

Interbasin Compact Committee Basin Roundtable
Rio Grande Interbasin Roundtable
MINUTES
April 14, 2015

Attending - Those who signed in are as follows: *Mike Gibson, Rio de la Vista, Charles Spielman, Karla Shriver, Chuck Howey, Erin Minks, Dwight Martin, David Marquez, Heather Bergman, Adam Mendonca, Dale Wiescamp, Charlie Griego, Dale Pizel, Nathan Coombs, Travis Smith, Keith Holland, Jim Ehrlich, Christi Bode, Steve Vandiver, Wayne Schwab, Kevin Terry, Bea Ferrigno, Matt Hildner, Nicole Langley, Adam Moore, Gene Farish, Ruth Heide, Eugene Jacquez, Ron Brink, Craig Godbout, Matthew Gallegos, Tom Spezze, Lindsay George, Mac McFadden, Anne Steinhage*

Welcome and Introduction: Chairman Mike Gibson called the meeting to order at 2:04pm at the offices of the San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District, in Alamosa, CO. A quorum was established, those in attendance were introduced, and all were welcomed.

Mike Gibson provided some information and comments on the Rio Grande Water Leaders Course and asked for reflections from course participants in attendance. Thanks to those who have organized it.

Update on the Sub-Districts - Rio Grande Water Conservation District: Steve Vandiver provided an update on the Sub-Districts. Tomorrow is the deadline for when Subdistrict No. 1 Annual Replacement Plan (ARP) will be sent to the State. Lots of work has gone into this plan over the past few months. Water will be released from reservoirs to make up depletions and to keep the river whole. In addition, 9 forbearance agreements have been signed this year. Together these will help replace depletions from well pumping. The deadline to form Subdistrict No. 2 is coming up soon and there is only one well that has not signed up. This is a huge step forward for Subdistrict No. 2 which is opt-in. Steve thanked Karla Shriver for her work on Subdistrict No. 2. There was a Habitat Conservation Plan meeting yesterday. Steve had to leave the meeting early, but voted in favor of Judy Lopez's Education and Outreach proposal. Steve also emphasized the importance of the discussions on the Rio Grande Forest Plan Revision.

Approval of Minutes of March 10, 2015: Rio de la Vista requested that the March minutes be amended to show Charlie Spielman, Cindy Medina, Mike Gibson, and Rio de la Vista as members of the Executive Committee. In addition, it was requested that a new line be added under the Rio Grande Water Conservation District's update between the Subdistrict and Forest Plan Revision information. Ron Brink moved that the amended minutes be approved, Rio seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Administrative Issues: The Roundtable Executive Committee met today and has been working to finalize and update the bylaws. The Executive Committee is not replacing the Roundtable and will not be making decisions or voting, but will help out with the administrative side of the Roundtable and bring suggestions to the meetings.

WSRA Funding Request: Education and Outreach: Video Vignettes — Judy Lopez, Rio Grande Watershed Conservation and Education Initiative:

Judy Lopez presented a WSRA funding request to the Roundtable. The Rio Grande Basin has been very supportive over the years with Education and Outreach. We are

lucky to have strong public education and outreach, largely due to the hard work of Roundtable members and agency, newspaper, and radio folks. Our local media people understand the need for Public Education, Participation and Outreach (PEPO). This request is for a three year project that will insure this education and outreach continues and grows. This includes outreach through monthly newspaper articles, radio shows, web page, video vignettes, project tours, public meetings, etc. Video vignettes will be created by Christi Bode who will create 3 videos a year for three years on important water topics. All of these 9 videos would then be available to be used by community members to explain these topics. These will be done on a cost share basis and topic decisions will be made by the Roundtable's Education Subcommittee. This project will also include public engagement that will bring partners together to initiate multi-use projects and organize project tours. Finally this project will support PEPO administration. Judy went over the budget break down of the project - total budget of \$156,000 with the WSRA amount being \$45,300 over three years.

Travis Smith thanked Judy for all her work on PEPO. Karla moved to approve the funding request, Heather seconded, the motion carried.

