

**DOLORES RIVER DIALOGUE/
LOWER DOLORES WORKING GROUP Joint Meeting
April 26, 2012**

Note: The DRD web site is <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/drd/>.

Agenda: The agenda was approved with no changes.

Update on “A Way Forward” and Implementation Team: Mike Preston, manager of the Dolores Water Conservancy District and a member of the Legislative Committee and Implementation Team, briefly reviewed the history of AWF and the IT.

He said some of the nine opportunities to aid native fish presented by three researchers in the AWF report are already being implemented. Others are more complicated and have not been implemented yet.

Mike said the IT is on track to produce its Implementation, Monitoring & Evaluation Plan by June 30 as required under the terms of the \$50,000 grant it received from the Colorado Water Conservation Board. However, the IM&E Plan that is delivered this year will not be a final document, but instead a "Version 1". After that, the IT anticipates a year of discussion about the plan among all of the members of the DRD and LDWG and the institutions they represent. Mike emphasized that this is an adaptive-management process.

Mike discussed spill management and the need for early releases ahead of the spill for the purpose of temperature suppression to prevent premature fish-spawning. That is one of the researchers' nine opportunities that McPhee's managers have already been practicing. To help with this opportunity, the IT has installed a real-time thermal-monitoring gauge on the Lower Dolores at James Ranch. The team is also working to purchase components for PIT (passive integrated transponder) tagging of native fish, which will allow their movements up and down the river to be tracked.

Status of native fish: Jim White of Colorado Parks and Wildlife gave a PowerPoint presentation about the status of the three native species of concern on the Lower Dolores: bluehead suckers, flannelmouth suckers, and roundtail chub.

He said it is sometimes believed that the native fishery and trout fishery are in conflict, but many habitat objectives for native fish and trout are very similar, although native fish live in warm water and trout in cold. For example, 80 cfs is the minimum base flow recommended for native fish; 70 cfs is the recommended minimum for trout. Both types of fish evolved in the same hydrologic regime, but native species lived farther downstream on the same river.

Jim discussed this year's surveying. Some of the highlights were:

- The percentage of native fish increased from 9 percent in 2007 to 35 percent on the 14-mile reach from the Pyramid to Disappointment Creek. However, non-native smallmouth bass are a concern on this reach because they prey on other fish, and there is no easy solution to their presence. Physical removal reduces the numbers of *large* bass, but it is unclear whether it helps

decrease their numbers overall.

- Surveys found a near-absence of trout and an increase in flannelmouth suckers at the Dove Creek pumps. Normally a large percentage of the fish population in this reach is brown trout. Jim said the change was caused by sooty runoff from the Narraguinnep fire, which killed the trout.
- The reach from Bradfield Bridge up to the dam is cold water because of releases from the dam. Typically this is brown-trout habitat, and they constituted 50 to 80 percent of the catch there in recent surveys. There are also some rainbow and cutthroat trout.
- Over the last several years there have been modest gains in spawning and recruitment of native fish. The population structure of native fish shows some variety, indicating that reproduction and recruitment occurred.
- There was some expansion of native-fish territory. Bluehead suckers were seen two years in a row at the pumps, a site where they had not been seen for a long time prior. Flannelmouth suckers are moving into portions of the Pyramid reach.
- There were fewer non-natives in terms of brown trout, but that was not the case for smallmouth bass. Smallmouth bass don't seem to be moving downstream, but some are moving upstream. CPW is not seeing brown trout moving downstream.
- There was improvement in trout density, biomass and quality.

Scott Clow, representing the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, said the tribe collaborated with CPW in 2002 on a project on the Mancos River. Twenty-seven roundtails were captured and placed in the Alamosa native-fish hatchery, where they have remained. Also, some flannelmouths and blueheads were removed from the San Juan River and placed in the hatchery.

Scott said surveying last fall was the first to find multiple age groups among native fish on the Mancos. This indicates they are reproducing. The roundtail chub seems to be doing well in the Mancos; he believes it is a success story.

Jim thanked Scott for letting CPW work on the Mancos system.

Jim said stocking of native fish is an option, but is probably not enough by itself to restore populations on the Lower Dolores.

Peter Mueller of The Nature Conservancy, a member of the IT and Legislative Committee, said he has learned in the past several years that the Lower Dolores is a complex ecology. He said the conservation community in this area was infamous for saying there was one solution to dwindling native-fish populations, and that was more water. This led to a belief that conservationists did not understand this community and the importance of water as the major economic driver in Southwest Colorado. Peter said more water does indeed mean more fish habitat, but the survival of native fish in the Dolores River requires a multi-tiered solution and it has to be found through a collaborative process.

Peter said he believes the conservation community has now moved past the idea that someone is to blame for the native-fish situation. He said no one in this room is to blame. Everyone is here because of a desire to settle the West, build communities, build farms, and raise children. When the Dolores Project was authorized, it was done in that spirit. Everyone did their best to figure out the type of water-sharing that would take place to sustain recreation, irrigation, municipal-industrial development, and the native ecology.

