

Piedra River Protection Workgroup
Meeting # 6 March 13, 2012
Ross Aragon Community Center, Pagosa Springs

What happened at this meeting?

1. Values statement and info sheet updated
 2. Outline for values/protections on Weminuche Creek and Piedra main stem
 3. Discussion of whether current protections adequate or not
 4. In-stream flow compromise proposal
 5. Discussion of threats to the Piedra River
- website: ocs.fortlewis.edu/riverprotection

Next Meetings:

April 17, 5:30 p.m.

May 8, 5:30 p.m.

June 19, 5:30 p.m.

All meetings at Ross Aragon
Community Center,
Pagosa Springs, Colo

Meeting called to order at 5:30 p.m.

Facilitator Tami Graham went over the agenda: Review/update values statement; update information sheet; discuss values/protections of Weminuche Creek and Piedra River main stem; discuss whether current protections are adequate; set dates for multiple future meetings.

Minutes were reviewed.

Wendy noted that statistics on Page 2 showing percentage of land managed by forest service within the Focus Area should be clarified to indicate land “eligible” for Wild and Scenic and land deemed “suitable” for Wild and Scenic status. Forest Supervisor Mark Stiles said that information would be figured out.

Corrections: Mely Whiting’s name was misspelled, and her husband’s name is Michael Whiting, not John.

Information updates

Conservation easement data sheet was updated to include the Lone Tree Ranch of 150 acres.

It was noted that water quality classifications for the Piedra watershed streams were recorded in 2006.

Under the information sheet heading “Land and Water Protections Currently in Place” conservation easement total acreage should be updated to 6,467 acres after Lone Tree ranch is added in. Private land under conservation easements within the Piedra Focus Area represents 14 percent of the 48,000 acres of private land in the area. These numbers may be updated further.

Under the subheading ‘County Land Use Plans,’ the protection of riparian areas in the Archuleta County land use plan should be added. Several changes should be made under the Proposed Management section relating to the Forest Service 2007 Draft Management plan, but the details were not specified.

Values statement revisions

Paragraph three: replace 'a dam site' with 'impoundment'. Also, add that Hinsdale County has a right to farm and ranch policy. It was asked whether Archuleta County has a right to farm and ranch policy, but no one was sure. It was suggested that language about the right to farm and ranch counties be added to the information sheet as well.

Facilitator Tami Graham said a finished version of the values statement would be presented at the next meeting.

Weminuche Creek values/protectations

- Instream flows: Three stretches totaling 41 cfs. See information sheet for details.
- Upper (northern) section of creek is in Weminuche Wilderness
- There is a portion of protected roadless area above Weminuche Valley Ranch and a section of roadless area below the Ranch to the confluence with the Piedra River
- Hinsdale County land-use plan protective of the creek
- Conservation easements including Weminuche Valley Ranch (2500 acres) and Cungini Ranch (estimated 500 acres)
- Limited public access except for bridge. Primitive trails. Less access a form of protection. Private property along creek also limits use, although it was pointed out that private landowners could also open up access if they desired. One distinction of this creek is that there are virtually no roads that parallel the creek, just trails.
- Geologic value: Glacially formed valley
- Cutthroat trout in tributary Falls Creek, and in some other tributaries, possibly in Little Sand and Big Sand creeks
- Lynx habitat in upper stretches.
- One characteristic is that the creek has erosive soils and when it rains the water silts up quickly
- Recreation: Hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding
- Impressive scenery from headwaters to confluence with Piedra
- No active grazing on allotments on upper Weminuche Creek. Kevin mentioned that there is grazing on Poison Creek, adding that the Sand Creek allotments were closed. Domestic sheep grazing allotments were specifically retired to protect native bighorn sheep from domestic diseases and habitat conflicts.

Piedra River main stem values/protectations

- Portion of the river flows in the Piedra Area, a special protection management zone of the Forest Service
- Portions of the river flow through protected roadless areas
- Instream flows through four different segments totaling 322 cfs. (Some ISF's are seasonal) See information sheet for details
- Limited road access is a form of protection, as well as lack of popularity of the region.
- The finding of "preliminarily suitable" for Wild and Scenic by the San Juan National Forest 2007 Draft Management plan is a current protection.
- Hinsdale Land Use plan has protective measures
- Whitewater boating, mostly on an expert level. A capacity study was conducted that limits the number of commercial trips. No permits required for non-commercial.

- Federal land in the region has protective measures, but may also invite increased use.

It was asked if logging was prevalent. Stiles explained that there is not much commercial timber in the area. There is some old-growth and Douglas-fir stands on the river, and also some tribal cultural trees used for making traditional cradle boards.

Bruce pointed out that there is private and public lands on the Piedra main stem, with irrigation ditches, but some may have been abandoned or are inactive. He added that water rights are a value on the Piedra.

- Outstanding views, scenic canyons and hot springs. The wild and free flowing nature of the river is outstanding as it rushes in and out of two narrow box canyons.
- Education value for natural sciences, outdoor recreation, eco-systems and wildlife.
- Hunting, especially along west and north sides. Outfitters rely on this region for business. Area is also a key wildlife corridor linking lower elevation winter habitat with higher summer ranges. Mule deer especially thrive in the region, and rely on it for calving, according to a Southern Ute Tribe study. Wildlife includes deer, elk, river otter, bobcat, turkey, bear, mountain lion.
- Rock climbing
- Active grazing rights is a value that was mentioned.

