

**DOLORES RIVER DIALOGUE**  
**July 2, 2013**

**Note:** The DRD web site is <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/drd/>.

**Overview of efforts on the Lower Dolores River:** Facilitator Marsha Porter-Norton said the various efforts currently underway on the Lower Dolores are like the different parts of a mobile – all interconnected. These efforts include the 319 watershed plan, the Implementation Plan, and work to develop legislation to create a national conservation area along the Lower Dolores corridor.

▪ She gave a brief history of the process that led to the recently released Dolores River watershed plan. After receiving a grant in 2008 from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to write a watershed plan, the DRD put that project on hold to await the results of other efforts, such as the Lower Dolores Working Group process. Eventually, however, the state said it was time to finish the plan. Don Schwindt, a Dolores Water Conservancy District board member, and Matt Clark of Trout Unlimited (along with, previously, Wendy McDermott of the San Juan Citizens Alliance) served on a subcommittee of the DRD Steering Committee that guided the completion of the watershed plan over 18 months. Ann Oliver and Jeff Kane took over the job of writing the plan after the consultant originally hired, Chester Anderson, moved to California and could not finish the job. Marsha said the plan was sent to the state at the end of June after being reviewed and vetted by the DRD-SC at least eight times. She said it is a foundational and educational document.

Hard copies are available and anyone who wants one should contact her. The plan is also on line on the DRD web site and there is a copy that can be seen at the DWCD offices.

▪ Marsha also discussed the development of the Implementation Plan, an effort to look at the river and native fish from a broad perspective. The IP was released last fall by the Implementation Team. Much feedback was received and the IP is being rewritten in response to that feedback.

▪ The effort to develop NCA legislation is also ongoing.

Marsha provided a handout of an organizational chart for the DRD and another handout describing current efforts on the Lower Dolores.

**Update on the Dolores River Nonpoint Source Pollution Watershed Plan:** Jeff Kane, one of the plan's authors, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the plan. He said nonpoint pollution comes from the landscape, as opposed to point pollution, which is emitted by specific sources such as a factory or waste-water treatment plant. Generally, nonpoint-source pollution involves runoff and is associated with landscape disturbance or natural background. Nonpoint-source pollution plans (also called "319 plans" after the section of the Clean Water Act that authorizes them) are designed to bring stakeholders together to coordinate what they believe are issues of importance involving the river in question.

For the Dolores River plan, the key goals were:

- Focus on the stretch between McPhee Dam and the confluence with the San Miguel River.
- Focus on water-quality concerns for native fish.
- Compile water-quality data for pollutants of concern in one place so it can be evaluated.

- Compile stakeholder perspectives and information underlying the pledges in the DRD mission statement.
- Create a menu of potential voluntary opportunities/actions to monitor, protect or improve water quality and native-fish habitat within existing water allocations. (Many are opportunities to collect more data.)
- Identify projects and actions for the DRD or its member entities to prioritize and pursue.

Jeff said watershed plans usually are written for streams or lakes with pollution concerns, but a plan can be written to protect existing water quality. That was true for this plan, as the Dolores has generally good water quality. Temperature criteria are occasionally exceeded, but otherwise the river is not exceeding thresholds.

Jeff discussed the three appendices to the watershed plan, saying collaboration is their common theme. He said Appendix 3, “A Beginning Compilation of Stakeholder Perspectives on the History of Dolores River Diversions, Agriculture, and Recreational Uses of the Dolores River,” is called a “beginning” effort because there are a number of stakeholders not represented yet.

Jeff said the five pollutants identified by the DRD-SC for further examination in this plan – temperature, sediment, uranium, salinity, and nutrients – are thought to have some effect on habitat for native fish.

Section 10 of the plan summarizes potential action steps. It includes a decision tree developed by the DRD-SC describing the steps for moving forward with proposed projects. Jeff said the plan doesn’t recommend any steps in particular, but simply sets up a process.

**Q&A:** Ed Miller, an MVI shareholder, said he was impressed with the plan and it opened his eyes to rafters’ concerns. He said the trout fishery below McPhee Dam is a part of the Dolores Project that seems not to have worked well, and asked whether it might be beneficial to abandon the coldwater fishery and use the fish-pool water to create a simulated flood surge on the river in spring and to provide for a reliable recreational-boating season. He said this would also benefit native fish because it would bring the river closer to the conditions that existed before McPhee. Ed said rafting and roundtail chub are the two Outstandingly Remarkable Values in the river and should be the top priorities.

