

Dolores Watershed Resilient Forest (DWRF) Collaborative
Stakeholders Meeting
March 3, 2021
dwrfcollaborative.org
6 pages

The meeting was conducted via Zoom. Present were:

Selwyn Whiteskunk (Vice Chair, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe); Steve Garchar (Dolores County Commission); James Dietrich (Montezuma County); Rich Landreth (City of Cortez); Mike Battaglia, Ryan Cox and Mark Loveall (Colorado State Forest Service); Alex Graf (Wildfire Adapted Partnership); Ed Millard (Southwest Basin Roundtable); Mike Preston (Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative Steering Committee and DWRF Coordinating Committee); Derek Padilla, David Casey, Tom Rice, Matthew Tuten, Travis Bruch, Tim Leishman, and Keith Fox (San Juan National Forest); Ken Curtis (Dolores Water Conservancy District); Molly Pitts (Colorado Timber Industry Association); Tim Kyllö (Montrose Forest Products); Aaron Kimple, Anthony Culpepper, and Michael Remke (Mountain Studies Institute); Robert Meyer (Mancos Trails Group); Phil Ayers (Wildfire Adapted Partnership Board and Southwest Colorado Cycling Association); Bruce Short (Consulting Forester, Short Forestry LLC); Bill Baker (Retired Ecologist); Duncan Rose (Trout Unlimited); Eric Janes (Retired BLM Hydrologist); Danny Margoles (DWRF Coordinator); and Gail Binkly (Meeting Recorder).

Salter Draft Environmental Assessment

Danny described the importance of the area in the EA to the local community and to business and tourism. The Boggy Draw area is particularly important for recreation; it is a key mountain-biking area. Many different community interests are linked to this landscape.

David Casey, a supervisory forester on the Dolores Ranger District, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Salter Vegetation Management Draft EA, of which he is the main author. He said this represents the district's continuation of its management of the pine belt. It started with Lone Pine and now is moving to the next landscape. Proposed treatment areas in the Salter EA are in the vicinity of Salter Y, Plateau Creek, Carlyle Point, House Creek, Boggy Draw, and Turkey Knoll. There are 24,833 acres of potential treatment.

Boggy Draw Design Features/ Mitigations: David said the Boggy area has the most recreational use of all the blocks in the EA. It is truly a year-round recreation area. To achieve desired conditions and have minimal impacts to the users, there needs to be special care in that block and special coordination with the district's partners. The district has done a great deal of coordination up front.

In this block, communication with the district's partners and the specialists that oversee the block will be key. Information is also critical. A sign with information including which trails are closed will be located at the Boggy trailhead.

David said the locations of all landings and slash piles resulting from timber operations will be identified during the implementation checklist process to avoid long-term physical impacts to any system trails. District officials can identify placement of the slash piles and additional mitigation measures that will help ensure minimal impacts to trails. The district will designate all skidding sites, where a log needs to be skidded across a trail, in order to isolate the impact. No tracked or wheeled equipment will be allowed within 15 feet of the center line of a system trail except where a trail crossing for skidding or hauling has been identified.

In addition, to help limit the impact to trail users, where there are loop trails the Forest Service wouldn't close an entire trail system. Timber operations are limited to one compartment at a time and operators have to complete one compartment before moving to the next.

No harvest activities or hauling will be allowed in recreation compartments 1-4 during the Escalante Days mountain-bike race day.

If trails are substantially damaged by vegetation-management activities, they would be repaired immediately afterward.

Danny said questions have been raised about trail closures, trail impacts, winter recreation, aesthetics, detailed analysis of economic impacts, and safety. There are also questions about the 9-foot buffer strips around trails and a 15-foot buffer for vehicles.

Tom Rice said there are single-track trails mainly used by mountain bikers. A 9-foot buffer would allow the Forest Service to identify "leave trees" to help preserve those unique parts of the trail system, continue to encourage slowing down on curves and turns, and maintain the winding trail. That addresses concerns about scenery as well.

