

Piedra River Protection Workgroup
Meeting #8 May 8, 2012
Ross Aragon Community Center, Pagosa Springs, Colo.

What happened at this meeting?

1. A recreation report on the Piedra Focus area was given by Ros Wu of the San Juan National Forest.
2. Reviewed segment spreadsheet on rivers within the Focus Area.
3. The group requested that hydrographs of rivers within the watershed be made available.
4. The group chose to focus on which threats are most critical rather than discuss ideas for protection for each river segment.

Website: ocs.fortlewis.edu/riverprotection

Next meetings:
June 19, 5:30 p.m.
July 17, 5:30 p.m.

A tour of the Piedra is being scheduled for either Wednesday July 11 or Thursday July 12.

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

Additional handouts were made available to the group and included:

- Comments from the revised San Juan National Forest Plan regarding the Piedra River.
- An excel spreadsheet outlining segments of rivers in the Piedra watershed and their respective values identified by the group within various categories. The rivers listed are the Piedra Main Stem, Weminuche Creek, East Fork, Middle Fork and Williams Fork, and the categories for each are: protections in place, values, threats, and ideas for protection.

Facilitator Tami Graham explained that the segment analysis is a work in progress and attempts to quantify the group's concerns and values regarding various rivers within the Focus Area.

The meeting notes from the April meeting were approved after a couple of questions. The Piedra River is not considered Gold Water or Blue Ribbon quality fishing. Mike of Parks and Wildlife explained that at times it has qualified but the designation attracts more people and the fish biomass/acre is consequently diminished, then it falls below the standards.

The April minutes mention an avenue for Wild and Scenic rivers to be designated through the state government. Chuck of TU explained that the U.S. Secretary of Interior can designate a river as Wild and Scenic if certain parameters are met, including a recommendation from the state governor and an established state management program that specifically protects the river proposed for Wild and Scenic status.

Typically, Wild and Scenic rivers are designated through an act of Congress. Whether designated by the Interior Secretary or Congress, Wild and Scenic rivers fall under

federal management. Sections of the Trinity river and Klamath river were reportedly designated Wild and Scenic through the state governments and the Secretary of Interior.

Map discussion

Ivan of the Forest Service went over a new map identifying Wild and Scenic suitability within the Piedra watershed overlaid by various alternatives being considered under the forthcoming San Juan National Forest management plan, expected out soon. (See website for map details.)

It was noted that Alternative B is the preferred choice by forest officials, and that plan eliminates the East Fork for Wild and Scenic suitability from the confluence to the Wilderness boundary because of the large amount of private land there. Alternative A keeps all of the original sections of the Piedra and tributaries listed as preliminarily suitable for W&S as determined in 1979. Alternative C keeps all of the 1979 suitability sections and tacks on eight miles of the Piedra River below Highway 160.

It was asked when the alternatives were determined. Kevin of the FS said it is an ongoing process that has been morphing over a long period. He estimated that the final plan could be announced this November.

The group previously expressed concern that the final forest plan would be released before the Piedra Protection Working Group's recommendations were finalized. Tami said the Forest Service has been monitoring the group's progress and input and is aware of the diverse interests of stakeholders in the Piedra Focus Area. It was noted that recommendations made by the group after the final forest plan could be added in an amendment to the plan.

Wild and Scenic impacts

Randy, a representative of the Notch Ranch, sought explanation of the potential impacts of a W&S designation on private land and water rights. He asked, hypothetically, if something went wrong downstream on a W&S section would that impact water activities on his boss's ranch upstream?

Steve Fearn stated that he feels the Federal Reserved Water Right is a threat to modify or move existing developed upstream water rights and generally will not recognize upstream conditional water rights. This is why SWCD generally would not be supportive of a Wild and Scenic River Designation in the lower Piedra Canyon.

John Taylor explained that Wild and Scenic status triggers consultation with federal agencies administering irrigation/farm projects using federal money. For example diversion projects associated with the Natural Resource Conservation System (NRCS), Army Corp of Engineers or water conservation districts would have to comply with Wild and Scenic regulations and standards. Even building a pond could conceivably impact standards set by a Wild and Scenic designation, he said.

