

Issues, Opportunities and Concerns

Raised to Date in the Lower Dolores Plan Working Group – Planning Process
(draft, 6/26/09)

Topic: Recreation

Issues: The Lower Dolores Area is used by recreationists of all types (boaters, rafters, hunters, hikers, sport fisher men/women, ATVers, 4-wheel drivers, etc.). Recreation is growing in the area, particularly boating and rafting. There are consequently some impacts to the values and resources and, at times, conflicts among user groups occur.

Concerns:

- vehicle access and emergency rescues via a County Road in the area
- carrying-capacity of the river and corridor; rafters camping close to each other and resulting conflicts (sounds, drinking, loud parties, dogs, fireworks, etc.); a permit system may be needed for non-commercial rafters (concern and opportunity)
- declining native fish species in the Dolores River below the dam; must be addressed or there could be a federal Endangered Species listing
- people camping on private land along the river and liability for landowners around firefighting costs (opportunity: agreement to limit liability for the private landowner)
- over-promotion and use of the Lower Dolores = attracting more users = harm to the resources

Opportunities:

- provide vehicle access for rescues and recreation on a County Road
- revitalize the coldwater fishery below the dam to Bradfield
- a permitting system for recreational rafters to better manage use
- better flow management; creating steady flows will give more paddlers an experience
- manage flows for irrigation and rafting in a compatible manner
- increase tourism by stretching out the experience for smaller craft such as canoes by having more days with lower but consistent flows (concern expressed that this does not meet the needs of the majority of river boaters who utilize rafts)
- continue to allow historical uses (e.g., Al Heaton has a permit to take people on horseback trail rides in the fall)
- change number of commercial permits allocated
- a rafting permit system for everyone (also cited as a concern)
- rafting permits only on weekends and holidays

Topic: Wildlife, Fish and Ecology

Issue: There are abundance of wildlife and ecological resources in the Lower Dolores River Valley. Managing these resources in relation to human uses and impacts is a challenge. The fisheries in the Lower Dolores River Valley have received considerable attention, including much focus and research on the part of the Dolores River Dialogue and state agencies (e.g., CDOW). Some fish species are declining. The dam, spills, and water flows are managed under contracts and obligations.

Concerns:

- human impacts to wildlife from industry, grazing, recreation
- the river has been diverted for a hundred years; humans have been impacting the native species for a long time; it's hard to determine what's native and what's non-native
- restoration of some plants

- non-native plants and impacts on water quality and amounts -especially Tamarisk (Tamarisk channelizes the stream; sucks salt out of the water and stores it in its leaves, then drops the leaves, creating a saline environment)
- address conflicting goals (restoring native fish, improving the sport fishery, restoring cottonwoods, providing irrigation water, etc.)
- need to prioritize all these concerns and issues; how?
- finite amount of habitat available for the native fish species; wish to keep them present in the river (i.e., bluehead suckers, flannelmouth suckers, and roundtail chubs); they cannot be supported by many other streams in the State of Colorado
- challenge: maintaining historic uses and yet, keeping the resources healthy and intact
- Tribal traditional uses on public lands; this mostly involves plant gathering, and specifically riparian plant gathering (cottonwood, sumac, willow, etc.) (also fits in wildlife category) (via email from Scott Clow)
- MVIC is studying the potential of a water lease program through the Colorado Water Conservation Board

Opportunities:

- examine the historic hydrology; present information about how the river used to flow pre-McPhee and compare to post-McPhee conditions
- continue Tamarisk removal
- provide more detailed mapping of wildlife species and their range and habitats, including along tributaries and into uplands
- preserve and protect habitat for the three native fish; avoid federal ESA listing
- re-develop (fish) pools and remove silt
- create off-channel or in-channel sediment traps to improve pools and reduce sedimentation occurring from some tributaries (some of it is naturally-occurring)
- keep current policies in place because they are apparently successful; the sheep and fish are still there and many activities are enjoyed throughout the corridor
- solve some problems together
- preventing overuse of some rafting campsites
- change the constraints on water use (timing and amounts)
- continue to use DRD to coordinate science efforts and to keep things transparent
- continue to use the foundation of the DRD -- which is to address these issues within the context of existing water rights and contracts, and available flows/spills

Topics: Geology, Archeology and Scenery (also included a discussion of a potential Wild and Scenic River designation)

Issues: Cultural resources are abundant in the Lower Dolores River Valley. Some are being impacted by human use, particularly some key sites by the river. There are not enough resources to document and protect all of them. There is outstanding scenery and geology in the Lower Dolores River Valley.

The Lower Dolores River has been found to be suitable for a Wild and Scenic River designation in the current draft Land Management Plan published by the San Juan Public Lands, USFS/BLM. A WSR designation would provide permanent protection of important ORVs in the valley. However, there are many concerns relating to how a WSR designation would affect private property and water rights as well as operations of the McPhee Project.