Peter said the concern about how McPhee has changed the river, and how best to manage the water resources to protect the values that are still present, has been raised many times. The river used to put a lot more water down the canyon at peak times, which created rich and diverse habitat for fish. The Dolores Project took away much of that power. The Dolores Project greatly benefited this community and area, but there is considerably less water and energy in the river now, and even if the fish-pool water were added, it would not replicate the power and volumes that were present before the dam. Peter said it is not possible to go back to the pre-dam era, but the goal is to manage the baseflow and spills to provide the maximum possible benefit for ecology and boaters.

David Graf of Colorado Parks and Wildlife said when the Dolores Project was envisioned, there was a goal of a having tailwater fishery. Planners looked at other places where such fisheries had been created and have proven to be a boon to local economies. In fact, after the dam was built but before the Project came fully online, the trout fishery on the Dolores met gold-medal standards, and commercial guides operated there regularly. However, David said, since about 2000, there has been almost a 1:1 correlation between how much water is released and the biomass of trout in the river. He said Ed’s

question is a good one, but it is an obligation under the Project documents to create a coldwater fishery. Changing that would require going back to the community to re-evaluate that commitment. David also noted the risk of releasing water from high in the dam, which could result in the release of non-native species from the reservoir.

Cole Crocker-Bedford, a landowner on the river, asked whether the watershed plan offers solutions for sedimentation. Jeff said much of the solution was to involve stakeholders more and to look at broader sediment dynamics in the river. More monitoring is needed to know what measures will be effective.

Allen Maez, an MVI shareholder, asked about the effects of the pollutants. Jeff said there are not enough data to say conclusively. Biologists often wonder whether large uranium tailings piles are affecting the river, but more sampling would be needed to ascertain that. Regarding salinity, Jeff said it is mostly related to Paradox Valley, and there is already an ongoing project to remove salt. There is not a great deal of specific information on how uranium and salinity affect fish.

Jeff said nutrients, another of the pollutants in the plan, have been on the radar because sometimes they promote algae growth below the dam. More needs to be learned about what is influencing the algae. He said the other two pollutants described in the plan, temperature and sedimentation, have more obvious impacts. Others may warrant future study and could be referenced in a grant application.

Alan said the IP and watershed plan both need to contain specifics on what the outcomes should be.

Don S. said before the reorganization of the DRD and creation of the Steering Committee, he and Chuck Wanner of the SJCA were approached by federal officials aware of the DRD effort who suggested writing a watershed plan because it does provide access to new funding. Don said the watershed plan for the Dolores might be something of “a square peg in a round hole” because it is not closely similar to most other watershed plans, but it’s a way to further DRD goals.

Ed asked whether errors in the document can be fixed at this point. Marsha said it has been submitted to the state, but if someone has input about a simple correction they should tell her, Don, or Matt. Ed said he believes the number of acres listed as irrigated by MVI seems too low. Marsha said that can be discussed at the DRD-SC’s meeting in August.

#### **Update on the Implementation Team’s effort to redraft the management plan for native fish**

**(Implementation Plan):** Peter gave a brief history of the IT, explaining that it was created at the end of the “A Way Forward” scientific inquiry and includes representatives of entities interested in working to improve management of native fish. The team’s IP came out in August 2012 and was presented to the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Outreach was done to many other entities. Concerns were raised about a number of issues, a few of which were:

- What are the goals that are being set?
- The goals are too far-reaching and unrealistic.
- There was too much of an “aspirational” quality in the discussion about baseflows. The language seemed to imply a responsibility to meet those goals.

So the IT is now redrafting the plan. They began with the “goals” section. Peter said one concern was that the three native fish species – the roundtail chub, flannelmouth sucker, and bluemouth sucker –

were lumped together. The roundtail chub has the ability to survive droughts by staying in deep pools. The two suckers are more riffle-dependent. The roundtail is an ORV listed for the river, while the other two species are not. Furthermore, the roundtail is showing somewhat better viability at present in the Lower Dolores.

Peter said there was a strong concern that the IP's goals for the sucker species were too ambitious. The IT wants to understand what goals are appropriate for a changed river, so changes were made in the plan:

- Roundtail chub were separated from suckers.
- The river was addressed as different reaches with different characteristics.
- Different indicators – numbers, age-class distribution, success of spawning, and habitat indicators – were considered in regards to fish viability. The IP now discusses measurement tools to evaluate change over time. It was made more specific about what kinds of conditions and what kinds of status are being sought in each reach.

Peter said work is ongoing to revise the baseflow and spill-management sections. He emphasized that this process is about listening to feedback.

Peter said there was also a concern that the IT did not do enough consultation with entities such as the Legislative Subcommittee and DWCD and MVI boards. The IT decided they need to get sections out for review in the community as they are completed, and slowly but surely work for completion of a second draft, perhaps by September. The focus for input has been the Legislative Subcommittee and DWCD and MVI boards; these are reviewing each section as it comes out. Peter said it is important to finish the plan and to do so in a way that broadens support for improving management of water resources and species, because the NCA legislation has to be supported by the community.

