

Dolores Watershed Resilient Forest (DWRF) Collaborative
Stakeholders Meeting
Dec. 2, 2020
dwrfcollaborative.org
7 pages

The meeting was conducted via Zoom. Present were:

Ellen Roberts (Southwest Colorado Wildfire Mitigation Impact Fund); Brenna Gaber (Biology Student, Fort Lewis College); Steve Garchar (Dolores County Commission); Molly Pitts (Colorado Timber Industry Association); David Sitton (Aspen Wall Wood); Andrew Hawk (Timber Age Systems of Durango); Tim Kylo (Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative Steering Committee and Montrose Forest Products); Eric Janes (Retired BLM Hydrologist); Bruce Short (Consulting Forester, Short Forestry LLC); Bill Baker (Retired Ecologist); Ed Millard (Montezuma County Representative to Southwest Basin Roundtable); Ken Curtis and Eric Sprague (Dolores Water Conservancy District); Mike Preston (RMRI Steering Committee and DWRF Coordinating Committee); Anthony Culpepper and Michael Remke (Mountain Studies Institute); Duncan Rose (Trout Unlimited); Rebecca Samulski (Fire Adapted Colorado); Alex Graf (Wildfire Adapted Partnership); Robert Meyer (Mancos Trails Group); Tim Reader (Colorado State Forest Service); Travis Bruch, Keith Fox, Derek Padilla, Brad Pietruszka, and Pat Seekins (Dolores Ranger District, San Juan National Forest); Jamie Johnson (Montezuma Land Conservancy); Jordan Van Sickle (Natural Resources Conservation Service in Cortez); Rich Landreth (City of Cortez); Danny Margoles (DWRF Coordinator); and Gail Binkly (Meeting Recorder).

Updates

Forest products industry development: David Sitton said he has been working with Horizon Environmental Services to make an excelsior product that is more like straw than typical fine excelsior fiber. They have found that aspen is much easier to work with than pine because it is less brittle. It is being developed for fire mitigation, particularly on steep slopes and in remote locations, and is being used now on the site of the East Canyon Fire, which burned this summer on Bureau of Land Management and private lands near Mancos. The product can be hand-spread. However, it currently does not meet Forest Service specifications regarding the size of the wood fiber. Aspen Wall Wood and Horizon Environmental Services are working to get the Forest Service specifications changed to allow this size of wood fiber so it can be used on national forest land. The hope is that this is a product that can be put out as part of post-fire mitigation.

Anthony said MSI has used excelsior fairly extensively. It has the ability to stay on the ground and not blow around like straw.

In response to a question, Brad said the product probably is flammable but is generally used on slopes that have already been severely burned.

David said this meets Colorado Department of Transportation specifications, so it can be used on road construction work.

Collaboration with land management agencies:

▪ **Collaborative Forest Landscapes Restoration Program (CFLRP):** Danny said the initial cross-collaborative meeting regarding CFLRP was very useful. Representatives of different collaboratives attended. There was discussion of group governance and future working groups, the need to develop norms and operating principles, and more. However, there may not be funding to do such work, as the CFLRP funding may not actually be delivered for a year. Anthony and Dana Hayward of MSI are to look into routes for getting a facilitator on board to do cross-collaborative discussions and help the group advance. In addition, a project prioritization and a science and monitoring group will have to be developed fairly soon. Danny is excited these conversations are beginning. The next meeting will probably be in January or February. Anyone new who wants to participate should contact him.

▪ **Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative (RMRI):** Danny said conversations have been taking place about the next steps for the PODs prioritization effort. He and Anthony have been speaking with some members of the RMRI Steering Committee. They will be structuring a series of meetings starting in January to gather input from the two collaboratives as well as outside specialists on developing a shared understanding of the goal of this tool and how to use it. The meetings will be open to everyone who wants to participate. People will be doing the prioritization exercise on their own and then coming together as a group to work on areas of agreement and disagreement regarding higher- and lower-priority PODs, etc.

Mike Preston said the core of the POD exercise is to attach the values of water, wildlife, recreation, and community resilience to the landscape and prioritize over a ten-year work program.

Bill Baker expressed concerns about openness and transparency. He said people should be able to see the agenda for the meeting and receive a report about it. He said there are people who are puzzled about what is happening with RMRI and the process should be more open in order to mesh with CFLRP. Ed Millard supported Bill's concern, saying he has asked repeatedly to be added to two email lists regarding RMRI but doesn't believe he has yet been added.

Anthony and Danny said they are trying to make the process as open and transparent as possible.

Mike Preston said an instrument is being developed so people can work either as groups or as individuals to respond to a survey and enter their input on PODs. A great deal of emphasis has been put on trying to do these exercises within the collaborative framework. The opportunity to participate will be widespread. Mike will make sure Ed is added to the email lists. Mike said the RMRI process is just getting started. No one who is interested in participating will be excluded.

Mike Remke said he didn't know he had been named to an advisory group for RMRI until the public meeting. More communication would be helpful.

