

**DOLORES RIVER DIALOGUE
STEERING COMMITTEE
Sept. 3, 2013
draft – 7 pages**

Present: Don Schwindt, Dolores Water Conservancy District; Greg Black, Montezuma Valley Irrigation Company; Jerry Koskie, San Juan Basin Farm Bureau; Drew Gordanier, Southwestern Colorado Livestock Association; Amber Kelley, San Juan Citizens Alliance; Peter Mueller, The Nature Conservancy; Matt Clark, Trout Unlimited; David Graf, Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Guests: Mike Preston, DWCD. Contract staff: Marsha Porter-Norton, facilitator; Gail Binkly, recorder.

Agenda: The agenda was approved with no changes.

Debrief of July DRD meeting: Marsha commented that it was fairly well-attended, with about 35 people present. She brought up a question that had been raised by an audience member about a statistic cited in the 319 watershed plan regarding the number of acres irrigated by MVI, which was given as 37,500. Don said there is not agreement on the number and there are potential water-rights ramifications no matter what number is cited. Don said Ken Curtis, who wrote the appendix in which the number is mentioned, used the acreage stated in the initial contracts between DWCD and MVI. Don said if the number is to be changed in the 319 plan, his advice would be to give a source for it. Don said he would be glad to research those figures if necessary.

Matt said it doesn't seem that the DRD-SC should be the entity to count MVI's acreage, so he would recommend simply adding a phrase giving the source of the number. Jerry said he has seen the figure used with plus and minus signs around it.

There was agreement not to change the number at this time.

Next steps:

→ Marsha and Don will find the paragraph where the number is cited and add a clarifying statement.

Implementation Team and Implementation Plan update: Peter said four major sections of the Implementation Plan are being worked on: the introduction, goals and measures, baseflows, and spill management. He said the IT is meeting tomorrow and will be going over the baseflow and spill sections.

Amber said she has been working on the introduction. It has been reduced from about 25 pages to 6 and is now more factual, with some of the positioning removed.

David discussed the section on goals and measures for native-fish conservation. He said the IT tried to keep it factual and discuss what is known about each species of concern and the ways CPW collects the data that helps it evaluate how the fish are doing. He and Jim White, a biologist with CPW, "heard loud and clear" the feedback about the original table in the first draft referencing numbers and goals for bluehead and flannelmouth suckers and they made changes in accordance with the feedback. In addition, Shauna Jensen's list of factors that would indicate

a fishery response has been added. David said a recent meeting with the two water boards was positive and that the IT is trying to invest the community in the plan, because it is really the community's plan.

Greg commented that he believes both the DWCD and MVI boards would like to see much more monitoring.

David said CPW does as much monitoring as it can. He said the Dolores can be difficult to monitor because it is a big river and portions are hard to access. The dataset CPW has on the reaches from the dam to the Dove Creek pumps is one of the best long-term datasets in the state, but that represents the upper end of the reach where native fish occur. He said it's very problematic for biologists to get to the right reaches in a timely fashion to see whether fish have spawned.

The impacts of a recent flood that sent muddy slurry into the Dolores from Disappointment Creek were discussed. Matt said every natural system is unpredictable. David said managers try to program in resiliency. He said the Narraguinnep fire several years ago caused a lot of ash and sediment to be released into the river, but it had benefits for native fish because it hindered trout over about 20 miles. In 2012, there was a big debris flow with fine sand near Snaggletooth rapid that wrecked the smallmouth-bass habitat, so those non-native fish were knocked back in the reach from Pyramid to Disappointment, which is their stronghold. So those were positive events.

However, David said this year the mud flow from Disappointment into a stagnant river killed nearly everything, even black bullheads, which are hardy.

David said CPW is the main entity monitoring the river but is not able to do all the work needed, so it may become incumbent on others to seek grant funding to do more monitoring to link with the IP. David said CPW is facing a budget shortage, and a prioritization scheme that was released last week de-emphasizes native-species conservation work. CPW is trying to do everything possible to aid the Gunnison sage grouse and greater sage grouse, but funding for native aquatic species, including the three native fish and the boreal toad, is going to decline over the foreseeable future. David said local communities will have to find ways to monitor or there won't be much monitoring done. He also said that while he would like to see more data, he thinks CPW has done a good job and has come a long way in 10 years.

Jerry asked about the long-term effects of the flood event. David said without a spill, the river will go back to selecting for species such as bullheads and smallmouth bass. If there is not energy in the river, the pools start filling up and habitat diversity will be compromised. The river needs varied habitat including riffles, pools, backwaters, and channels. Native fish have evolved to utilize specific niches that were created when the river was natural.

David said in 2005 when a spill was anticipated, he went to Big Gyp and surveyed a cross-section through a pool, then checked again after the spill. He found the water had scoured 6 vertical feet of mud. The pool was 4 or 5 feet deep before the spill, and afterward, it was about 11 feet deep. David said while that was just one pool and not statistically rigorous, it demonstrates the potential effects of a surge of water. Without spills, he said, the habitat is being contracted,

especially when there is no spill for several years. The native fish don't fare as well as the bullheads.

