

## LOWER DOLORES WORKING GROUP

### Meeting 2 Summary

Jan. 19, 2009

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**Note:** Presentations, documents, meeting summaries, agendas and other information related to the Lower Dolores Working Group process are posted at <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/drd/>. There is a button on the left on the home page for the Lower Dolores Working Group.

**Agenda and future meetings:** Facilitator Marsha-Porter Norton reviewed the agenda for this meeting of the Lower Dolores River Management Plan Update Working Group (“Working Group”). The Working Group will be delving in-depth into issues from now through April. Final decisions and recommendations to the San Juan Public Lands Center (“SJPLC”) should be made by this fall.

**Meeting summaries:** Rather than review past meeting summaries during the meetings themselves, Marsha asked that participants e-mail her if they have corrections or concerns about draft summaries. Her e-mail is porternorton@animas.net.

**Science efforts of the Dolores River Dialogue (“DRD”):** Jim Siscoe, director of the Montezuma Valley Irrigation Company (“MVIC”) and co-coordinator of the DRD Science Committee, presented a PowerPoint summarizing past and present science efforts.

Primary DRD science participants are the Colorado Water Conservation Board, which provides funding; MVIC, which pays Jim’s salary; Colorado Division of Wildlife (“DOW”); Nature Conservancy, which paid for the initial core science report three years ago and hired Jim as a science consultant; Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (“BLM”); Fort Lewis College; Northern Arizona University; and Bugs Consulting.

The philosophy of the DRD science team is to make sure that the science efforts they conduct are completely transparent, free of hidden agendas, and as devoid of politics as possible.

Major topics of discussion for the DRD science team have been:

- Geomorphology (primarily sediment transport)
- Coldwater fisheries (in particular, how to manage for a recreational fishery in Reach 1 from McPhee Dam to Bradfield Bridge while also supporting native fish)
- Riparian ecology
- Special species of concern (native fish)

Scientists have broken the river from McPhee to the confluence with the Colorado River into eight reaches that have unique characteristics in regard to gradient, riparian ecology, geology and other factors.

The reach from the dam to Bradfield is one of the healthiest areas on the river, in terms of trees and riparian ecology. Rivers like disturbance and like to be able to meander. Since the construction of the dam, vegetation including cottonwoods and willows has responded to the spills and has flourished.

The DRD science team recognizes there are limitations to what can be done to encourage a healthier river and fishery because of the many needs of downstream users. The DRD science team seeks to identify issues and needs, quantify the water they think they need, and see if that is feasible.

One of the issues with riparian and aquatic ecology is the bottom of the stream can't be hard and smooth or fish don't have places to lay eggs.

Before MVIC built the trans-basin diversion, it's likely the Dolores River did not go completely dry in summer. During the 120 years prior to the dam's construction, the river would have big flushing flows. Then it would go dry, or nearly so, from mid-June through July in the area where the dam is now, down to the pump station. There was then no trout fishery, but there were deep pools of water filled with native fish. The river bottom was churned up. It was a healthier environment.

The maximum amount of spill that can now be released from the dam without harm is 5,000 cfs. The energy from the big flushing flows has been lost. And where the Dolores was once a dry river, it is now a perennial river.

The science team has talked about using heavy equipment to physically move the river channel in places such as Big Gypsum and below the dam to create healthier conditions. However, the DOW is opposed to such an action.

But the science team has been conducting such a project at Big Gypsum on private land owned by the Suckla family. A series of aerial photos taken over the years will help reveal changes in the channel and vegetation.

The DRD science team has accomplished a great deal with very little money. It is on par with efforts that have cost millions of dollars.

Lessons learned so far:

- Timing of the spill can be difficult. It is difficult to plan management options for spills of less than 50,000 acre-feet.
- Flushing flows can be negated by late-fall fine-sediment loading. Last year the energy released was small and long. It was excellent for rafters but lousy for fish.

- Individual reaches have different opportunities to achieve ecological targets. Just putting water down the creek may not be the answer for some of the ecological needs. It may help fish but not other riparian needs.

Primary questions 2008:

- The relationship between temperature and river flows. (This is true across the West.)
- The relationship between flows and cottonwoods
- The relationship between flows and nutrients
- Native and non-native fish issues (invasive species, proper functioning condition, and overall watershed health)

Predicting runoff is difficult. The Bureau of Reclamation's official forecast for spring and fall winter flows is mostly nonsense, in Jim's opinion. If inflow could be predicted with 80 percent certainty about a week in advance, you could perhaps manage spills to better meet the needs of both recreationists and the environment. However, the accuracy of predictions is closer to 50 percent.

**Recreation in the Lower Dolores River Valley:** Rick Ryan, river ranger with the SJPLC, discussed recreation and gave a PowerPoint about rafting on the Lower Dolores. Rafting is just a small part of the recreational activities occurring in the valley, but it is a major factor in deciding flows.

Recreational uses in the 97-mile corridor from Bradfield Bridge to Bedrock (the portion managed by the SJPLC) include motorized travel along the Snaggletooth trail from Cahone to Slick Rock; horseback riding; camping; hiking; fishing; hunting; biking and more. The main campground is at Bradfield Bridge. Twenty miles downstream is the Box Elder Recreational Site, which sees family camping, weddings and family reunions, and even a bluegrass festival once a year.

There are 16 commercial boating outfitters permitted on the Lower Dolores, one of which is basically for fishing.