Peter said locals don't want federal interference in their lives, and a threatened or endangered listing for native fish under the Endangered Species Act would bring that sort of interference, so everyone is looking for shared solutions. The conservation community would like to see more water in the river, but they recognize that they are not entitled to it. They would like to buy some water, but they do not yet have a willing seller, so they continue to look for long-term solutions.

2012 water forecast: Vern Harrell of the Bureau of Reclamation said BOR held an operations meeting in Dolores on March 21. At that time it was believed there would be a managed release this year. Now it is estimated that the reservoir will be 20,000 acre-feet short of filling. Precipitation was 35 percent of normal in March.

Ken Curtis, hydrologist with the DWCD, said science around hydrology is increasingly sophisticated. Until six years ago, no one had studied the effects of dust on snow. Gauging data goes back 100 years, and SnoTels have been in existence 30 years. Yet on March 21, managers thought there would be a spill on the Dolores; now the entire Colorado Plateau and the state of Colorado are in drought conditions.

In response to a question, Ken said the decision about whether there will be shortages this year will be made in the next month. He said managers expect to be 15,000 to 20,000 AF short this year. That amount would sustain a full allocation.

Update on National Conservation Area legislation: Amber Kelley and Ernie Williams of the Legislative Committee gave a PowerPoint presentation on aspects of the legislative effort. Amber said the committee is working on a solution that will permanently eliminate Wild and Scenic River suitability for the Lower Dolores but will also ensure protection for the river's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Amber said two issues currently being worked on are the NCA boundary, and outreach to Montrose County.

In general, the NCA will be defined by the river corridor, or the viewshed in some places. It may also include some tributary streams such as Summit and McIntyre canyons. Other information will also be considered when deciding on the boundary.

Ernie said drawing the boundary has turned out to be surprisingly complicated. Four counties are involved, as well as multiple recreational, political, and economic interests. Members of the committee have met with many people, including miners, different counties' representatives, and representatives of different BLM management areas.

He said Montrose County was initially left out of this process because it was not believed that it would be affected. Now the Legislative Committee has had to reach out to seek Montrose County's support, because their WSA is an important piece of the proposed NCA.

A large amount of private land is also involved, and the Legislative Committee strongly wants to protect private property rights. Another concern is mineral extraction. There will be a mineral withdrawal within the NCA, so that is a factor in the boundary. Ernie said carbon-dioxide production provides 42 percent of Dolores County's revenue, and uranium, oil and gas are also important. The committee has researched all the uranium-mining claims in the area.

Amber said the committee has made considerable progress on the boundary, but it has been more

difficult than was originally thought. She said an expert has been hired to create interactive mapping for the NCA effort.

Ernie said the committee's first meetings were somewhat confrontational. Now the IT is working well together and there are dialogues going on with every county involved. He thinks this effort has accomplished much in regard to improved communications and conversations.

Amber and Ernie emphasized that the Legislative Committee is always open to input and anyone can contact any committee member with issues and concerns.

They also stressed that the committee will come back to the full LDWG for approval of the committee's ultimate recommendations regarding the NCA.

319 Watershed Plan: Wendy McDermott, river-program director for the San Juan Citizens Alliance, and Don Schwindt of the DWCD board constitute the subcommittee for the watershed plan. Wendy said "319" is a section in the Clean Water Act that provides for funding of plans to address nonpoint source pollution such as salinity, runoff, and selenium. This is a voluntary process designed to reduce pollution. One advantage of having a 319 watershed plan is that it opens up many funding sources.

She said the 319 process for the Lower Dolores has been on hold while other processes such as the LDWG and AWF played out. Now the plan is moving forward again. It is being written by Chester Anderson of BUGS Consulting and it should be finished next year.

The 319 planning process is designed to:

- Identify stakeholder objectives
- Identify sources of pollutants
- Develop recommendations on management measures and Best Management Practices to mitigate pollution sources.

Wendy said the first and second tasks are mostly completed, but not the third. She said including the history of the river is very important. The subcommittee is looking for people to provide input by sharing stories, knowledge and photos of the river. This can be done through a web site set up by Chester. The subcommittee may also do some direct outreach.

Scott said there is another process going on to produce a source-water protection plan for the Upper Dolores and the watershed down to the Dove Creek pumps. Wendy said the 319 planning process involves only the Lower Dolores from McPhee to the confluence with the San Miguel River, and more broadly to the Colorado state line.

Scott said the two processes have somewhat different goals. The process on the Upper Dolores is about drinking water and it is mandated. Scott said this effort is close to producing a final draft and will probably have public meetings in mid- to late summer.

Announcements: Marsha said the Colorado Foundation for Water Education, which has been in existence for about 10 years, produces a magazine called "Headwaters", and its next edition (due out in June) will focus on Southwest Colorado. The DRD contributed \$500 to this effort.

Scott said the Dolores River Festival is June 2 in Dolores and it is designed to celebrate the resource.