

UPPER DOLORES WATERSHED/ MCPHEE RESERVOIR PROTECTION INTEREST MEETING

Thursday July 30, 10am to 12pm

Dolores Water Conservancy District, 60 S. Cactus St., Cortez

Summary:

At a meeting held to determine if stakeholders want to work together to improve ecosystem health, hydrologic function, and fire resilience in the upper Dolores River Watershed, participants agreed to move forward, inviting a few more players to the table, especially wood products industry representatives. Background provided included strong representation of the need for watershed scale forest restoration, and a foundation of successful regional efforts and the Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership on the Mancos/Dolores Districts of the San Juan in the 1990s to build upon.

The group compiled an initial list of resources that the attending organizations bring to the table including: community connections, funding, political support, technical expertise, coordination support, technical support, and chain-saw ready projects.

A list of challenges for scaling up restoration efforts on the San Juan National Forest was also compiled: uncertain futures, market and physical constraints (transportation, topography, milling capacity, etc.) to commercial harvest, and limited funding and manpower. This list also documents some information that needs to be compiled or determined to support a collaborative effort toward forest restoration.

The group agreed to continue the discussion. More background on the SJNF current efforts will be shared electronically and at a mid-September meeting. Industry and additional stakeholders will be invited for a presentation of the SJNF background and to agree upon goals.

NOTES

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In attendance: *Pam Wilson (FireWise), Vern Harrell (BoR), James Dietrich (MC), Thurman Wilson (Mountain Studies Institute), Mark Krabath (SJNF), Derek Padilla (SJNF), Mike Zion (Dolores FPD), Ken Curtis (DWCD), Mike Preston (DWCD), Kent Grant (CSFS), Rebecca Samulski (FireWise/ facilitator)*

The meeting began at 10:05

Rebecca opened with the purpose for “Stakeholders for water and forest management to determine if there is a need and a will to improve ecosystem health, hydrologic function, and fire resilience in the upper Dolores River Watershed, upslope from McPhee Reservoir,” and expected outcomes. The group agreed to move forward with the proposed agenda and attendees introduced themselves along with their interest in the discussion. The Dolores Water Conservancy District is interested in protecting McPhee Reservoir from the impacts of catastrophic wildfire.

Becca gave some background on why the group is meeting.

- A lot of funding for landscape-scale restoration is shifting from a project-level focus to watershed-scale efforts with examples of successful partnerships on the Pagosa Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest, the Rio Grande and Santa Fe watersheds, and around Flagstaff.
- FireWise and Mountain Studies Institute put in for a capacity building grant for watershed work in Montezuma County in spring of 2014, but did not receive the funding. Both organizations are willing to continue pursuing funding.
- The Weber Fire was an eye opener to Becca of the devastating impacts of post-fire erosion, debris flows, and flooding. The impacts of a similar fire in the upper Dolores or Mancos watershed could be devastating to the town, water users, infrastructure, and economy.
- Fuel treatments, including prescribed burning, and other mitigation actions are well documented to be more cost effective than fire suppression and post-fire reconstruction.

Background on the Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership: The Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership (Partnership) formerly functioned on the Dolores District, working to restore the ponderosa pine ecosystem and sustain the local timber industry from the early to late 90s. Many of the goals of the Partnership seem relevant today. The goals were:

- Demonstrate that a healthy ecosystem and healthy economy are compatible goals.
- Practice adaptive management collaboratively.
- Reduce hazards of insects and disease infestations and catastrophic fire.
- Create the opportunity for the re-emergence of mature and old growth pine along with an enhanced variety of sizes, ages, and stand structures.
- Increase the abundance and diversity of grasses and forbs by opening the canopy.
- Increase the diversity of wildlife habitat and species.

- Create a sustainable commercial approach to thinning second-growth pine.
- Assist industry in transitioning to small-diameter material.
- Demonstrate a process of coupling scientific analysis with broad based public input to inform management.

Some differences today are the need to include Dolores County and the town of Rico, highlighting the risks/benefits to the watershed, a local timber industry that has further declined, climate change, heightened insects and disease concerns, and interest in other ecosystems including spruce-fir.