Kevin, of the FS, agreed there has to be a "federal nexus" involved regarding potential impacts of a W&S on private land projects. However, if for instance an irrigation project is not accepting federal money, it still has to comply with W&S regulations along with state and local water law, but consultation with federal agencies isn't as paramount. Mely, of TU, added that NRCS and Army Corps consider a project's potential impacts on areas designated Wild and Scenic before approving them. She noted that Piedra's 'preliminarily suitable' status for W&S does not hold a federally reserved water right, but

that the Forest Service manages the area to preserve the suitability values until Congress acts to designate a W&S.

Tami reminded the group that Wild and Scenic is just one tool for sections, if any, that the group determines require more protection. Regarding collective recommendations to the Forest Plan on the Piedra, she said the group is still in that process, but that the ultimate decision can be a whole suite of tools, comments and recommendations.

Chuck, of TU, said it comes down to finding a creative way to protect the river in a fashion everyone can agree on. Randy asked if it was not already protected? Chuck responded that “some say yes, some say no.”

Dam/Instream flows discussion

Tripp, a landowner with a conservation easement, expressed concern that the box canyons of the Piedra are convenient for dams which he said would ruin the river if built. Not all of the water in the Piedra is allocated, and he wondered what could be done to prevent developing the river to its full allocation potential, thereby reducing overall stress on the waterway.

Tami noted that one tool worth exploring by the group is increasing instream flow rights as a way preempt future water development and to better guarantee continued river health into the future.

Instream flows are an in-channel appropriation of non-consumptive water between two specific points and is appropriated by the Colorado Water Conservation board (CWCB) for the purpose of protecting the natural environment to a reasonable degree. ISF rights are administered within the state’s water right priority system, meaning any new ISF would have junior status to current water right holders.

Mely emphasized that ISF only guarantee minimum flows necessary for the survival of fish, and do not provide for larger flows. She added that during dry periods, the river is over allocated because a section of the East Fork dries up. In a previous meeting, water managers explained that instream flows prevent any further dry up of streams than they currently have with irrigation demands.

Chuck, of TU, explained that ISFs are for certain reaches during certain months. If the SWCB applies for another ISF right, location and timing of the additional flows is essential. He said in the last 20-30 years new evidence shows flows should be larger than what they are now and that the group should examine each reach to see if additional flow is needed. He said it takes new information in order for the CWCB to be encouraged to allocate additional ISF’s.

Tami explained an avenue forward used in the Animas River working group process where the pros and cons of each protective tool is analyzed as appropriate or not for each section of river. It is time-consuming process that could take several meetings.

Recreation trends report

Ros Wu, an ecologist with the San Juan National Forest, was called in to discuss recreation impacts and plans in the Piedra Focus area. The group is concerned that increased visitation from a Wild and Scenic river designation could diminish the remote and wilderness values of the region.

Ros said there is not a lot of data on private use because there are no sign-up stations for most trailheads, nor are there any sign-in sheets for river runners or hot spring users.

Her sense though was that use is up based on increased traffic and full parking lots at trailheads; the area is being discovered. Private boating is limited because of the difficulty of the expert rapids on the Piedra, but the challenging whitewater in the box canyons is popular among the advanced river running crowd, mostly from Durango.

Commercial use, from hunting, fishing and outfitting, to camping, rafting, trail-rides and tourism is monitored and tracked.

There are several campgrounds in Piedra Focus Area totaling 150 campsites: Williams Creek, Williams Reservoir, Palisades, Bridge, Cimarrona, Teal, Ute and Lower Piedra. They vary in occupancy from 13% to 43%, according to data, but on the ground users report a few fill up to capacity during peak times. Overall though, Ros says there is a lot of capacity and that camping areas are for the most part no where near full.

Outfitting

The Piedra Area (a special management zone) is heavily used during the fall hunting season. The same goes for the Sand Creeks area. All the trailheads are active at this time and many trek into the area from the beaver meadows. The struggling economy has forced more hunters to head out on their own rather than pay for a guide, Ros said. Also, fires in northern New Mexico pushed many hunters and recreationists north into the South San Juans, increasing impacts and bringing in new visitors “discovering” the area.

Preston asked how outfitters will be affected with increased crowds he feels will occur with a Wild and Scenic designation. Outfitters are held to their client limit, Ros explained, and she predicts they will hit capacity. Additional hunting outfitting permits are not likely due to a priority to increase the elk population in the area.

It was expressed that commercial outfitters get regulated but not private users. Increased private use could diminish commercial outfitting demand because of more crowds, occupied fishing spots and a diminished wilderness experience. If the imbalance gets too great, Forest officials can begin permitting private users in the most popular areas. Sometimes urbanization eliminates some commercial uses, such as along Turkey Creek where there was once a popular horse-trail guiding service, but now it is too close to homes and yards of Pagosa Springs.