Jerry asked whether a major rain event would have the same effect as a spill. David said a spill would be clear water and therefore would have more energy to pick up silt and move it. Below the dam, he said, there is the concept of "hungry water". The water released from the bottom of the reservoir contains no sediment, so it will scour habitat until it reaches a balance with the sediment.

Don said there is a push to know how the IP's introduction will dovetail with the proposed legislation to create a National Conservation Area on the Lower Dolores. Don said it is best to stay away from black-and-white thinking. He said McPhee Dam is the reality, and everyone has to live with that. These facts should be phrased correctly in the IP. People need to accept the conditions that exist and be realistic about what benefits might be gained from increased baseflows. Any increment of more water has to be truly beneficial. Don said the IP needs to be framed to focus on that cost-benefit ratio. A gain in water for native fish might not equal the benefit lost in the trans-basin community. Don said it is best to move slowly and not to make a commitment to more water being the solution without more monitoring.

David said this summer an increase of just 4 cfs made a difference in what the river looked like at Cole Crocker-Bedford's home. He said the benefit of more water to native fish can't necessarily be measured in pounds of fish, and the cost to some irrigators might be nothing if they're being paid to put that water in the reservoir for use next year. He said this year many people probably had marginal crops and might rather have been paid to put their water in a conservation bank and not to irrigate, considering they're not likely to make a profit anyway in a severe drought year.

Don said DRD has a clear role to try to backfill money lost for monitoring, but he wants to focus on the bigger questions that are unanswerable today. He would like to build a better knowledge base.

Peter said he feels like he is "hitting the wall" in a marathon, and the wall is the perpetual call for more monitoring and more information. He said the "A Way Forward" research effort was an attempt to establish where things stand and how to go forward. One of the answers was more monitoring; the report also presented a series of opportunities. AWF took the bull's eye off more water as the *exclusive* answer, but it didn't remove the bull's eye entirely. Peter said it would be possible to spend the next two, three or even 20 years just doing monitoring. He compared it to asking schoolchildren to keep sitting for CSAP tests; constantly re-testing will not make them any smarter. If the only action being taken is to monitor the fish, their status isn't going to change. Peter said there will never be enough information to say "x plus y equals z", and boards shouldn't be under the delusion that the conservation community will be happy with endless monitoring. Much work has been done and it is time for the community to recognize there is now a chance to figure out what to do and to act accordingly. People have spent the last four or five years focusing on the fact that there is a series of actions to take, and all of them need to be taken in order to make progress.

David suggested creating a high-water flow in the middle of the summer and continuing to monitor. He said after four or six years there would be a clearer picture. David said monitoring is especially important in response to an experiment or flow event.

Matt said you would have to run the experiment for at least four or five years to get a meaningful dataset.

Drew said even if the results couldn't be measured accurately in terms of pounds of fish, habitat changes could be measured.

Don said a certain amount of water may raise a certain amount of fish species. If some non-native fish are eliminated, there may be that many more pounds of native species. The question is how to get the most pounds of native fish, especially the roundtail chub. If all trout and non-native species are removed maybe actions could be taken that would benefit the chub without adding water.

Matt and David said the IT has to focus on every single possibility. Efforts shouldn't focus just on flows, but baseflow is one of the nine opportunities the IT is obligated to pursue.

Marsha asked whether the DRD has a role in monitoring, recognizing it's a complex practice and that it's not the only answer, She said with the state budget going down, there may need to be more of a community response. Where would the money come from?

David said this ties to the watershed plan because salinity, sedimentation and temperature might be easy factors on which to focus. Testable hypotheses regarding how those factors affect the fishery could readily be developed. He said those might be good places for the DRD to start. The IT needs to have more discussions, but the DRD could start right now to research questions raised in the watershed plan that affect the fish.

There was consensus that the DRD's possible role in such monitoring should be pursued.

Marsha offered to talk to Ann Oliver, who is the coordinator for the Animas River watershed plan, about possible next steps in writing a grant related to the watershed plan. Don said first the DRD needs to decide what it is trying to learn. Peter advised asking CPW what support it needs and wants. David agreed the watershed plan is a good complement and said CPW could develop some questions regarding salinity, temperature or other factors. Mike said first the state must approve the watershed plan, although he believes it is likely they will.

Don said money will be finite and the need will be greater than the money, so he sees DRD's role as prioritizing the monitoring or goals needs and trying to dovetail that with the watershed plan, as opposed to the focus coming down from the watershed plan.

Peter said the watershed plan focused on water quality while the IT's efforts are centered on native fish. He said any funding for monitoring that the DRD seeks should be rooted in the "A Way Forward" effort and the IP, rather than starting with the watershed plan. Don agreed but said the focus of the watershed plan is native fish so they do potentially complement each other.

