

DOLORES RIVER DIALOGUE
STEERING COMMITTEE
Oct. 2, 2012

Present: Don Schwindt, Dolores Water Conservancy District; Randy Carver, Montezuma Valley Irrigation Company; Wendy McDermott, San Juan Citizens Alliance; Peter Mueller, The Nature Conservancy; Matt Clark, Trout Unlimited; Nathan Fey, American Whitewater; Drew Gordanier, Southwestern Colorado Livestock Association. Guests: Don Magnuson, MVIC; Mike Preston, DWCD. Contract staff: Marsha Porter-Norton, facilitator; Gail Binkly, recorder.

Presentation from the Implementation Team on the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Plan: Don M. provided some background on the creation of the Implementation Team. He spoke about the reasons native fish are a concern and why irrigation companies care about them. He said if nothing is done to improve their status, there is a potential for one or more of the native fish species to be listed as endangered. Such a listing that could mean federal intervention and a taking of water. However, if there is a local plan in place to help the native fish, it lessens the chance of a government intervention. He said it should also be remembered that people have different views about native fish and many people believe there is an intrinsic value to having them in the river.

Don M. said an important piece of the just-published Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Plan is the table of physical water sources on Page 61. That presents, to the best of the IT's knowledge, all the water commitments in the Dolores Basin. Some are allocations and some are water rights. He said when talking about baseflows for the fish, it is important to know what water is available. He said the people who have an interest in saving the fish do not have an entitlement to any water, but they are willing to work to acquire some. He said all the water in the Dolores is allocated, but the IT wants to look at opportunities to find more water for the fish. He emphasized that there is no taking of water being contemplated.

Wendy said members of the IT have presented the IM&E Plan at joint MVIC-DWCD meetings and to the Colorado Water Conservation Board. She discussed the educational brochure that was also published to summarize the plan. Pages 2 and 3 of the brochure show why native fish are in decline and provide an illustration showing how habitat has changed post-McPhee. Prior to the dam's construction, there were still large peak flows that flushed out pools and provided timing cues for native-fish spawning. Today's managed flows have removed those peaks and as a result the deep pools have filled with silt. Thus, native fish don't have good places to hide from predators, especially smallmouth bass. The altered flows have also caused a decline in the macroinvertebrates that provide food for native fish.

Wendy said the three scientists who wrote the "A Way Forward" report on native fish in the Lower Dolores gave recommendations to help the species. One of their major recommendations was spill management. This opportunity is thoroughly discussed in the IM&E Plan.

Wendy said the IT developed spill-management hydrographs for different flow volumes with the goal of suppressing premature warming of the river in early spring. There is a concern that premature warming causes premature spawning and when that spawning is followed by a cold spill, larval fish die. The three native-fish species are long-lived, so successful spawning doesn't

have to occur every year, but at present there is a shortage of younger native fish in the river and a poor variety of age classes. If there had been surplus water in 2012 the IT would have been able to test the spill guidelines; they hope to be able to do so next year.

Wendy said the other main opportunity described by the scientists was improving baseflows. This is critical to improving the quality and quantity of fish habitat. Wendy said the IM&E Plan is not prescriptive about baseflows. Enhancing baseflows and late-summer flows for fish growth is a complex issue, but one that was identified as critical. The IT is still trying to see how that can be done. There is an array of opportunities to consider.

Wendy also discussed other types of opportunities presented by the scientists, such as reducing non-native predatory fish, particularly smallmouth bass and brown trout; and stocking native fish.

Wendy said the IT is presenting the plan to different groups for their feedback. She said a key element of the plan is monitoring and evaluation. This is critical to ascertaining whether measures being taken to aid native fish are working. Don M. said two pieces of monitoring were initiated this year: real-time water-temperature monitoring downstream and a PIT-tag program that can track the movement of native fish.

Discussion of IM&E Plan: Drew said it would seem that releasing more water from the dam would allow non-native coldwater fish to move further downstream. Matt said the amount of water that would be involved to increase baseflows in summer and fall is low enough that the habitat reaches would not change significantly. If the temperature were radically and consistently lowered it could extend the coldwater fishery, but that would not happen with small amounts of water.

Drew asked whether decreasing flows in order to warm the water closer to the dam would be helpful. Matt said that idea was considered, but flows can't get much lower and still support a healthy river because there would not be enough water for the fish to move through the riffles between pools. He noted that it has been decided that releasing warmer water from the dam's higher outlet works to regulate temperatures is considered too dangerous because of the risk of non-native fish escapement. This is one of the few river systems in the West that has not been invaded by white suckers, which hybridize with native suckers. Matt said it must also be remembered that CPW has a mandate to manage for a coldwater fishery under Dolores Project documents.

