

Interbasin Compact Committee Basin Roundtable
Rio Grande Interbasin Roundtable
MINUTES
September 8, 2015

Attending - Those who signed in are as follows: *Karla Shriver, Stan Moyer, Steve Vandiver, Kevin Terry, Dale Pizel, Rio de la Vista, Travis Smith, Heather Dutton, Bea Ferrigero, Lawrence Gallegos, Charlie Spielman, Sandy White, Emma Regier, Laura McCarthy, Tom Malicek, Erin Minks, Andrea Backman, Ed Nielsen, John Massopusi, Jason Lawhon, Anne Bradley, Rich Edwards, Charlotte Bobicki, Cary Aloia, Monique DiGiorgio, Craig Godbout, Brenda Femlee, Cindy Medina, Dwight Martin, Mac McFadden, Anne Steinhoge, Sharon Vaughn, Nathan Coombs, Eric Howell, Brad Piehl,*

Welcome and Introduction: Vice Chair Rio de la Vista called the meeting to order at 1:05 pm 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.

Adam Moore, Alamosa District Forester with Colorado State Forest Service, began with an overview of the purpose of the meeting. The Watershed Wildfire Protection Group (WWPG) is working throughout Colorado on watershed health and forest management. The Roundtable saw this joint meeting as an opportunity for the WWPG to share their projects and provide the Rio Grande basin with new ideas and perspectives on watershed health.

Approval of Minutes of August 11, 2015: Ed Neilson moved that the minutes be approved, Heather Dutton seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Who is the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable: Rio de la Vista provided a background on the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable. The Roundtable was formally formed after the "Water for the 21st Century" Act as an entity to facilitate discussions on water issues and encourage locally driven, collaborative solutions. The State has invested lots of money in the Basin Roundtables to implement water projects. The Roundtable provides a forum for entities to work together to implement collaborative/multi-benefit projects. Since formed, about \$12 million has come into the Rio Grande basin through the Roundtable.

Travis Smith added that watershed health has been a topic of discussion for the Roundtable. Even before the West Fork Complex Fire and in the Rio Grande Basin Plan, watershed health is a top priority. The Roundtable understands the connection between federal agencies as caretakers of the forest and the connection between forest health, water supply and more.

Judy Lopez presented a video vignette on the Rio Grande Basin Plan.

Who is the Watershed Wildfire Protection Group (WWPG): Rich Edwards with CSFS presented on the WWPG. Rich began with the history of the group, which was formed out of the Front Range Roundtable to identify hazards to water supplies from wildfires in Colorado. In the aftermath of the Buffalo Creek Wildfire in 1996, the Upper South Platte Watershed Landscape Assessment was completed. Then in 2002, the Hayman Wildfire burned 134,000 acres. After these large fires, the CSFS, Front Range Water Providers, and USFS formed the Front Range Watershed Wildfire Protection Group. The WWPG includes over 40 organizations and many partners. The initial purpose of the WWPG was to create watershed assessment templates, identify critical watersheds for water supply, prioritize sixth-level watersheds, and minimize adverse effects of post-wildfire hydrologic changes (including flooding, erosion and sediment deposition).

After 2009, the WWPG stepped back for a few years. They re-started in October 2012 recognizing the needs for this organization after a year of widespread forest fires. Today the WWPG promotes healthy watersheds by facilitating education and awareness; and facilitating prioritization, implementation, and monitoring for people in wildlife. The WWPG Goals are to connect project implementers with funders, provide outreach and education, and maintain a statewide focus.

Watershed Wildfires Assessments, Opportunities, and Uses: Brad Piehl with JW Associates presented more details on the WWPG and their Watershed Wildfire Assessments. Watershed Assessments are made through the WWPG and stakeholder groups. These Assessments have lead to several successful projects and partnerships to improve watershed health. Examples of these projects include the Forests to Faucets Program, Pikes Peak/Catamount Project, Colorado-Big Thompson Headwaters Partnership, Arkansas Headwaters - Tennessee Pass Project, and Cucharas River Project.

Brad broke down the Cucharas River Watershed Assessment Project as an example of how Watershed Assessments are formed and what they look like. This assessment began with a smaller scale assessment looking at just vegetation types. Then the watershed was broken down into sixth-level watersheds. The Watershed Assessment looked at wildfire hazard, flooding/debris flow hazard, soil erodibility, and water supply in each watershed. All of these components are factored in to create Levels of Priority and “Zones of Concern” (including watershed above water supply features) on the watershed scale. These factors are broken down into smaller basins to narrow in to specific areas of concern and priority. Through this process, specific priority projects are identified.