Commercial rafting

Ros said Mild to Wild is the main outfitter for boating, which overall utilizes 400 client days during the season. Commercial boating has become more popular on the Piedra, Ros said. There are two established put-ins past Deadman’s curve, and boaters have an option of taking out before the 2nd Box Canyon.

Visitor capacity

It was asked what the carrying capacity was for the region. Ros said a capacity study was done for summer and fall activities in 1999. It compared available land and access points, calculated visitor days and measured resource impacts. Average visitor density in the forest was estimated at less than one person per acre, and it is this solitude that is a key value for users experiencing the forest.

Ros said it is difficult to track private use, but she estimated that commercial use of the forest represents 10-30 percent of total visitor days. There are some 800 total days allocated for various commercial uses, she said. On average 400 client days are used in a year. Forest managers worry that maximum commercial quotas could harm the land, crowd the trails and streams, and degrade the wilderness experience for people. Too much popularity could trigger discussions of alternatives such as permitting for private users in high impact areas, a reduction in total commercial days, permitting for private boating and general stricter forest management.

A discussion began about whether a Wild and Scenic designation would attract more visitors and possibly hurt the values of solitude, degrade the wilderness experience, and harm natural resources because of increased traffic on roads, rivers, trails and campsites.

It was also noted by a working group member that commercial use is a key value and an important economic livelihood for locals. Proper forest management should allow outfitters and commercial guides the chance to maximize their business while also protecting the forest. John added that the proposed Chimney Rock National Monument nearby could also attract more visitors.

It was suggested that inquiries be made with forest officials and locals from the Poudre River Wild and Scenic area to gauge what impacts the designation had on visitation. John said the Poudre in the 1940s and 50s was undiscovered, now it is wall to wall people, and he is unsure if the Wild and Scenic designation helped to protect it.

Chuck, of TU, who helped to negotiate the W&S portion on the Poudre, said the region's popularity is inevitable considering its proximity to Fort Collins, a city of 130,000 people. A Wild and Scenic status can't control crowds, he said, but it does provide long-term protections for the river.

Ros said the Forest Service is always asking the question about how to handle the reality of increased visitation over time. She said a Wild and Scenic designation on the Piedra would elevate the area's profile and draw attention.

Increased traffic on the Piedra road has become obviously in recent years, noted John Taylor, who travels it daily. The other day he counted 100 cars while traveling on the Piedra road, a huge increase from past years. Forest managers note that the Piedra Road is the most heavily traveled forest byway in the region. The main artery fans out towards five different campgrounds, numerous trailheads, rivers and attractions. More people also results in more user-created paths, such as to the icicle feature, and increases human wastes where there is no infrastructure, such as bathrooms and garbage cans, to manage it. Piedra Falls has seen an increase in visitation, locals said, and should have a porta-potty to control human wastes there. Preston said that more visitation in south Hinsdale County has led to increased vandalism, but with no law enforcement to handle it.

Kevin said he would track down numbers on road usage. He noted that the number one use for National Forests is driving for pleasure. There is at least one commercial outfitter that gives road tours for visitors interested in exploring the Piedra region through the windshield as a passenger.

Campground status

Jimbo, of SJCA, asked how often recreation planning was revisited by the Forest Service. Kevin responded that campgrounds built in the 1940s and 50s were being updated but the money ran out. Then in the 1990s, \$500,000 was allocated for

improvements on the forest, which calculated to about \$15,000 per site. He said now the strategy is to obtain Recovery Act funds for road improvement and new toilets, but another cycle for funds isn't expected for ten years. He explained that a process of disinvestment is also underway. Disinvestment is the decommissioning of facilities and roads to save maintenance costs.

Discussion of current protections

John Taylor said the Piedra River and region is in good shape for the time being, but how to secure it for the future is an important question. He hopes the group comes up with protections now that will be long term, rather than getting mired in 'crisis mode' down the road when values are threatened by overuse or abuse. Ros explained that the Forest Service keeps a good eye on recreation thresholds in the forest and are prepared to take certain management actions to protect the land if there is overuse issues. Places being loved to death are targeted for a reprieve from people by educating them about other places to visit, she said. Another option is to begin a permitting system for zones most threatened by overuse to keep the numbers under control.