Concerns:

- how much water is needed to protect the ORVs and how do we determine this amount?
- places such as the Lower Dolores are getting rarer and rarer; a Wild and Scenic River (WSR) designation could prevent other federal entities from doing something to damage the area
- impacts of such a designation to grazing, historical uses and private property rights
- a WSR designation would bring attention to the corridor and draw more people and more impacts to the land and water
- threat of inaction and failing to protect the Lower Dolores resources; opportunity to permanently preserve it for future generations
- a WSR designation could hurt private landowners; possible condemnation of private land for scenic or access easements (by all levels of government); loss of property values and lack of motivation to put land in easements or conservation programs
- if all uses can happen under WSR (grazing, recreation, etc.), why do we need it... what does it accomplish?
- impacts of WSR designation on other water rights, including conditional rights, and on other water-users and upstream users

Opportunities:

- save the area for future generations and protect it from impacts from federal agency decisions
- look at WSR status without a federal reserved right (question: is this possible?)
- invite speakers on WSR and in-stream flows
- find an alternative to the WSR suitability status and designation that protects the identified ORVs and addresses concerns raised in the planning process
- if WSR were to move forward, craft any language in the legislation to address concerns raised in this process

Topic: The Planning Process and General

Issue: The Lower Dolores Plan Working Group has been meeting since December. The facilitator asked the group to discuss their issues, opportunities and concerns about the process itself.

Concerns

- impacts of any WSR designation on private landowners; they should not be harmed
- water in McPhee is a private property right and must not be harmed
- mineral interests are private property rights
- counties' and citizens' interests must be considered
- if private land is put into easement or accepted by (for example) the Land and Water Conservation Fund (or a non profit group) this means a loss of property-tax revenues for counties and schools
- protection for important values (ORVs and otherwise) in the Lower Dolores River Valley and finding ways to deal with increasing uses which in some cases are degrading the resources

Opportunities

- provide information to evaluate alternatives to WSR designation
- study the Dolores River according to its different reaches and evaluate alternatives to WSR designation for each
- write protections for private landowners into any recommendations
- make sure all tools are evaluated in detail as to their pros and cons

(See list at the end for the management questions raised to date in the planning process submitted by the DPLO.)

Topic: Oil/Gas/Minerals and Grazing:

Issue: The Working Group has been studying ORVs that are designated by the USFS/BLM. The community has identified other values in the corridor that relate to economic activity including grazing and oil/gas/minerals. Recommendations generated by the Working Group will need to strike a balance between protection of the ORVs and these two uses of the land that are occurring.

Oil/Gas/Minerals Concerns:

- footprint of the infrastructure (roads, pipelines, etc.)
- water uses and amounts
- waste disposal and impacts on local environment/people
- timing of activity esp. seismic
- drilling in bottom of canyon and impacts on ORVs and other values (e.g. grazing)
- impacts of drilling on ORVs in the entire corridor

Oil/Gas/Minerals Opportunities:

- perhaps more energy security via a resource that can be gathered locally
- to continue to enhance the counties' tax base from this resource
- local jobs and income for related businesses
- to understand a projection of wells that will be in the Lower Dolores planning area (request to BLM made)

Grazing: Concerns

- sediment going into river/streams
- one bad apple can ruin the reputation for all grazers
- impact of a Wild and Scenic River designation on landowners - -need flexibility

Grazing: Opportunities

- good grazing = good ecology
 - wildlife habitat
 - good management of land = profits for ranches = more open space
 - reduces wildfire risk (grasses are eaten)
 - land taken care of by ranchers, for the most part
 - monitoring
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Management Questions for the Lower Dolores Plan Update
By Topic
(as of 4/20/09)

Management related questions for ecology and wildlife:

1. How do we protect and enhance the ecology of the Dolores River while allowing for compatible uses? (Specifically the riparian ecology and the aquatic ecology.)
2. What are possible management objectives for old growth Ponderosa pine?
3. What management opportunities and strategies exist to maintain or improve the existing quality of the riparian and wildlife habitat?
4. How do we ensure the continued existence of federally listed, state listed, and BLM and FS sensitive species?
5. How do we minimize potential conflicts with recreational use of public lands and the preservation of federally listed, state listed and BLM and FS sensitive species habitat?

Management related questions for rafting and recreation:

1. Should the Dolores River be on a permit system for rafting use?
2. Should campsites be on a reserve or first come – first serve system?

Management related questions for cultural resources:

1. How do we protect and enhance the cultural resources of the Dolores River Management area while allowing for compatible uses?
2. What are the appropriate management actions for protecting and enhancing cultural resources values (example might include identifying significant cultural resources and paleontological sites, limiting access, performing the necessary documentation of sites, public education, etc.)