Danny said the points regarding increased openness are well taken. He does not think there is any intention to hide what is happening, people are just learning as they go.

Mike Preston said he will take these points back to the Steering Committee.

Anthony provided a link to a brief description of what PODs are:

[https://cfri.colostate.edu/2019/08/27/new-publication-collaboratively-engaging-stakeholders-to-develop-pods/#:~:text=Potential%20Operational%20Delineations%20\(PODs\)%20are,management%20objectives%20and%20incident%20response.](https://cfri.colostate.edu/2019/08/27/new-publication-collaboratively-engaging-stakeholders-to-develop-pods/#:~:text=Potential%20Operational%20Delineations%20(PODs)%20are,management%20objectives%20and%20incident%20response.)

Robert Meyer said it seems that the PODs that have more intensive recreation, such as Boggy Draw and Chicken Creek, are few. Mike Preston said some of the pods will be heavily recreation-oriented, while others will have different emphasis areas such as hunting or wildlife. People will have a chance on every survey to weight every POD. The exercise is aimed at trying to figure out what are the most critical PODs.

Resilient forests and communities (2020 wildfire update):

Brad said a total of 702,000 acres burned in the state of Colorado in 2020. That amounted to 113 percent of the acreage burned in 2002 – which had been the worst year for wildfire in the state until this year. However, 2020 was a below-average year in the local area in terms of acres burned. On the San Juan National Forest, the largest wildfire this year was the 596-acre Ice Fire outside of Silverton. This was fortunate, as Southwest Colorado had a very average snowpack that melted quickly and a sub-par monsoon season in 2020.

Pat Seekins said this year was unprecedented in regards to wildfire nationwide. There were epic fire runs and multiple fires or more than 100,000 acres. The 209,000-acre Cameron Peak Fire west of Fort Collins, which is now the largest in Colorado history, began in early August and is still burning, though it is winding down. The East Troublesome Fire near Estes Park became the second-largest in state history, with 194,000 acres, while the Pine Gulch Fire north of Grand Junction is now the third-largest, with 139,000 acres burned. Pat commented that breaking the record three times in one year is amazing. He said the Pine Gulch Fire showed extreme behavior. At 7 in the morning it would already be well-established and would make a significant run even without any wind, and there was a great deal of night-time fire activity. Nothing is typical fire behavior any longer. California and Colorado are seeing major wildfires every other year or so, not just every five to 10 years, and this sort of extreme behavior is expected to continue.

Pat said it is critical to be proactive on forest management. Locally, increased use of prescribed fire and fuels treatment would be helpful in preventing devastating conflagrations, but conditions must be right. 2019 was a great year for implementing such treatments. 2020 was not. Little could be done other than fire suppression.

In response to a question about why there weren't major wildfires in Southwest Colorado, Pat said there were not as many fire starts in the local area. Here, wildfires were mainly sparked by lightning. The fires on Colorado's Front Range were mostly human-caused. He said the terrain on the Front Range is definitely different than that on the Western Slope, with the Front Range having steeper slopes and being more like southern California.

Presentation by Brenna Gaber

Brenna gave a PowerPoint presentation of her senior thesis work regarding "Ponderosa Pine Characteristics Associated with Roundheaded Beetle Infestation in Southwest Colorado". She thanked Mike Remke for his help.

She said there are approximately 2 million acres of ponderosa pine forest in Colorado. Ponderosa is one of the most widespread pine species in the United States. However, there are many changes in these forests because of anthropogenic influences in the 1800s that are having consequences in the present time.

In her research, she looked for the presence of roundheaded and mountain pine beetles. Both are types of *dendroctonus*. 2011 was when the presence of roundheaded beetles was first noted near Dolores. *Dendroctonus* has now spread across 22,000 acres of the San Juan National Forest.

The study site was located in the Dolores District next to Narraguinne Canyon. For her study there were 28 plots – 14 green (with no infested trees) and 14 infested.

Some findings were:

- There were no significant differences between green and infested plots for individual tree characteristics regarding size or ratio.
- Dead trees were slightly larger in diameter at breast height (dbh) compared to green trees.
- Stand density and basal area were significantly higher in the infested plots.
- Other factors that influenced beetle infestation included growth rate and already stressed trees.

Brenna said researchers' recommendations were a combination of thinning and prescribed burning. Thinning can increase forest resilience, decrease susceptibility to insects and severe wildfires, and create the heterogenous structure that is desired in ponderosa pine forests. Prescribed burning improves stand regeneration, resilience, productivity, and heterogeneous structure. She would recommend starting with thinning in order to reduce the fuel load, then using prescribed burning.

Bill Baker said some old literature regarding ponderosa pine indicates they aren't good at self-thinning. The researchers believed that beetles might be one of the best thinning agents because they cull some trees that aren't well-adapted to the environment.