Matt said the IT is trying to prioritize what measures will have the most impact on the most habitat. If native fish were doing well everywhere except in the 10 miles below the dam, managers would consider eliminating brown trout, but moving the fishery upstream a short distance is not really a solution. The bigger picture and the overall health of the river system must be considered.

Drew asked about providing large releases of water every third year or so to flush out pools. Peter said that is one idea the IT considered when developing the hydrographs. The team looked at past studies to see what flows would be needed to carve out deeper pools. Gigi Richard of Colorado Mesa University did studies in the Big Gypsum area and found that those flows would be around 2400 cfs. This was considered when creating the hydrographs. Peter said the

hydrographs attempt to balance habitat needs with flows for recreational boating, and a scientist at Fort Lewis College said the hydrographs generally would accomplish that.

Mike said the “A Way Forward” scientists said in drought years, when fish are isolated in pools, it might be an opportunity to reduce smallmouth bass. CPW doesn’t want to artificially introduce a drought, but there will be times of shortage when there might be an opportunity to reduce predatory competition and give native fish a better chance of survival. Mike said rainbow trout are not as predatory as browns and are limited to cold water, so they are not as big a concern, but browns may be a problem.

Randy asked whether CPW believes reducing flows might cause more native fish to be eaten. Mike said that is so and that CPW has reported that the smallmouth-bass population surged during drought years.

Randy asked if increased baseflows (outside the fish pool) would increase habitat by a significant amount. Mike said large flushing flows are needed to carve out pools. He said projected habitat curves indicate that a 33 percent increase in flows could provide a significant benefit to native fish, but this would have to be tried in order to be certain. That is why the plan has an emphasis on monitoring.

Peter said baseflows are typically between 50 and 75 cfs. Adding 20 cfs to a baseflow of 60 cfs would be a 33 percent increase. That would equal 40 acre-feet a day. If there were such an increase for 100 days, that would amount to 4,000 AF. That is why the idea of a 4,000-AF lease from MVIC excited many people, because it could create a 33 percent increase in baseflows. Peter said 4,000 or 5,000 AF is one or two percent of the yield of the river. In terms of agriculture, that is water for one big farm or several small farms, so the question is whether this is a tradeoff worth making. He said last year there was a good long runoff and an increase in native-fish populations, but those bounces have been followed by drought, so there has not been successful recruitment. The native fish in the Lower Dolores are mostly old. Increased baseflows would expand the habitat to keep larval fish from dying off after successful spawns. However, no one can say exactly how increased baseflows would translate into an increase in the fish population. The nine opportunities presented in the “AWF” report are all interconnected, and the scientists recommended pursuing all nine with gusto.

Don S. said the baseflow issue is the most sensitive part of the plan, yet the full plan doesn’t say what effects increased baseflows would have on habitat. That is the serious discussion this community needs to have. He said he needs to know what effects the baseflow increase would have on habitat.

Mike said there are appendices to the plan that go into more detail about what benefit would derive from different amounts of water, but there is no way to be certain without experimenting and monitoring the results. Don S. said he would like a hard copy of the appendices.

Don S. said he has a number of concerns about the plan, how it was generated and where it may lead. He is interested in having an educated population address the complexities of the issues as the plan moves forward. If there is a new iteration, he would definitely like to see the paragraph about baseflows fleshed out. He said the full DRD meeting may be the best place for him to fully

articulate his concerns, but the DWCD board has always been interested in learning what gains would result from small increases in baseflow.

Matt said he understands that Don wants to verify the habitat curves and ascertain what that will do for the fish. He said with a good water year, it would probably be fairly easy to obtain some answers.

Drew said baseflows are higher now than before the dam. Peter agreed but said the big pools are not the same. The river has changed fundamentally. Most of the energy has been taken out of it; it is much narrower; and it doesn't have as much variation and depth as it used to. Peter said the changes to the river post-McPhee are permanent. When the dam was built, 100,000 AF of active energy was lost that had been there even after MVIC. When there are good water years, the habitat can be pushed toward better conditions, but it will migrate back to the shallow pools. This is the new norm. The issue now is how to cope with the existing structure. What environmentalists are trying to figure out is, given a changed river, what is going to help. Peter said if baseflow is not addressed, efforts to help native fish won't succeed. Peter said the conservation community realizes it is not in control, and it is not trying to exacerbate the competition for water that already exists. They learned a lot from the failed attempt to lease water from MVIC. There will have to be a broader discussion, not just an effort involving environmentalists working with MVIC on a lease or purchase.

