

A Flowing Dolores River Brings Much Celebration & Renewed Conflict: Can Irrigators & Boaters Support Each Other

Written by April Montgomery



Mike Preston, General Manager of the Dolores Water Conservancy District, enjoys the recent spill with his two sons, Woody and Gabe (taking the photo).

Over the weekend of June 3rd, it “was like the circus came to town” if you were passing through Cahone, Slick Rock, or Bedrock, popular river access points on the Dolores River. Almost 1,000 recreational boaters, who heard the call “The spill is on” from the Dolores Water Conservancy District (DWCD), came running. Boaters filled parking lots, purchased gas and beer, launched rafts, kayaks, canoes & duckies, excited to boat the Dolores River below the McPhee Dam - a section of the river which hasn’t been runnable for five years. According to Mike Preston, General Manager of the DWCD, who boated the river, “I’ve never seen so many people having so much fun in one location in my life.” There certainly was a reason to celebrate, as the Dolores River had flows high enough for rafting for almost two weeks. This recent release, the first since 2011, also brings the need for improved conversation, education and understanding, as there were thousands of potential boaters who missed out, due to limited advance notice.

Although I wasn’t one of the lucky boaters who got to experience the river this year, I was a regular in the early 1990s when the Dolores Project was just ramping up and

good water years enabled a consistent boating season. Back then, the Slickrock Café, serving hamburgers and milkshakes, and the Bedrock Store, with cold drinks and snacks, both catered to boaters. Every spring, I would count on a weekend or two to paddle the Dolores, watching the DWCD and NRCS websites closely and adjusting my schedule according to the spill predictions. However after the 1990s, spills have been much less frequent.

The McPhee dam and reservoir, completed in 1986, were constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation to store flows of the Dolores River for irrigation, municipal and industrial use. As one of the Colorado River Storage Act projects as well as is a component of the Colorado Ute Indian Water Rights Final Settlement Agreement, the original authorizing legislation didn’t speak to recreation. However, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents completed after authorization, required the project to mitigate its impact on the environment, fish and recreation, leading to fish releases of 31,900 acre feet (AF) a year and a “fill and spill” approach to allow the reservoir to fill first and then spill to accommodate recreation flows in small spill years of less than 50,000 AF (2016 was 28,011 AF).



Jim White, Colorado Parks & Wildlife (rowing) and his temp, Pete Deren (netting fish), surveying between Bradfield Bridge and the Dove Creek Pump Stations.

The key determinants of a spill are carryover storage and snow pack; yet due to persistent drought in the southwest, spills have been smaller, less predictable and less frequent. McPhee Project documents predicted that flows below the dam would average 105,400 acre feet (AF)¹ each year, and that spills capable of boating would occur once every two years. Reality has not kept up with early predictions -- since 2005 there have been two large releases of over 180,000 AF, two modest spills at 50-60,000 AF, and three small spills between 28,000 and 34,000 AF (including 2016).

Larger spills occur in good snowpack years, and water is released to ensure the reservoir has enough room to absorb peak flows. Larger spills allow enough water to plan ecological flushing flows and combine them with high flow boating. However, small spills make it tough to plan a river trip due to uncertainty of the reservoir filling, the short notice of any release, and lack of confidence in the duration of the a spill.

If you were one of the fortunate this year, you were able to experience one of the premiere river trips in Colorado. The Dolores River is an experience often compared to the Grand Canyon in its ability to provide a lengthy, multi-day river trip on a beautiful and primitive river. The Dolores River begins at approximately 14,000 feet in the San Juan Mountains near Lizard Head Pass. It flows through the towns of Rico and Dolores before entering McPhee reservoir. Below the dam, the river flows for 170 miles until it reaches its confluence with the Colorado River near Moab, through the heart of more than 250,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas and through almost every type of ecosystem represented on the Colorado Plateau.

This well-loved river and the Dolores Project serve many of Colorado's water values: drinking water is supplied to Cortez, Dove Creek and the tribal community of Towaoc; agricultural water irrigates approximately 70,000 acres in Montezuma and Dolores counties and on Ute Mountain Ute tribal land; environmental flows and a "fish pool" of almost 32,000 AF support a unique ecosystem, sensitive warm-water fish species, and a cold-water fishery; and recreational flows, when water surpluses exist, provide a one-of-a-kind boating experience. However, balancing these varied water uses and navigating the complex laws and policies governing this federal water project is not

¹ 105,400 AF reflects: 76,100 AF as an average managed spill; 25,400 AF of fish pool release; and 3,900 AF to meet downstream water rights (25,400 AF and 3,900 AF would be released out of storage after the spill has concluded).

easy. The DWCD has to forecast using unpredictable temperatures, irrigation deliveries, and snow pack run-off to determine how much and when recreational water can be released.