Meeting break

Facilitator Tami Graham explained that the Piedra Working Group is close to the end of Phase II: identifying values, identifying current protections and consideration of range of options. A brainstorming session on whether current protections were adequate for the Piedra watershed took place.

Current protections adequate?

Warren of Rocky Mountain Wild noted that administrative tools such as county land use plans can work to protect natural values of the river. Steve Fearn stated that new protection plans may have to be developed to custom fit the diverse values of the Piedra.

John Taylor believes the protections in place currently are adequate for now, but a looming problem is increased pressure on the region as the human population grows.

Mely Whiting, of TU, said it is important to outline specific threats to the river, and then create a plan to minimize potential negative impacts. She said future water development possibilities fall into the threat category for the natural values of the river. Bruce Whitehead said he is not aware of any major impoundment plans on the Piedra or plans for additional trans-mountain diversions.

In-stream flow negotiation

Chuck Wanner, of TU, said current in-stream flows designated for the Piedra are not sufficient to adequately protect a river of that size. He expressed concern for aquatic health and riparian areas during low flows, and said additional flow would help protect ecological values for the future.

Fearn said studying the timing of flows and then adjusting them to better serve the river during dry times may be an option. But he cautioned that increasing designated in-stream flows affects the ability to develop water upstream, and that has to be part of the discussion. Bruce Whitehead, of SW Water District agreed that expansion of instream

flows limits future water development. Chuck responded that it could, but the impact on future development would be marginal.

Chuck Wanner suggested a trade-off that proposed expanding in-stream flows on the Piedra River in exchange for dropping pursuit of a Wild and Scenic status, which carries a federally reserved water right. In-stream flow rights do not carry a federally reserved water right. In-stream flow rights are administered by the Colorado Water Conservation Board under a water right priority system.

Such alternatives were worth exploring, Chuck said, in lieu of pursuing a Wild and Scenic status for the Piedra River.

Bruce Whitehead noted that new filings for ISF could jeopardize water rights appropriated for beneficial uses.

Steve Fearn added that downstream senior water rights impact flows in any particular stretch of river. Designated instream flows also have an impact for downstream users, he said.

Mely Whiting said it was important to know exactly how much more water is legally available on the Piedra for new appropriation. The answer needs to be researched.

John Taylor said another potential threat for the Piedra is a change in land-use plans that allow for more homes, gravel pits, or roads.

Discussion of threats on the Piedra

Major water development:

Wendy, of San Juan Citizens Alliance, pointed out that there are three potential dam sites within the Piedra River drainage, according to CWCB analyses. A more specific map of exact dam proposals within the Piedra Basin would be helpful.

Bruce Whitehead remarked that limiting dam sites can also be seen as a threat to values of water development. There is a conflict when one person's threat is another person's value, he said. Another example of conflicting values discussed was visitation. To some increased visitation is a threat to solitude and the environment; to others limiting visitation is a threat to commercial values such as outfitting and recreational-based businesses.

Mark Stiles, forest supervisor, observed that seasons, water demand, and timing of irrigation all affect the functionality of the river. He urged the group to think ahead and plan for protecting current values not just for today, but for 30-40 years down the road when population impacts have grown.

Other threats stated were increased visitation, too much use in one particular area, change in land-use patterns, expansion of trails, more ATV/motorcycle use, increased mountain biking, more logging operations, more roads, paving of Piedra road, increased water demand for Pagosa Springs, climate change, increased evaporation from dust on snow, and geothermal development.

It was noted that the Piedra Area is closed to mechanized transport, which includes motorized vehicles and mountain biking.

Jimbo Buickerood, of SJCA, said water quality could be diminished by erosion after a wildfire, so adequate fuel thinning is also important.

Steve Fearn summarized the threats into the following categories:

1. Dams/impoundments
2. Increased visitation
3. Adequate flows for riparian and aquatic health
4. Degradation of water quality

Williams Reservoir

The group discussed the impacts Williams Reservoir could have on the Piedra if the dam was raised to increase storage or water management changed. Bruce noted that storage of water can also be a effective tool to deliver supplemental water during low flows. The group said information on management procedures for Williams Reservoir would be helpful.

It was noted that a sudden increase in camping facilities and infrastructure at Williams Reservoir could also threaten the solitary nature of the area. Development of private land to accommodate visitors or build homes could have the same impact as well.

Measuring water

The group said a current hydrograph of the Piedra during dry, average and wet years would be helpful. There is a water-flow gage at near Arboles on the Piedra. It was asked how ISF is measured in the stream. Bruce responded that there is not a specific structure that measures in-stream flow amounts and that the CWCB has never received a call for in-stream flows.

Understanding senior water rights below Highway 160 is important, and in particular what are the specific Southern Ute tribe rights on the Piedra and Stollsteimer Creek, a tributary.

Informational items requested by the group:

1. Hydrograph of Piedra
2. Proposed dam locations by CWCB
3. Williams Reservoir Management plan
4. Senior and tribal water rights below Highway 160
5. How much water in the Piedra Basin is available for new appropriation.
6. Is Archuleta county a right to farm and ranch county?
7. Break down areas "eligible" for Wild and Scenic status and areas "suitable" for Wild and Scenic status within Focus Area.

Future meetings were set for Tuesday, April 17; Tuesday, May 8; Tuesday, June 19.

Meeting adjourned 8:30 p.m.

Visit the River Protection Website for documents, meeting minutes and more information.

ocs.fortlewis.edu/riverprotection

(Find the Piedra Workgroup on the left buttons.)