Randy said there will be years when MVIC doesn't need all its water. He asked whether there is anything wrong with enhancing baseflows and adding money to the company's coffers. To him that is an opportunity that will be lost if the dialogue is not continued. He said there is a slight risk in dry years, but counterbalancing that risk is the greater gain of the entire basin.

Don S. said he is not convinced that MVIC has extra water, even in a wet year. The company needs to have that discussion with its shareholders.

Matt said other sources of additional water are being discussed, including new storage and improved efficiency.

Randy said if the dialogue can't move beyond these small groups, it will hurt the basin. The discussion needs to go to the full MVIC.

Don S. said he is willing to have a full discussion, there cannot be a constructive community debate without a better handle on what the facts are. He asked whether he should sketch out some of his concerns about the plan today, or at the full DRD meeting.

Marsha said the MVIC lease proposal, previous and future, is a separate issue from the IM&E Plan, although they are linked. She said the plan is not a framework proposal for the DRD-SC to consider and the IT is not a DRD-controlled effort, although there needs to be linking and collaboration. The DRD-SC does not have to take the IM&E Plan to the full DRD with a consensus vote. The question is whether the committee wants to vet Don's and others' concerns before going to the full DRD.

Peter said the whole point of the DRD is to bring issues to the table. He said the lease proposal was an important benchmark of the larger community's sentiment. He would like the chance to understand Don's concerns and questions.

Randy said he has been waiting for the document for a long time and is excited to have something he can show to others to explain what MVIC's managers were talking about. He wants to see more dialogue.

Don S. said while he has serious concerns about parts of the plan, there is much in it that is very good as well.

Matt and Nathan said the document is not "set in stone" and will continue to be refined, and that the IT welcomes feedback. Marsha said one of the values of the DRD is to raise questions, even if they are uncomfortable, and that this was a healthy discussion and it is not finished.

Next steps:

→ It was agreed that there will be a more thorough airing of concerns about the IM&E Plan at the next DRD-SC meeting on Nov. 6.

→ Don and Drew may communicate their concerns to Mike and Peter ahead of the meeting.

→ The Livestock Association's annual meeting is in February, so that will be a target for a presentation on the plan.

→ The cattlemen's board will meet in November or January. The plan can be presented to them at that time.

319 Watershed Plan: Marsha said Gail's contract is being extended so she can do a series of interviews for the 319 plan. Interviewees will include nine or 10 people in the water community, a couple of anglers, and nine or 10 boaters. This is for the purpose of writing an appendix to the plan that will provide historic context.

Marsha said Chester Anderson is starting to draft the main document and Ken Curtis is starting to write an appendix about contracts.

The timeline was discussed as follows:

- The 319 subcommittee will likely get the main document (appendices will follow later) starting in November.
- Once the subcommittee is comfortable with the document, they will forward it to the DRD Hydrology and Science committees and the IT for feedback.
- The 319 subcommittee will review input and generate a next draft for the DRD-SC around early December. The DRD-SC needs to be comfortable with the plan before it goes to the full DRD and the LDWG.
- The plan should be sent to the state by March 2013.

Mike said the grant expires at the end of March so all monies related to the plan must be spent by then.

Fall DRD meeting: This has tentatively been set for Nov. 29. It will be discussed further at the Nov. 6 DRD-SC meeting.

Announcements: Peter said the Dolores River Restoration Project will be caging cottonwoods in the Disappointment Valley on Oct. 18. As they move lower in the watershed, they are finding there is not enough native vegetation to take over following tamarisk removal, so follow-up work is necessary.

Meeting summary: The Aug. 28 meeting summary was approved with no changes.

DRD finances: Marsha said the DRD's balance is \$7,532. The DRD received matching funds from DWCD, SJCA, MVIC and TNC this year. She emphasized that no organization has to give money to be on the DRD-SC.

Marsha said some of the \$7,532 will be used as a match for the 319 plan. She said Steering Committee members may want to think about what their groups can give in 2013, and the DRD-SC may want to talk about what the DRD needs to do next year and how often to meet.

Don S. said he would suggest this be discussed at the next meeting. He said he would like information on how the past budget, which was a two-year budget, was generated. Marsha said she will e-mail that information.

Marsha said the budget this year was \$32,000. Not all of that has been raised, but the full amount was not needed because there were not as many meetings as originally planned.

Next meeting: The next meeting will be Tuesday, Nov. 6 (Election Day), at 9 a.m.