



COLORADO

Colorado Water
Conservation Board

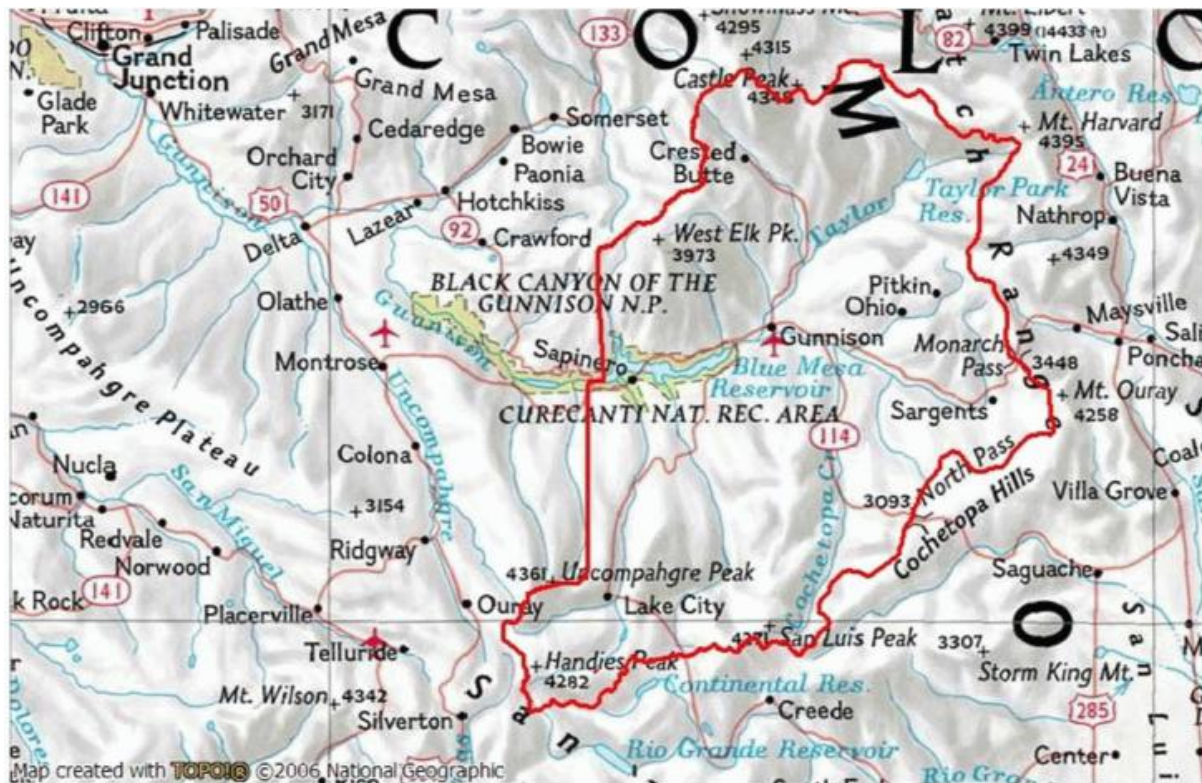
Department of Natural Resources

Watershed Management Planning in the Upper Gunnison River Basin

The who, the where, the how.

The Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District has joined with the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association, Trout Unlimited, High Country Conservation Advocates, Coal Creek Watershed Coalition, and the Lake Fork Valley Conservancy to form a Watershed Management Planning Group (WMPG) for the Upper Gunnison River Basin. The mission of the WMPG is to develop a watershed management plan that will help protect existing water uses and watershed health in the Upper Gunnison Basin in the face of pressure from increased water demands and permanent reductions in water supply.

The Upper Gunnison District



The Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District is located in south-central Colorado in the headwaters of the Gunnison River. The District boundaries encompass



the portion of the Gunnison River watershed that is tributary to Blue Mesa Reservoir, an area of approximately 3,450 square miles. The District includes most of Gunnison County, and a portion of Hinsdale and Saguache Counties. The City of Gunnison, Towns of Crested Butte, Mount Crested Butte, Lake City and Pitkin are located in the District. Elevations range from

7,160 feet below Blue Mesa Dam to more than 14,000 feet at the eastern and southern boundaries on the Continental Divide. The Taylor and East Rivers combine at Almont to form the Gunnison River, approximately nine miles northeast of the City of Gunnison. From this location, the Gunnison River flows south and west to the point where it enters Blue Mesa Reservoir. Blue Mesa is the largest body of water in Colorado, and is one of three reservoirs comprising the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit of the Colorado River Storage Project. Taylor Park Reservoir and Lake San Cristobal are also located in the District. Major tributaries to the Gunnison River within the District also include Ohio Creek, Tomichi Creek, Cochetopa Creek, and Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. The District's western boundary is immediately downstream of Blue Mesa Dam. The total population of the District is approximately 20,000 residents.