Rio Grande Forest Management Plan Révision – Adam Mendonca, USFS and Heather Bergman, Peak Facilitation Group: Rio Grande Basin Roundtable Chair Mike Gibson reported that this was the second co-hosted meeting with US Forest Service regarding the Forest Plan Revision process for the Rio Grande National Forest. The first meeting in December was truncated due to other Roundtable agenda items, so the Roundtable invited Adam Mendonca and other members of the plan revision team back for additional discussion about the Plan Revision. Mr. Mendonca thanked the Roundtable for the additional opportunity to discuss the plan revision with them. He then introduced Erin Minks, the new planner working on the forest plan revision, and Heather Bergman, the facilitator working with the Forest Service on the public engagement component of the revision. Mr. Mendonca stated that Ms. Bergman would be facilitating the discussion with the Roundtable.

Forest Plan Revision Discussion

Ms. Bergman stated that the forest plan revision team is hoping to get feedback from the Roundtable and hear the group's thoughts about several issues related to water in the forest plan. Specifically, the team is interested in the Roundtable's perspectives on: 1) the Federal Reserve water rights; 2) maintenance of reservoirs and other water infrastructure in wilderness areas; and 3) standards and guidelines related to water. These are issues that have emerged from early public meetings on water issues that merit additional feedback from the Roundtable.

Questions/Answers: Forest Plan Revision Process

- *What is the timeline for the plan revision?* We are hoping to complete the revision process in 4 years. This first year is focused on assessing the need for change—this is about problem identification and what is working and not working in the current plan.
- *How do you incorporate flexibility and creativity in the face of climate change?* The current plan must adapt as new science comes along. With the new plan, we must use the best available science. We are doing our best to predict changes through modeling, but even with the best science and modeling we can't predict everything. For example, when completing our 1996 Forest Plan we had no idea the beetle outbreak would be so extensive.

Federal Reserve Water Right

Mr. Mendonca gave a brief overview of the issue related to the Federal Reserve Water Right.

The Decree was signed in 2000 and identifies minimum flow requirements for riparian areas on Forest Service land to maintain instream flows and riparian habitat. Mr. Mendonca stated that he is unaware of any other National Forest with a similar decree. The Forest Service is interested in learning whether the Decree is working as currently written and implemented. Mr. Mendonca stated that the Decree has been incorporated into the current Forest Plan and would simply carry over into the new plan if there is no need to change it.

Several members of the Roundtable stated that there is no need for change to the Decree or its implementation. The Decree is a success story of collaboration between water entities in the San Luis Valley and the Forest Service. Changing it is unnecessary and could become a very messy and complicated process. One person stated the Decree is an example of creative problem solving that should be a model for future discussions between the water community and the Forest Service.

A member of the Roundtable suggested that the Roundtable write a letter to the Forest Service indicating their desire for the Decree to remain unchanged in the new forest plan. The Roundtable voted on this motion, and it carried. Mr. Mendonca stated that he looks forward to receiving the letter from the Roundtable.

Maintenance of Water Infrastructure in Wilderness Areas

Mr. Mendonca reported that several people have raised the issue of maintenance of water infrastructure in wilderness areas during early public meetings related to the Forest Plan revision. Many reservoirs and ditches in the San Luis Valley were built around the same time and are now in need of repair at the same time. Many of these reservoirs and ditches are in or surrounded by wilderness, which restricts the use of mechanized equipment. In emergency situations, mechanized equipment may be used at the discretion of the Forest Supervisor; however the decision to use equipment in wilderness in non-emergency situations does not reside with the Rio Grande National Forest Supervisor, but rather with the Regional Forester in Denver. Mechanized maintenance requires a minimum impact study that must be approved by the Regional Office.

Members of the Roundtable reported several concerns and experiences with reservoir maintenance in wilderness areas, including the following:

- Non-mechanized maintenance can actually have a bigger negative impact on the landscape than dropping a little excavator in the area.
- A major improvement would be to allow small hand tools like chainsaws into the wilderness area. These could be packed in and would make very little impact to the landscape, but would allow for more efficient maintenance, especially in the aftermath of the fire.
- Non-mechanized maintenance is also very expensive.
- Explosives count as a “primitive method” but can have a bigger impact.