This year proved especially tricky to forecast a release. Although there were boating flows for almost two weeks, the timing and advance notice of these flows didn't allow boaters to plan for a two week trip. Most boaters thought that they only had a four to five day window for a trip because they didn't know there would be a second week of spill. In addition, early release announcements led boaters to plan three-day Memorial Day trips; many boaters couldn't adjust their schedules when the release date was moved back a week.

The difficulty in forecasting reservoir inflows and releases may be understandable from the perspective of water managers, but for most boaters it is frustrating. As one boater commented on Facebook, "No worries, we will send out our carrier pigeons each morning from our camp to inform us if there will be enough water to continue with our planned float." One organization that did an outstanding job, serving as a liaison between the DWCD and local boaters, was the Dolores River Boating Advocates (DRBA). This year, it played a key role in communicating about releases and a new river access point, as well as providing current information. DRBA is starting to develop a more collaborative relationship with DWCD. "We want to be part of the conversation," said Josh Munson, Vice President and Founding Board Member of DRBA.

Working together, DRBA and DWCD were instrumental in opening up a new critical river access point near Slickrock. As the old access is on private land and now fenced off, there was an immediate need to find a new access point along a particularly long stretch of the river. Recognizing the problems and confusion that might occur if a legitimate access wasn't created, the James and Heaton families opened up their Slickrock property for parking and launching boats. Melody Heaton spent almost two weeks living on the property and managing the cars and crowds. Parking about 142 vehicles, Melanie said "it was great to be part of the excitement, everyone was really happy." While most people were from the region, she met boaters from Flagstaff, Montana, and Salt Lake. Parking cars at \$7 per day, no one made a fortune; however, it did provide the opportunity to make some extra cash.

Extra cash is an opportunity not to be missed, especially in the rural, challenged economies of Dove Creek, Naturita, Dry Creek Basin, Bedrock and the Paradox Valley. This year a few shuttle businesses were able to organize quickly and used DRBA to spread the word that they were in operation. One business out of Dove Creek shuttled close to 100 cars.

Before the dam was built, there were 22 commercial companies permitted to operate on the Dolores. Several shuttle businesses operated in Dove Creek, Bedrock and Naturita, and from May through July, area businesses enjoyed the influx of boaters who stocked up on food, gas, and supplies. Commercial rafting is big business in Colorado, providing an estimated 162 million dollar impact to the economy in 2015.

Because of the unpredictable nature of recreation flows, there are limited commercial boating opportunities on the Dolores River compared to other rivers in the state.

This year's full reservoir and subsequent spill was much needed - a relief to drought-weary irrigators, critical to the fish and riparian habitat below the dam, and a thrill for boaters whose memories of long past Dolores trips were fading. While a full reservoir should be a great unifier for boaters and irrigators, it appears from recent newspaper articles, editorials and social media that there remains a lot of polarization. While both irrigators and boaters have different priorities, they all want a full reservoir, effective forecasting, and predictable reservoir levels and flow releases. According to Josh Monson, DRBA wants to be in a collaborative relationship with DWCD and help create solutions as well as educate the public about the complexity under which the dam operates. Most boaters would like to see more water in the river, but as Munson so astutely put it, "yelling and pointing fingers isn't the right way to go." DWCD, too, is reaching out in a positive way to boaters; they are holding a public meeting on July 26th for a discussion of the 2016 boating release, inviting boaters to learn about spill operations and to share their experiences.

These are all positive steps to bring the boating and water communities together, improve relationships, and educate both groups about constraints and needs of the other. I applaud the efforts of DWCD to learn more about the needs and safety of boaters and to open a dialogue around how releases for recreation might be improved. I thank DRBA for being a voice for the river and working to help solve conflicts and problems, including most recently using its social media and communication platforms to get the word out about flows, shuttles and access. American Whitewater (AW) has also been a long-time advocate of the river, spending countless hours participating in the Dolores River Dialogue and other collaborative efforts to improve boating and fish flows. AW was instrumental in creating DRBA in 2012 to bolster opportunities for local paddlers to engage in dialogue with water managers and agencies. According to Nathan Fey, Director of the Colorado Stewardship Program, "There are opportunities to improve spill management below McPhee and implement some long-sought cooperative efforts to benefit fish and boating."

Around the state, there are good examples of boaters and irrigators working together, avoiding the threat of litigation, and recognizing the benefits each brings to the state. I am hopeful that this same synergy can come to the Dolores River and that improved communication, forecasting, and timing will help support a more predictable boating season, boating economy, as well as healthier river environment for sensitive fish species.



The author hooting and hollering on the lower Dolores River.
Photo credit: Cody Perry of Rig to Flip

With a full reservoir in 2016, it sets up the possibility for another release in 2017 if snow pack levels are close to average. Regular reservoir releases would do wonders for the river ecosystem, not to mention bring happiness to lots of boaters and business owners. The Bedrock Store, closed for years, was recently purchased. Unfortunately, it opened right after hundreds of boaters passed through this June. However, I think it's a

good sign - at least there will be ice cream, once again, at the end of a Dolores River trip - now if we can just count on Mother Nature and predictable boating flows!