The information presented in the rafting PowerPoint was gleaned from voluntary register sheets at four boat-launch sites on the river. They may reflect only 60 to 70 percent of the actual trips because not everyone signs in.

The 2008 rafting season was a good one. Flows first reached 200 cfs, the minimum flow for small rafts, inflatables and kayaks, on March 26. (Bigger rafts need at least 800 cfs, and the biggest prefer 1,000 cfs.) The greatest release was 2,000 cfs from May 21 to 22. The last day at 200 cfs was June 24.

Launch-site information shows:

- Bradfield Bridge had the most launches, with 303. The pump station had 74, Slick Rock had 139, and Gypsum Valley had 114.
- The busiest day of the week was Saturday.
- May was the busiest month, with 211 launches.
- The majority of trips were for three days, but more day trips are also taking place.
- The most common group size was two.
- The vast majority of boaters were from Colorado (494 launches); of those, most were from Durango (120).

The Dolores is not a permitted river, meaning private boaters do not need permits to float the river. If it were, groups would likely be larger.

There are few boaters on the reach from the dam to Bradfield Bridge.

Class V Snaggletooth rapid is a challenge even for experienced rafters and kayakers.

**Managing spills:** Mike Preston, manager of the Dolores Water Conservancy District (“DWCD”), discussed the logistics of managing spills from McPhee and described the 2008 season.

The DWCD had a good working relationship with the Dolores Public Lands Office last summer. The 2008 forecasted spill turned out to be a somewhat optimistic projection, but there was still plenty of water for a spill. When inflow equals outflow, the spill is over. Last year that occurred on June 24.

Last year the reservoir filled and stayed full. It is now down by about 25 feet, or 100,000 acre-feet, which bodes well for 2009. At a minimum the reservoir will fill and there will probably be some releases; managers will know more in February.

Mike presented and explained graphs showing McPhee downstream releases and Snotel averages over the years.

Mike was asked whether releases could be timed to coincide with low-elevation snowmelt coming off below the dam. He said in some years it could and that might be helpful. A lecturer from the University of New Mexico spoke in Cortez on Jan. 16 about how climate change might affect the Southwest. He projected that there will be more rain and less snowfall. Snowpack will melt earlier and temperatures will be warmer, so more evaporation will occur. Over the next 100 years there could be a 30 percent reduction in reservoir water in Southwest Colorado. Mike said managers will be keeping a close eye on when the snowpack is melting and will plan different management if necessary. So far the time of peak snowmelt seems to be steady, around the third week in May.

**Discussion of issues, concerns and opportunities surrounding recreation:**

Concern and opportunity: The Dolores County commissioners said they want to keep open the county road that goes through the river corridor across public lands in Dolores County and into San Miguel County. Maintenance ends about 1 mile beyond Snaggletooth. Driving past Snaggletooth toward Pyramid Point in a full-sized vehicle is difficult if not impossible, and further along, it's difficult even with an ATV. The concern is for vehicle access and emergency rescues. The opportunity is to provide vehicle access for rescues and recreation.

Opportunity: Revitalize the coldwater fishery below the dam to Bradfield for recreation.

Opportunity: Because the river is not permitted, local boaters can take several raft trips in a single season if the spills are good. Better flow management to create steady flows will give more paddlers an experience.

Opportunity: Al Heaton has a permit to take people on horseback trail rides down the road as part of the cattle drive in the fall. Continue to allow this.

Concern: Rick Ryan said the carrying capacity of the river and corridor must be addressed. At Coyote Wash one day there were seven groups camping, all in sight and sound of one another. There have been complaints about loud parties and drinking, fireworks, and dogs running loose. A permit system may be needed. It was suggested that permits be required only on weekends and holidays.

Opportunity: Under the contract, the DWCD and Bureau of Reclamation must manage the dam for irrigation and to "maximize rafting days". This is not defined. Flows of 1,000 to 1,200 cfs are ideal for rafters, but there may be an opportunity to increase tourism by stretching out the experience for smaller craft such as canoes by having more days with lower but consistent flows. However, this does not meet the needs of the majority of river boaters who utilized rafts.

Concern: Declining native fish species in the Dolores River. Their needs must be addressed or there could be a federal Endangered Species listing.

Concern and opportunity: People camp on private land along the river. Who is liable for firefighting costs if they start a fire? Maybe there could be an agreement to limit liability for the private landowner.

Concern: Do we really want to promote the area and attract more users when this could prove detrimental to the resource?

Concern: The 1990 management plan allocates a certain number of commercial boat launches. Is this still appropriate? The SJPLC would like feedback.

**Public comment:** Audience members also raised several concerns.

- Careless OHV use is destroying pools and vegetation near Coyote Wash. Rick Ryan agreed this is a problem. There are OHV drivers coming in from the Utah side. This is a Wilderness Study Area.
- The boat takeout at Bedrock needs improvement; possibly a donation box could be put up to help with costs. This site is managed by a different BLM resource area, but the manager there seems willing to have Rick manage it. Volunteers could help.
- A safe place to take out before Snaggletooth needs to be developed. Rick said he will see what he can do.

If anyone has further opportunities, issues, or concerns, e-mail them to Marsha before the next meeting.

**Next meeting:** The next meeting will be Tuesday, Feb. 17, from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. It will not be on Monday because that is Presidents' Day. The topics will be ecology (riparian and other), fish and wildlife.