Mike Remke said this was a good point. These are native beetles. Data from the Colorado State Forest Service indicates there will be mortality of less than 10 percent in most of the geography involved in this area. Some other places have more than 90 percent mortality. These outbreaks are in very small pockets and are creating openings. There is a green forest right next to the outbreak pockets.

Brenna said she believes there might be concern about dead trees leading to potential fire severity because they are so dense.

Next steps:

→Danny can share PowerPoints by Associate Professor Stephanie Kampf of Colorado State University and research biogeochemist Charles Rhoades from Rocky Mountain Research Station regarding the effects of beetle infestations if anyone is interested.

Presentation by Duncan Rose

Duncan gave a PowerPoint presentation on “State of the Upper Dolores, 2020”. The Dolores River Anglers chapter of Trout Unlimited provides an overview on the state of the Upper Dolores every year.

Duncan noted that wildfires are bigger and more intense. The 20 largest in Colorado history have all occurred since 2002.

2019 insect and disease update: North of Highway 145, Western spruce budworm and Sudden Aspen Decline (SAD) continue to expand rapidly, with drought and warmer winters fueling the expansion. In 2020, Taylor, Little Taylor and Tender Foot creeks were almost completely dewatered by drought. As water levels drop, more algae is present. In 2018, all trout populations in four other creeks – Spring, Morrison, Coke Oven, and East – were lost. All four were cutthroat streams. None have yet recovered. With the addition of the three creeks this year, seven out of 27 known cutthroat streams on the Upper Dolores watershed have lost populations. Will they recover through natural migrations? That is not known.

The Upper Dolores Stream Protection Working Group, which was formed in 2018, is made up of senior and executive staff from SJNF, DWCD, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and Dolores River Anglers/Trout Unlimited. They formed a framework for analyzing streams and the major disturbances underlying the transition going on in the trout populations. They created a list of tools for stream protections.

Duncan discussed different types of zones in relation to the question: Where do we invest limited money and resources?

- Zones where trout populations have been lost and it is unlikely that they will be able to sustain a trout population again.

- Threatened zones where it may be beneficial to focus on resilience treatments, possibly including introducing other suitable trout species such as desert trout.
- Persistent zones, which are where the longest-term investments should be focused.
- Emergent zones that may become trout habitat but currently are not.

Duncan said it needs to be understood that zones may transition from one category to another over time.

The Working Group came up with a list of streams and rated each 1, 2 or 3. Those rated 1 are most likely to persist through the end of the century.

The most vulnerable trout populations are in small watersheds and low-elevation headwaters. This is related to precipitation. Dewatering is closely related to soil/subsoil moisture, which affects summer base flows. Lower stream levels lead to warmer waters.

Recommended focus areas are in large watersheds with high-elevation waters. The second priority is streams with cutthroat trout.

The Upper Dolores Stream Protection Working Group is seeking an Outstanding Waters designation. This is a state designation awarded by the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission. It is focused on preventing degradation of the designated waters. All the candidate stream reaches are contained entirely within the SJNF, not on private property.

There is a total of 25 candidate streams, with 16 in the Animas/Gunnison/San Juan watersheds and nine in the Dolores watershed. Dolores River Anglers is the nominating group for the nine in Dolores. They presented their proposal two weeks ago. In June 2022 there will be a hearing on the designation.

Duncan said every protection that can be put in place should be implemented because local cutthroat populations are being lost.

In answer to a question, Duncan said individuals can provide support for the designations through a comment period. DWRF is one avenue.

Next steps:

→Danny will email Brenna's and Duncan's presentations to stakeholders.

DWRF Tour Debrief

Danny said the Salter EA will probably be released on Jan. 6, the day of the next DWRF stakeholder meeting, and there will be a brief overview of the EA during the meeting. Stakeholders will identify what next steps the collaborative wants to take in discussing components of the EA.

Danny gave a brief recounting of two recent DWRF tours – one of Chicken Creek and one of the Salter EA area. There was excellent attendance at both.

Derek said one takeaway was the importance of recreation in some areas. Forest managers incorporated some of that into the Salter analysis process.

Mike Remke said even-aged, homogenous stand structures emerged in the treated areas in Chicken Creek, and while that may be acceptable there, it's important that management prescriptions move the forest toward desired conditions. This is an important conversation as the Forest Service moves on to bigger EAs. These projects need to move toward improved forest health in the long term in a way that is friendly to implementers.

Danny commented that spatially diverse structure is listed among DWRF's desired conditions and in the SJNF management plan.

Danny talked about a visit that was made during the Salter EA tour to a previous treatment area in ponderosa pine forest. It was good to look at the on-the-ground outcomes of ecologically focused treatments meant to also improve economic viability that were done more than 20 years ago. Generally the treated area looked good. There were multiple age classes and advanced regeneration.

A number of scoping comments came up during the Salter tour regarding desired vs. existing conditions, alternative actions within the EA, and differing components of those prescriptions. There were specific questions regarding transportation. Ken Charles, town manager for Dolores, highlighted the need to inform the community about increased truck traffic through the town as a result of logging.