Question/Answer: Maintenance of Water Infrastructure in Wilderness Areas

- *Is there a way to revise the Forest Plan to include changes to the rules to allow for use of small hand tools?* Not specifically, but the Forest Service could define what “minimum impact” means for the Rio Grande National Forest to create some flexibility. This might make it easier to get approval for using mechanized tools from the Regional Office.
- *In what year was the wilderness area created?* There are 4 wilderness areas on the Rio Grande National Forest, each with a different date of designation. Reservoirs do not detract

from the qualities of wilderness, but the designations did not speak to the need for maintenance or how it should be addressed.

Standards and Guidelines

Ms. Bergman stated that the Forest Service has identified several Standards and Guidelines in the current Forest Plan that have been the cause of confusion or that have been challenging to implement. The Forest Service would like Roundtable feedback on these items. “Standards” are things the Forest Service *must* do, while guidelines are things the Forest Service *should* do. The Roundtable discussion on standards and guidelines is summarized below.

- **Sediment Control Standard # 4 states that the Forest Service must “Reclaim roads and other disturbed sites when use ends, as needed, to prevent resource damage.”**
Ms. Bergman reported that previous discussion on this standard at a public meeting revealed that the Forest Service does not currently reclaim roads. Roads that are no longer used are closed instead. One suggestion that emerged at a public meeting was for the Forest Service to close the roads and reclaim the initial sections of the road and any sections that are eroded or characterized by steep slopes. This would protect water resources and discourage additional road use without overly burdening the Forest Service with an unattainable reclamation requirement. Several members of the Roundtable indicated support for this suggestion.
- **Guideline # 6 under Riparian Areas Standard # 1 suggests that the Forest Service should “Remove livestock from riparian areas when average stubble heights on key species reach 4 inches in early-use pastures and 6 inches or more in late-use pastures.”**
 - o A member of the Roundtable wondered if stewardship agreements would help with this implementing this guideline.
 - o Another member stated that he has had permits with the Forest Service and wondered how grazing permits might change in the new plan. Another member of the Roundtable responded that grazing on the forest has already changed a lot as use and distribution patterns of wildlife have changed over the years.

At the invitation of Ms. Bergman and Mr. Mendonca, a member of the Roundtable identified an additional standard in the current plan that he believed should be changed. Hydrologic Function Standard # 1 states that the Forest Service must “Manage land treatments to conserve site moisture and protect long-term stream health from damage by increased runoff.” It was suggested that this be changed from a Standard to a Guideline because conditions have changed and it may not be possible for the Forest Service to achieve this standard in all cases.

Another member of the Roundtable identified the challenges related to quantifying both current conditions and improvements to those conditions over time. Mr. Mendonca stated that the Forest Service anticipates developing a monitoring plan, which will help determine how resources and other conditions are changing, improving, or getting worse on the ground in the forest. Mr. Mendonca stated that he would welcome recommendations and suggestions for how to monitor resource conditions in addition to the current legally defined process for monitoring certain species.

Several members of the Roundtable had questions and concerns related to the Forest Service budget and whether there would be enough resources to do all of the things required by the

Standards and suggested by Guidelines in the current plan. Mr. Mendonca stated that the Forest Service hopes that the Standards and Guidelines in the new Forest Plan will be sustainable and attainable with the resources available.

Questions/Answers: Standards and Guidelines

Members of the Roundtable had several questions related to Standards and Guidelines and associated issues. These are captured below. Responses are from Mr. Mendonca unless otherwise indicated:

- *Aquatic species are water quality indicators, but is monitoring species more difficult than chemical monitoring?* Yes, but new monitoring techniques can make monitoring water quality easier.
- *It sounds like the revised Plan will be more complex, more extensive than the past one, but you have a smaller budget. How is this possible?* This is why identifying the need for change in the new Plan is so important. We don't want to open up parts of the Plan that don't need change. That way we can focus on the parts that need change the most.
- *How can new technology like drones be used to help with monitoring on the forest?* We need to look at new technology and the best ways to utilize it on all fronts.
- *What have you heard and what are the thoughts on the limited budget? Will there be a restructuring of fees?*
 - o Ms. Bergman: Several people at public meetings on the Plan Revision have indicated they are frustrated that access to the forest is limited and getting smaller. Some of these people have indicated a willingness to restructure fees if it would translate into more access to the forest.
 - o Mr. Mendonca: We are interested in discussing fee structure. It is generally easier to just close a road than to implement a fee structure to keep roads open. Because of budgets, we don't do a great job of maintaining the roads we have open now.
- *How does funding impact the priority of what you do or do not do?* The Forest Service has to do the monitoring in the Forest Plan, so if we say we are going to monitor species, we have to do that. We have to be careful what we put in the Plan, because if we are overly aggressive in our monitoring commitments, that could consume all our time.
- *Are you currently installing culverts and bridges that block fish passage?* We are trying to replace impassable bridges and culverts to assist the fish.
- *What Standards and Guidelines make managing the forest difficult? Is there a way to set Standards and Guidelines that help the Forest Service do its job?* Yes, that is possible and would be great. Right now, we are taking public input without judgment on what we are hearing. However, when we move from the assessment to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, we will address what we should do better or differently in the future.

Next Steps

Mr. Mendonca and Ms. Bergman invited members of the Roundtable to share any suggestions for additional standards and guidelines to discuss at the remaining public meeting related to water. Additionally, they encouraged members of the Roundtable to remain engaged in the plan revision process.

Update on the Rio Grande Basin Water Plan: Mike Gibson gave an update on the progress of the Rio Grande Basin Water Plan. Lots of work has been done on the Executive Summary. Tom passed around a few copies of this Summary for the Roundtable to see. Now people are working on the final editing of the Basin Plan. Heather Dutton has been compiling edits and working on editing the Plan.

DiNatale water will help with the final editing and we will make sure that the final plan is what we need it to be.

Update on RWEACT: Tom Spezze gave an update from RWEACT, which is in the process of expanding its mission from protecting public safety to include more watershed

health and forest stewardship. RWEACT is working to transition into a non-profit that will forward this expanded mission. RWEACT has also been working with the FS to provide input on the Forest Service Plan revision and continue to help the Forest Service improve watershed health.

Report from the Colorado Division of Water Resources: No update was given.

Report from IBCC Representatives: Travis Smith thanked everyone that attended the Roundtable Summit. There is ongoing work on Conceptual Agreements and what this could look like. Travis Recognized Heather Bergman for her service to IBCC.

Craig Godbout, WSRA: Craig reported that around 300 people attended the Statewide Roundtable Summit on March 12 in Westminster. An Executive Summary is available on this event for those that were unable to attend. The current WSRA Rio Grande Basin balance is at approximately \$246,000 and the next installment will be \$120,000, so in total there will be approximately \$370,000 in the account.

Rio de la Vista, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust: Rio announced that there is a new newsletter is out from the RiGHT. They have reached their Rio Grande Initiative goal of conserving 25,000 acres along the Rio Grande! RiGHT will be co-hosting a screenings of the film "Hanna Ranch" in Alamosa on Thursday, April 23 at Carson Auditorium and then on the 25th in Saguache at the Ute Theater.

Adam Moore, Colorado State Forest Service: The Watershed Wildfire Protection Group is an organization made up of a variety of entities and groups and they try to have a few meetings a year around the state. Adam suggested that the Roundtable ask them if they want to host a meeting in the SLV. The Roundtable could coordinate this future meeting. An interest was expressed by the Roundtable to pursue this possibility. Travis recommended that the Executive Committee will discuss and organize this at their next meeting.

Eugene Jaques, Sangre de Christo Acequia Association: Eugene gave an update on Acequia del Ferro and Vajellos project: They have just completed Phase 1 and it looks great. Thanks to the Roundtable for funding these projects.

Adjourn

Next Meeting: June 9, 2015
Conference Room, San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District
623 Fourth Street, Alamosa, CO