Water Provider Perspective: Eric Howell, the Forest Program Manager with Colorado Springs Utilities, presented on the WWPG from the Water Provider Perspective. Colorado Springs Utilities provide electric, natural gas, water, and wastewater services to over 650,000 customers. They provide a critical water service for 450,000 with an extensive water system bringing water from over 100 miles away. Colorado Springs’ water system is very complex with over 70% of the water coming from over the Continental Divide (the Colorado River Basin) through 4 tunnels and collection systems. The Colorado Springs watershed is facing increasing risks and increasing development in the forest. This has lead to a focus on watershed health.

There are many opportunities to improve forest health and water supply protection with the WWRG with the help of the Arkansas Headwaters Wildfire Analysis and Assessment. Having these Assessment results have helped the Colorado Springs Utilities prioritize projects and treatments to improve watershed health. The Waldo Canyon Fire has caused significant damage to water supply and reservoirs. Damage from the fire included erosion, sediment impacts, flood damage, access road damage, pipeline damage. Because of a long-standing partnership with the Pikes Peak Forest Service, post fire work was able to be done immediately to protect the watershed. Post fire protection methods have included sediment detention basins, filling and silling, log erosion barriers, and seeding. After the fire, there has been an increase in forest and watershed management and pre-fire mitigation efforts, CSU Wildland Fire Team, size and capacity, participation in regional recovery efforts, and regional flash flood preparedness efforts. Overall, the Colorado Springs Utilities has redefined their Forest Management Program in response to the Waldo Canyon fire.

Ongoing Watershed Projects and Initiatives in the Rio Grande:

Adam Moore, CSFS: Adam provided an overview of the CSFS Resource Assessment, which provides an analysis of forest condition and trends in the state and delineates priority rural and urban areas. The Assessment also outlines opportunities for positive action within the National Theme of enhancing public benefit from trees and forests. The Rio Grande Basin specifically has high post fire

erosion risk. Statewide Forest Resource Strategy helps the CSFS prioritize projects in the forest and provides a platform for the CSFS and its partners to focus efforts on important forest landscapes and leverage limited resources to achieve post fire results. An example of how the CSFS uses this resource strategy is through stream restoration with “Move Mountains”, a program that gets youth involved in planting willows and restoring streambanks. Another example is the Restoration Grant, which works to protect water supply by supporting projects to reduce fuel loading, create fuel breaks, and create defensible space around homes.

Other programs that the CSFS offers are the conservation seedling program, and Best Management Practices books and trainings.

Heather Dutton and Emma Regier, RGHRP: Heather Dutton and Emma Regier presented on the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project and their current watershed projects. Heather gave a history of the organization and an overview of the RGHRP’s four programs: Riparian Restoration, Irrigation Infrastructure, Watershed Stewardship, and Outreach and Education. The RGHRP is partnering with the USFS, CPW, TU, SLVID, WCRC, and more to complete an Upper Rio Grande Watershed Assessment. This will look at a wide range of conditions including riparian habitat, geomorphology, aquatic habitat, recreation, flow regimes, in-stream infrastructure and adjacent upland habitats.

Emma gave an overview of the RGHRP’s current watershed health projects. The West Fork Complex Fire Weed Management Project is a partnership with the USFS and treats noxious weed infestations and inventories trails in sections of the burned area. The Ptarmigan Meadows Project is in partnership with the CSFS and USFS to reduce fuel loading and create defensible space in the Ptarmigan Meadows subdivision. The RGHRP has partnered with RWEACT and USFS to complete campground hazard mitigation and install mulch and seeding test plots in the burned area.

Kevin Terry, TU: Kevin discussed watershed management and the limitations of looking either too broad (landscape view) or too narrow (small picture). In both scenarios, important details and information is lost. There is an ongoing struggle between big picture vs. small picture and it is a challenge to acknowledge both. Rivers are the central feature of a watershed and our everyday life and they are sensitive indicators of environmental stress. Proper management of rivers and their watersheds involves balancing a wide range of resource uses on the river and the ability to predict the response of the river to imposed change. Our resource uses include irrigation, flood control, municipal and industrial use, and more. These resources should be viewed collectively along with identified cumulative impacts in order for us to better predict the responses of the river to changes in management or practices.