Approximately 82% of the land located within the District are federal public lands used for livestock grazing, recreation, and wildlife habitat. The predominant use of private lands is for production of hay, pasture, and livestock. This agricultural production is a major factor in the District's economy and is dependent upon irrigation, with approximately 70,00 irrigated acres that account for 97% of water consumption in the District. The Upper Gunnison Basin is noted for its water-based recreation activities including rafting, kayaking, boating, stream and reservoir fishing, and skiing. All of those recreational activities contribute significantly to the basin's economy. For example, the Curecanti National Recreation Area surrounding the Aspinall Unit reservoirs hosts approximately one million visitor days each year. Healthy lakes and streams are critical for all of the water uses in the Basin.



The Planning Process

Colorado's Water Plan contains measurable objectives for - among other things - productive agriculture, watershed health, environment, and recreation. The Gunnison Basin Implementation Plan likewise describes goals to establish priorities for water development and to maintain and protect the current balance of water use in the Gunnison Basin. Guided by these measurable objectives and Basin goals, the Board of Directors of the Upper Gunnison District has initiated a five-year watershed planning

process. The Board accepts the preponderance of scientific evidence indicating that warmer temperatures are already having effects in the District on quantity and timing of precipitation, evaporative losses, forest health, timing of peak runoff, and other effects that will increase in the future. Consequently, the Board directed that the planning effort assume diminishing water supply and increasing demand.



The process began with an *ad hoc* committee made up of stakeholders from throughout the Basin representing diverse interests and water uses. After a series of meetings, the committee evolved into the WMPG that proceeded to develop a framework for advancing the planning process and a budget. Because each tributary

sub-basin within the District is unique, they will be evaluated individually and the results incorporated into a comprehensive basin-wide plan. The first phase, which extends over three years, will concentrate on the Ohio Creek, East River, and Lake Fork sub-basins. The District has contracted with a basin coordinator for each of these sub-basins. The coordinators are persons familiar with the sub-basin and its stakeholders. They will work with stakeholders and consultants to compile the information necessary to assess the needs and objectives of the sub-basin. The total budget is funded by a \$175,000 grant from the CWCB's Watershed Restoration Grant Program, \$300,000 from the Upper Gunnison District, \$37,800 in-kind from partners, and \$60,000 (anticipated) from Water Supply Reserve Fund grants. The planning process consists of the following tasks.

Stakeholder outreach begins the planning process and continues concurrently with all of the other tasks. Stakeholder input will be sought for all aspects of the project, from information gathering to planning to implementation. The coordinators will contact stakeholders individually and in community meetings to learn their ideas about existing uses, information needs, best practices, potential pilot projects, and to develop implementation strategies.



Mapping and data compilation will be conducted by professional consultants to collect and synthesize existing information and identify the need for additional information. A map will be created for each sub-basin, identifying characteristics such as multi-year water supply trends, areas with significant agricultural diversions, areas with significant recreational use, and areas of significant environmental concern. The consultants will work with coordinators and stakeholders in gathering this information.



Address information gaps identified in the two prior tasks and conduct stream and watershed assessments that will provide stakeholders with the information necessary to make informed decisions about needs and solutions. This activity will result in a

consumptive use inventory that will include identification of areas of shortages and infrastructure needs. A non-consumptive use inventory will also be completed to identify and quantify environmental and recreational needs.

Construct demonstration projects in each sub-basin that demonstrate water use efficiency and other best management practices, with multiple use objectives to meet consumptive and non-consumptive needs.



Identify a range of options for improved water use efficiency and other best management practices. Working with stakeholders, the WMPG will compile the information developed in the assessment phases and develop a comprehensive list of options for developing a watershed management plan for each sub-basin.



During this process the District, WPMG, and involved stakeholders will reach out to those in the other Upper Gunnison sub-basins to introduce the project and lay the groundwork for the expansion of



the planning effort to those sub-basins and for consolidation of the sub-basin plans into a master watershed plan for the entire Upper Gunnison River Basin that is consistent with the WMPG mission.

About the author: *John H. McClow is a graduate of the University of Colorado and University of Colorado School of Law. He has practiced law in Colorado since 1973, and has represented the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District since 1991, becoming full-time General Counsel in 2006. John is a Colorado Bar Fellow, a member of the Board of Directors of the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy, and is past Chair of the Seventh Judicial District Commission on Judicial Performance. He is a member of the Board of Directors and is past President (2014) of the Colorado Water Congress, as well as Vice-Chair of its State Affairs Committee. He serves as the Legislative Representative to the Gunnison Basin Roundtable. He served from 2013 to 2014 as Colorado's Commissioner on the Upper Colorado River Commission, and as Colorado's representative to negotiations among the seven Colorado River Basin states, the United States, and Mexico. He represents Colorado in the Glen Canyon Dam Adaptive Management Work Group. John was appointed to the Colorado Water Conservation Board in 2009.*