Derek said when the process gets to implementation, the district may run into situations they didn't foresee but they would work with recreation groups and the district's partners to ensure there is the least possible amount of impact to the trail system.

There was discussion about the length of the timber-sale contracts and logging projects.

Robert said it's good there will be blocks not being impacted by the thinning process but it seems to draw out the process considerably. David Casey said it does impact the schedule and draw it out. They tried to meet in the middle. He said there is always a potential that operations will be extended. The contract allows for extension time and involves roughly a five-year sale period.

Tim Kylo said timber sales like this need to be seven-year contracts. They have a letter from Forest Supervisor Kyra Chadwick guaranteeing these sales would be for seven years, but none have gotten to that point. Longer terms will make the process a lot easier. He asked whether the trail system is used year-round and suggested that if it's not used in the winter, operations could be occurring along this trail.

David said they will open up areas as the work is completed. Most of the area is used year-round for recreation.

Tim said the more that operators are forced to move into and out of an area, the less attractive the sale is. Seasonal restrictions mean that the term has to be extended.

David said the Forest Service took that into account. No one is going to win completely.

Tim said operators have worked a great deal around trails. Timber operators in Colorado are used to recreational hiking and cross-country skiing. They have to return the trails to their original state when operations are complete. They would appreciate it if the Forest Service could give them some options on this and keep restrictions to a minimum.

Phil said there have been some discussions among local business owners about the impacts of logging. One owner worried that Boggy might become ugly and nobody would go there any more and businesses would suffer.

Robert said logging will change the visual aesthetics, but people should keep in mind the major wildfires that burned in Colorado and California in the fall of 2020 and wiped out recreational places. This should be brought to the public's mind.

Tim agreed strongly. He said operators will try to minimize impacts.

Danny mentioned the tour of Chicken Creek that DWR conducted last fall. Representatives of the Town of Dolores thought it might be helpful to have a tour there. Tom suggested also touring some sites on Haycamp Mesa where timber projects were completed a couple of years ago.

Danny said people have asked him about economic impacts, such as the impacts of closures, not being part of the analysis.

Derek said EAs do assess those impacts. He said Tom put together a table and some maps that show the amount of trail mileage that would be restricted or closed potentially in any compartment and it's minimal. Derek doesn't believe this will have a large impact to businesses related to recreation. Much of the rest of the trail system will be open and available. Perhaps the Forest Service needs to do a more formal analysis. It's tough to quantify the exact economic impacts, but he believes they would be fairly insignificant.

Tim talked about the best timing for logging ponderosa pine. Operators try to do it in the spring before the sap moves up in the trees. The wood blue-stains in later months and loses value, so operators want to do the logging in early May through mid-June, then return in late September or early October when the sap moves back down the trees.

Tom Rice said if operators are out of an area for months, the district may be able to reopen trails during that time. Summer is a time of high recreational use in the entire Boggy block. In winter, recreation is concentrated more in compartments 1 and 2. The bulk of the use is non-winter but there is growing winter use.

Purpose and need: David discussed the purpose and need for the project. It is designed to:

- improve resilience and resistance to epidemic insect and disease outbreaks
- increase structural diversity of the ponderosa pine landscape (age diversity and spatial variation among trees)
- provide economic support to local communities by providing timber products in a sustainable manner.

Bark-beetle outbreaks involving three different species of beetle are taking place in the area. High-hazard basal areas are those of greater than 80 square feet/acre, low-hazard are those of under 60 square feet/acre. Basal area is square footage of the bole of a tree.

Structural diversity: David said the stands across the Salter and Lone Pine areas are dynamic and diverse. A single approach will not fit everything. These stands have been affected by lack of management and a lack of fire. The Forest Service wants to get to long term desired conditions.

Economic support: He said the Ponderosa Pine Partnership of the 1990s is a good example. The intent to improve forest health was there, but the necessary tools weren't available to get treatments done on a landscape scale. Now the industry to implement these treatments is available, so the Forest Service want to support and help that tool.