DWCD manager Mike Preston said water managers have said they would like to eliminate the Wild and Scenic River suitability that currently exists on the Lower Dolores and provide long-term protection for the water supply. The NCA legislation is a way to do that, but in order for environmental groups to support this alternative to WSR suitability, they need to be satisfied that the river's ORVs will continue to be protected.

David Frederick of the San Juan Basin Farm Bureau asked whether there had ever been a vote taken or consensus reached on creating the NCA. Mike said anything that involves the Dolores Project water supply has to be agreed to by the DWCD board. The same is true for MVI and other interests involved. Many entities would be affected.

Marsha said in 2008 the Forest Service/BLM came to the DRD and asked for a group to help them update the management plan for the river corridor. They also asked whether there was interest in finding an alternative to WSR status. About 45 people served on the LDWG and that group reached consensus to create a special area, and appointed a legislative subcommittee. There was very much consensus to see if a WSR alternative could be found and the tool picked was an NCA. Marsha said it is unrealistic to expect that every citizen in all the affected counties would be in agreement but many interests were represented on the LDWG.

Jay Loschert of Dolores River Boating Advocates asked whether the IP will have a “two-tier” approach to native fish, with the roundtail chub prioritized over the two sucker species. He said when the AWF researchers spoke here, they mentioned that the suckers in the Dolores River are special because they haven’t been hybridized, which is unusual. Jay said it is important not to ignore the suckers’ needs.

David Graf said from CPW’s perspective, the three native fish are an assemblage of species and can’t really be disaggregated. They evolved together; actions that could be taken to optimize roundtail chub numbers generally will benefit bluehead and flannelmouth suckers as well. David said to the best of his knowledge, native sucker species in every other river mainstem on the Western Slope have some hybridization. Additionally, there is a three-species conservation agreement for these fish that has been agreed to by six states, including Colorado, as well as the federal-land agencies and tribes.

David said the first draft of the IP set the barrier too high and the IT is now trying to couch the fish metrics in a way that is much less threatening, but the goal remains to try to prevent these fish from being extirpated from large stretches of the Dolores River.

**Update on the Legislative Subcommittee’s work:** Amber Kelley, chair of the Legislative Subcommittee, briefly reviewed its history. She said the subcommittee is meeting regularly again after a period during which it met less often because it was awaiting the results of other efforts, such as the Implementation Plan. She said the subcommittee is now giving feedback to the IT on the IP. The subcommittee is not sure how the IP may link to the NCA legislation. One major focus now is the boundary of the proposed NCA and language to address access to private property. The subcommittee is also preparing a comprehensive list of issues that need to be considered. The members have been engaging with the BLM and will soon be discussing the agency’s new policy manuals. The subcommittee also has been working with Montrose County and will be going on a field trip with some of their representatives.

Amber said the goal is to be able to develop a fairly complete boundary map so it can be brought to the full LDWG soon, perhaps by this fall. She said these meetings are open to the public, and the legislative-parameters document can be provided to anyone interested. Even when the draft legislation is prepared and disseminated there will be many opportunities to provide feedback about it. She said she is not sure about a timeline for that because they are waiting on the completion of the IP, and all the pieces of the “mobile” have to hang together. She said no one will be 100 percent happy with the legislation because it represents compromises on everyone’s part.

**Drought forecast:** Ken Curtis, engineer with the DWCD, said an enormous amount of data has been accumulated in the last 30 to 40 years related to weather and geoscience, but when it comes to drought, the information is still largely speculative and there is not a lot of lead time on forecasts.

He said the Colorado River Basin has been in its current dry cycle since 2000. In that time there have been just two good water years. Since February, the local area has been in severe drought conditions. He said the Upper Dolores would be going dry right now if it were not for water from Groundhog to support the flows. Ken said New Mexico is predicted to receive good moisture in July and the Four Corners is right on the edge of the perceived benefit area. After that the picture is unclear. The monsoons always come, but no one knows how strong they will be. In response to a question, he said a single average-precipitation year will probably not result in enough water to provide a spill in the spring, but a couple of average years or better would; however, there have not been many of those since 2000. A normal year would probably bring the river and reservoir back to conditions allowing for a full water

allocation, but it will take a couple years to restore conditions to where they could support a spill.

Ken said there were similar drought cycles in the 1930s and '50s. The 1980s were record wet years and the 2000s were record dry years. He said researchers do not have a good understanding of what drives those cycles.

Ken said the only area of agreement among researchers seems to be that temperatures will be slightly higher in the future.

In regards to the El Niño/La Niña cycle, he said it appears to be neutral right now, and models predict it will stay neutral going into the winter.