Leader Winner Kelly Romero-Heaney and 2022 Winner Sonja Chavez

Check out this YouTube Video about Sonja Chavez: <https://youtu.be/8h5EoD5nBTU>