Participants were asked to add further background to frame the current status of forest health in the Dolores R. watershed above McPhee.

Mark Krabath has been on the forest since 1999. From 2000 to 2007/2008, there was 400-500 acres a year being harvested. The forest has 10-12,000 acres of a backlog of prescribed burning in timber and fuels units. Recent timber removal has been by a handful of commercial firewood cutters and the Southwest Conservation Corps' Veterans Fire Crew, collectively thinning around 200 acres per year. A lot of aspen was taken out in areas of Sudden Aspen Decline, but there is probably a need to address SAD aspen again.

Mike Preston added some background on what made the PPP work. The strong partnership included local timber industry, Montezuma County, the Forest Service, and San Juan Citizen's Alliance. There had to be enough big logs to carry each restoration unit. The partnership did a lot of tours and shared the work happening on the ground. Dolores Fire Protection District was great at sharing information with homeowners, going door to door. There is a larger wildland-urban interface issue today.

Intermountain Lumber in Montrose bought all of the logging contracts, shutting out some of the smaller, local producers, before the Montrose Mill shut down. They have reformed the business in Montrose, now Montrose Forest Products, but are not processing pine. Mark K. added that Montrose Forest Products is now interested in spruce and fir from the Dolores district. There are some tools that weren't available at that time to secure the timber resource, such as stewardship contracting.

There was general agreement that we need to involve the local wood product industry as soon as possible.

Thurman Wilson supported the importance of the commercial component, citing it as a source of success for the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership in Pagosa. The presence of Renewable Forest Energy, LLC (J. R. Ford's biomass power generation project) made the community discussions about forest health and timber harvesting real, rather than theoretical.

Becca Samulski highlighted a couple of examples of watershed forest restoration efforts that don't rely on the commercial component, demonstrating that it can be done. Santa Fe has restored the majority of their primary drinking supply watershed intentionally excluding industry due to the environmental

politics at play in the community. They were awarded \$1 million for 5 years then continued to pay for the efforts of the USFS and City fire department fuels crews by absorbing the fuel reduction, maintenance, and education costs into the municipal water budget. Flagstaff created a partnership to restore the forest on the slopes around the city and their water supply reservoir, relying on funding from a mill levy adopted with strong community support. There is also the example near Flagstaff of a partnership working to create wood-products industry. 4FRI, Four Forests Restoration Initiative put out a request for proposals for a timber business that could process all of the wood they wanted to remove. The first selection was unsuccessful, but now another business has taken up the challenge.

Agreement to move forward

Each attendee gave a response as to whether they thought their organization wanted to continue pursuing a restoration effort on the Upper Dolores. Everyone was in support at this time.

YES – Montezuma County, USFS-SJNF, Dolores Water Conservancy Dist., Dolores Fire Protection District, Colorado State Forest Service, FireWise of Southwest Colorado

UPON REQUEST - Mountain Studies Institute (science/monitoring/education and outreach), Bureau of Reclamation (whatever support DWCD needs)

Becca acknowledged that representatives for Dolores County, Rico, and San Juan Citizen's Alliance were interested but unable to attend this first meeting due to scheduling conflicts. The group asked that Timber Industry, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Empire Electric Association, and the High Desert Conservation District be added to the invitation list. There was brief discussion about getting too big to function at this early stage, but that it is better to invite everyone in from the beginning, and let those participate who wish to. Then if someone isn't coming that we really want at the table, we reach out to meet their needs and include them.

What we have in common

The group did a quick exercise to find a few things everyone has in common, and found only one person in our group lives IN the watershed, but nearly all of us drink water from it daily.

Everyone:

- has drunk water from the Dolores River
- has recreated on McPhee and the neighboring forest
- has first-hand connection to a catastrophic wildfire

What we bring to the table – existing capacity, Opportunities, complimentary initiatives, etc.