Kevin provided suggested steps for the implementation of watershed management:

1. Identify and develop landscape level data (big picture);
2. Identify resource needs (historic, current, future) within the watershed;
3. Identify the communities and stakeholders that rely on the watershed;
4. Organize a strategy to reduce and creed negative impacts to watershed health without compromising community values and social needs;
5. Predict impacts from management decision on stream health and socioeconomic values;
6. Implement strategic projects and actions and monitor results;
7. Inform the community and strategy.

Tom Spezze, RWEACT: Tom began with an overview of the West Fork Complex Fire. This large event brought community members, USFS, Counties, and many partners together to form RWEACT under the executive order from. Through RWEACT, many projects have been implemented in partnership to protect the “Values at Risk”. Sample projects include Doppler radar deployment to

protect public safety from monsoon rains and flash flood risks, and rain and stream gauges. These projects all tie into the emergency management plan for flash flooding and debris flow risks. An ongoing Water Quality Study is investigating the impacts of the fire and beetle kill on water quality. RWEACT is working to form a 501-c3, which will continue and expand these efforts, partnering with the USFS, CSFS, and private landowners. In addition, RWEACT has been aiding the Rio Grande National Forest with their Forest Plan Revision

Tom Malicek, USFS: Tom, the Deputy Forest Supervisor for the Rio Grande National Forest, presented for Dan Dallas who is on wildfire detail. Currently, the USFS is tapped out fighting fires throughout the West. The RGNF, like most forests, were established over 100 years ago to protect the watershed. All entities have a say in the management of the watershed and the management grows stronger with diverse input and buy-in. RGNF Forest Plan is under revision currently and provides a broad, landscape assessment of the Forest and provides management activities and strategies. A priority of this assessment is watershed and forest health.

Andrea Jones, District Ranger with Conejos Peak Ranger District, discussed how collaboration on projects allows the USFS to make bigger impacts. The Conejos Peak District is working on salvage tree harvesting in areas impacted by spruce beetle. This is a priority from Public Input that the USFS has received.

Tom Malicek replied that the public changes their perspective on salvage harvesting and timber sales in the aftermath of these fires. People understand the benefits and are open to fuels treatments and timber harvesting after fires because they can see the benefits of these projects.

Erin Minks, RGNF Forest Planner, discussed the value of collaborative relationship and projects. The national forest takes up much of the watershed and the RGNF wants to be an effective and efficient partner with watershed projects. The RGNF is in the middle of the RGNF Forest Plan Revision, currently reviewing public comments and compiling and collecting data. Soon the RGNF will come back with these results and reach out for more public involvement and comments.

Chama Peak Land Alliance Ongoing Projects and Initiatives: Monique DiGiorgio presented on the San Juan -Chama Watershed Partnership. This partnership was started by the private landowners and agricultural operators who were conservation minded and came together to improve and protect the water sources and communities in the watershed. The project area crosses two states (CO and NM), four national forests, and tribes. Formed in 2010, the first tasks looked at Biomass availability in the region. A study was completed in 2013 looking at whether or

not biomass energy could be competitive on the energy market. Small scale facilities distributed across the watershed, pulling feed stock locally is more feasible in comparison to large scale facilities. The Land Alliance partnered with the Nature Conservancy and the Rio Grande Water Fund for the treatment of 800 acres through prescribed fire and thinning over three years to improve forest health. The Land Alliance also looks at water quality and quantity, including water quality monitoring, riparian restoration on the Rio Chama and Navajo River, and water panning. The end goal of the Chama Peak Land Alliance is resilient forests and watersheds that provide drinking water for ABQ and Santa Fe, abundant wildlife, and hopefully ultimately a local biomass economy for the region.

Open Discussion - Opportunities for Collaboration and Next Steps

The Roundtable discussed ways that the Rio Grande Basin could tie into the statewide efforts to continue to improve watershed health. Moving forward we need to connect the dots between efforts related to watershed health and assessment and groups working on this. Entities working on watershed health should get together to see what efforts have been done and combine priorities, plans and resources moving into the future. Tom Spezze proposed that an email chain be formed to bring together these people and entities to share efforts on future projects, especially in reference to the proposed Upper Rio Grande Assessment. There is a common interest in Watershed Health. The next step is taking key points from this meeting and building projects on this common interest.

Rio de la Vista announced RiGHT's fundraiser Hoedown, which will take place on Sunday, September 13.

Adjourn

Next Meeting: October 13, 2015
Conference Room, San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District
623 Fourth Street, Alamosa, CO