Treatments: Possible treatments include single-tree selection, commercial thinning, post-fledgling area thinning, and pre-commercial thinning (5 inches or less). There can be prescribed burning or brush thinning. They adjust the treatments according to conditions such as the presence of bark beetles, disease, advanced regeneration, aspen (which is very important for wildlife), and structure. David said many areas of aspen are being shaded out and dying.

Salter current stand data: Travis Bruch provided information on current stand data in the Salter landscape. He said 480 stands were measured covering 36,526 acres. The quadratic mean diameter at breast height (dbh) was 11.9 inches. Trees per acre averaged 534. The average age of trees larger than 23 inches at dbh was 96 years, but Travis said size does not always directly correlate to age.

Some key findings were:

- The largest tree was 50 inches in diameter.
- There were not many trees measuring 2-4 inches in diameter.
- There were numerous trees from 5-20 inches in diameter.
- Few trees were greater than 27 inches in diameter.

Travis said from 1925 to 1935, operators did a great deal of logging.

He discussed how the Forest Service decides what trees to leave and which to cut.

Discussion

Bill Baker raised concerns about the goal of the project. He said the goal seems to be creating an uneven-aged forest that can be logged, but that isn't the prevailing goal for ponderosa pine stands in the West. The general societal understanding is that ponderosa forests were extensively logged and were subject to fire suppression. As a result, they are in trouble, with numerous beetle outbreaks. He believes the prevailing scientific view is that these forests have to be restored, but he can't see that what the Forest Service is doing here is restoration. The San Juan National Forest management plan seems to say to restore ponderosa forests, not to create a sustainable, uneven-aged forest that can be substantially managed for timber production.

Travis said he doesn't like the word "restoration". A hundred years ago the Dolores District would have looked considerably different, with bigger and fewer trees. The New Mexico Lumber Company didn't do the forests any favors in 1925, but you can only deal with what you have. The Forest Service wants to try to reduce the number of trees and hopefully wind up with bigger trees down the road. He doesn't know if that is restoration. Forests are always changing.

Mike Battaglia said he disagrees with Bill on the science of restoration and forest management. Mike said he believes restoration is restoring the process and functions of the ecosystem. It can be congruent in a ponderosa forest to manage sustainably and meet other objectives while working to get the forest into a condition that can receive fires or bark beetles without the entire landscape being wiped out.

Bill said he isn't suggesting that harvesting be stopped, he is asking whether the purpose of this harvesting is restoration, or just creating a long-term timber operation. It is possible to do sustainable timber harvesting while restoring the forest. But there was no effort here to do that, even though restoration is called for in the forest plan.

Eric said in the face of climate change, changes in societal needs, and a new forest plan, he doesn't think anyone can say that in 15 to 30 years this will be a forest that continues to be cut and harvested. He is not concerned that this looks like a sustained-yield operation because there are many unknowns in the future.

Bruce Short said in a written comment that as silviculturists, "what we want to do is preserve options for the future, working off our current objectives, including providing products presently and larger trees for the future." He said this landscape has been heavily worked over for 120 years, so restoring a pre-settlement condition may not be possible except through geologic time. He respectfully disagreed with Bill that a regulated forest as defined here would not provide the societal benefits of a "restored" forest.

Mike Remke said how to foster ponderosa pine restoration in the future might be a good topic for research in other projects, but not Salter. There is much still to learn.

Mike Preston said in future discussions he would like to see what is being planned silviculturally in terms of wildlife, water and other values. This is a good discussion to build on. The group needs to keep discussing what is meant by restoration.

Next steps:

→ Danny said the April stakeholders meeting will include a conversation about a third-party monitoring approach for Salter. [THIS IS NOW GOING TO BE DELAYED UNTIL MAY]

→ Danny would like to plan tours showing logged areas, as well as an educational presentation on what goes into marking trees.

→ Travis Bruch said anyone who want to go into the field sometime or has a particular stand where they would like to see something particular done should please reach out to him.