Peter said CPW's data has gaps from year to year so he believes there is an obvious need for monitoring on an annual basis. The DRD is a dialogue, not a research engine. He wants to help keep the conduit of monitoring consistent so there will be real numbers over time. He doesn't really want to ask challenging questions but to keep it simple. He also stressed the importance of asking what CPW would find helpful.

Don said the DRD should decide if Peter's suggestion should be the highest priority and then focus on that, as there is a limited amount of energy and time.

Marsha said the watershed plan has an "action plan" on pages 78-88 that contains relevant material. There are fairly specific ideas for possible next steps, including estimated costs, although there are no commitments.

Jerry said David's comment that a small change in flow could make a big difference is significant. Making a small change in flows would be very doable if it could be done with the present baseflow.

David said this year the base pool was 9,000 acre-feet or so and a small increment to the supply this summer probably would have helped considerably. An additional increment of water above and beyond what is currently available could be used for life support in drought years such as this one.

Next steps:

→ Marsha said everyone should look at the action plan in the watershed plan.

Update on Legislative Subcommittee: Amber said whenever new material is produced by the IT, it is funneled to the Legislative Subcommittee first for review, then to the MVI and DWCD boards. This has helped to make people feel more involved. The subcommittee's last two meetings have been focused largely on education with the BLM regarding revised policy manuals that govern units in the National Landscape Conservation System.

Amber said the subcommittee has a list of issues it needs to discuss, e.g., the existing power line in the proposed NCA and whether the legislation needs to address how it could be upgraded if needed. The goal is not to have any major surprises at the end of the process.

Amber said the subcommittee is still working on its relationship with Montrose County and on boundary issues. It will be doing outreach to private landowners in the next few months.

Drew said he has heard negative comments from landowners in the proposed NCA area. Marsha said subcommittee members Larry Don Suckla, Al Heaton, and Cole Crocker-Bedford are working to protect landowners' rights. **Anyone who hears feedback about the NCA should tell Amber.**

Amber said the subcommittee continues to work on its Legislative Parameters document. Everything it discusses feeds into that document. Nothing will be "set in stone" until the entire proposal hangs together.

Don suggested she bring that document to the DRD-SC's next meeting and Amber agreed.

Next steps:

→ Amber will bring the Legislative Parameters document to the next meeting for discussion.

DRD cash-flow projection and other financial issues: Marsha said the DRD needs to complete funding of the watershed plan which amounts to an additional \$15,000. The group will continue to get partner contributions. Contributions to date from different entities were reviewed and discussed. Don said even small contributions, such as the \$100 given by Dolores County, are important because they show support for the DRD. He suggested asking entities such as the Farm Bureau, MVI, and Livestock Association for small amounts of funding.

The group discussed whether the DRD will be in place three to five years from now. Peter said it likely will be. Don said he doesn't foresee the political forces changing that are driving this effort, and added that for a coalition like the DRD to stay together means that people have to perceive something productive is coming out of it.

Mike said the Slickrock gauge is another issue that needs to be addressed. He said during the 2008 spill, the DRD decided a gauge was needed at that site. CWCB paid for the installation and the locals have been picking up the annual O&M, but the cost is not sustainable by DWCD's budget alone. Mike said the contract with USGS varies but is approximately \$15,000 to \$17,000 each year. The DWCD has been covering the cost and is supposed to be receiving contributions from other entities, but this year the district has received contributions of just \$2,000. DWCD has signed the contract that is currently operating the gauge. If the district doesn't sign a contract over the next winter, the gauge will go dark by spring of 2014. Mike said he is about to recommend to his board that they not renew this contract for the gauge. He will start to bring discretionary budget items before the DWCD board in a couple of weeks. Final decisions will be made in November. The last contract was signed in November and payment in full is due in January, so November is a key deadline.

David said the Slickrock site is an important data point and there are ways to do such monitoring on a shoestring budget by obtaining a subscription to uplink data from a point. The subscription costs about \$500 a year; equipment costing approximately \$500 to \$1,000 must first be installed. However, the information would not go into USGS records if it is obtained this way.

Peter said temperature and flows go hand in hand, so it's important to have some way of validating and understanding that relationship. Don agreed that such monitoring information has significant value. He suggested approaching the Southwestern Water Conservation District for funding.

Marsha suggested approaching the SWCD a little later, after more of the legislation is finalized, there are more details on the gauge, and the second version of the IP is out. Looking at the original grant for the DRD, SWCD might ask where things stand now and it would be good to have these answers.

Next steps:

→ Don will talk to Bruce Whitehead of the SWCD and will find out what their funding cycle is. Peter is willing to help.

→ It was agreed the gauge can be discussed further by email.

Meeting summary: The May 28 minutes were approved with no changes.

Next meeting: It will be Tuesday, Nov. 5, at 9 a.m.