Meeting break

River segment spreadsheet

The group looked over the segment analysis that quantifies current protections, threats, values, and ideas for protection for the Piedra main stem, Weminuche Creek, East Fork, Middle Fork and Williams Creek.

Tami explained that under ideas for protection the group should brainstorm the pros and cons of various solutions and see which ones, if any, rise to the top. She emphasized that Wild and Scenic was just one tool for protection and the group needed consensus on longer term protections for the Piedra, if possible.

Randy asked if the new forest plan would have different management priorities for various areas in the Piedra Focus Area. Ivan said he thought they would be the same but would check on that.

Mely said potential dam sites on the Piedra were a threat to the river and banning them should be in the ideas for protection. She added that the state lacks authority to say no to dams. Bruce, of SWCD, said dams on the Piedra are unlikely, and instream flows insure minimum flows for a healthy river. Bob was suspicious that a Wild and Scenic status or additional ISF's were a tactic to obtain private water rights for use in the river during low flows. Chuck, of TU, stressed that private water rights are respected and that taking away water rights is not an option on the table and would violate Colorado water law.

The group added to the segment analyses categories. (See document on website)

John Taylor said there needs to be established coordination between private citizens and government agencies regarding public land policies. Steve said the Hermosa Working Group formed different committees – one for citizens and another more formal – in order to gauge public support for ideas and encourage participation.

Hydrograph discussion

Hydrographs for the Piedra were requested by the group to get a general understanding of the seasonal flows of the river. Gathering hydrograph data can be difficult to pin down,

is time consuming, and has lots of variables, especially on the Piedra because there is only one gage at Arboles. There was some resistance in the group to compiling hydrograph data, but the majority of meeting participants agreed it would be valuable knowledge to pursue. Hydrographs can reveal problem areas of the river where low flows negatively impact riparian health, according to the discussion. The hydrograph data also helps to determine if the timing and supply of instream flows is adequate, plus it is a good visual. One trick used on the Colorado River was to simplify the data into separate hydrographs depicting the river at high flows and at low flows over different seasons.

Mely, of TU, said a hydrograph would also be helpful in determining what the Piedra would look like if available water was appropriated for any or all of the three dams sites on the river.

Steve wondered if dams were a significant threat since they are so unlikely to happen on the Piedra, comparing opposition to them as boxing a shadow. He said the chance for a dam on the Piedra is practically zero because of high cost, lack of available storage water, no desire, and limited benefits. Mely said dams are always a threat because the pressures of population 20-30 years from now provide incentives for dam construction. She would like to see protections on the Piedra that prevent major dams. Tami noted that there was group consensus against major impoundments on the Piedra.

Bruce emphasized that the reservoirs are only proposed sites and that there are no water rights associated with them and no plans to build them. He noted that the Piedra River water is already being stored in Navajo Reservoir a short distance away. Bruce explained that the Piedra is not over-appropriated and that at times there is water available for development. The unallocated water flows into Navajo Reservoir. He said SWCD held onto a reservoir option on Hermosa Creek because of the higher demand in the Durango area for potential water-storage.

John Taylor summed up that the main threat to the community is the loss of water for the irrigation system. He said he is not in favor of a reservoir on the Piedra because it would disrupt a working system already in place.

Redirect to threats

Tami asked if the group was ready to tackle the task of comparing ideas for protection for each stretch of river. A discussion arose regarding the benefits of the exercise. Bruce said there wasn't consensus yet on whether there was really a need for more protection, and that debating the pros and cons of additional protections was putting the cart before the horse.

It was agreed that there had not been a group consensus on whether current protections were adequate or not, and that more debate was needed on the topic before going through the pros and cons of additional protections.

As a way forward, Ray suggested starting with the threats of each river segment, rather than with the pros and cons of additional protections. Filtering the threats that are out of our control versus realistic threats would help narrow down the key issues endangering the long-term protection of the river.

A tour of the Piedra Focus Area is expected in July 11 or 12. The exact date will be finalized soon. A Southern Ute biologist will discuss the Piedra deer and elk migration corridor, habitat and population trends at the June 19th meeting.

Meeting adjourned 8:30 p.m.

Information requested by group members:

1. More specific data on how many vehicles travel on the Piedra Road.
2. Will there be any changes in forest management within the Piedra Focus Area in the proposed new San Juan National Forest plan?

Visit the River Protection Working group website for documents, meeting minutes, maps and more information.

ocs.fortlewis.edu/riverprotection

(Find the Piedra Workgroup on the left buttons)