DWCD: *Contacts/ customers – water user awareness; experience; financial; leadership; longevity; interagency relationships; willingness to communicate and cooperate with industry*

BOR: *Cooperation with USFS and DWCD on issues in and around McPhee*

CSFS: *Technical expertise; on the ground forestry assistance on private lands; Grant \$; Wildfire Hazard mitigation info, Wood utilization and marketing assistance; Good Neighbor Authority; conservation education and outreach*

Dolores Fire: *Support and education. Everyone looks to Fire departments first for help.*

SJNF: *Headwaters of most tributaries are on NFS lands; 4,000 acres of Ponderosa Pine units ready for treatment; Embarking on High Value Risk Analysis for Dolores and Columbine districts starting this Fall; Fire Plan w/ emphasis on W.U.I.; Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA); Farm Bill; existing watershed risk and treatment/restoration efforts; **Targets:**12,000 ccf (500-750 acres) for thinning in Pine, aspen or spruce; mechanical treatment of 500 acres of pine/oak/ year; Prescribed burning (Rx) of 1-2,000 acres/yr*

Mountain Studies Institute: *Supports similar effort – San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership; has science, monitoring, education and facilitation skills and connections; experience with watershed assessments; ties to Colorado Forest Restoration Institute; Good at grant writing and fund-raising; already helping to support the spruce beetle initiative*

Montezuma County: *Local government brings political support; Eligible for some money and subsidies as pass through or recipient; can help make connections to industry; some planning and coordination support; policy development; some tech support, including mapping*

FireWise of Southwest Colorado: *Seed funding to facilitate three meetings of the group before December, 2015 through our role as a Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network Hub organization (1 of 17 across the nation with Nature Conservancy, NFPA, USFS/BLM support); community connections, educating residents to take action to keep properties safe; tours; grant writing; interest in sustaining and promoting partnership; homeowner /landowner incentive programs;*

What outstanding information gaps, capacity or resource shortfalls, challenges or threats do we know about?

Challenges out of our control

- Insect and disease issues in addition to wildfire threats to forest
- No major local catalyzing events/ large wildfires lately
- How future will look – climate, insects and disease, etc. how fires may change in response

Scaling up will be a challenge;

- Lack of a collaborative group in the area- Build partnership to cooperate on pilot efforts
- Limited forest product industry, especially for ponderosa pine, to utilize and pay for wood products, no long-term industry stability, lack of capacity and transportation infrastructure;
- Limited forest products markets/ demand for local products
- Slope- topographic and other practical constraints to commercial timber harvest
- Community education and outreach - Make the public more aware of the danger of what could happen and work to get support from them

- People that don't want to see or support timber harvest or thinning
- Limited manpower, need a way to fund activities, including personnel; Limited CSFS and USFS personnel
- Planning/ NEPA efforts take time
- Inadequate funding from current sources to treat on a large scale; Limited grant money – Need funding to pay for stewardship or service contracts where we can't sell products
- Need mapping support and targets

Information gaps:

- Which treatments should get highest priority? Highest risk areas to McPhee? Prioritize risk areas feasible for treatment
- Where can we treat?
- What is industry demand and capacity?
- What is potential local market for wood products?
- How can we get community buy-in?
- How will we monitor progress of our efforts and success of treatments?
- GIS data for private lands not as good as on Natl. Forest lands
- Relevant info and data is scattered across different agencies and governments

Next Steps

| Task | Who | When |
|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Background summary of current efforts/ targets, proposed High Values Risk Analysis, HFRA opportunities, ready, planned, possible treatment areas | Derek/ SJNF | Aug. 31st |
| Invitation to industry representatives – send email addresses to Becca to add to list | Dwayne Findley (565-2149 or 882-7366 at Wall Wood)and Norm Birtcher (970-249-0812 or 970-275-2405) | Mike Preston by Aug. 31 but ASAP |
| | Kyle Hansen (533-7412) and Harold Ragland (882-2350 or 739-5528) | Kent Grant by Aug. 31 but ASAP |
| Next meeting Sept 15 th or 18 th | Becca- doodle poll Agenda – Purpose and current goals, USFS presentation | |
| Maps to define watershed and demonstrate visually | Past/planned/NEPA ready treatments, vegetation, forest health issues | Mid-September meeting |
| Participation in Cohesive Strategy visit | Derek, Mike P., James and/or County Commissioner | TBA |

The meeting adjourned at 12:12pm.

Notes submitted by Becca Samulski, 8-3-15