

**Dolores Watershed Resilient Forest (DWRF) Collaborative  
Stakeholders Meeting  
June 2, 2021  
dwrfcollaborative.org  
6 pages**

**The meeting was conducted via Zoom. Present were:**

Helen Katich (Sen. John Hickenlooper's office); Rich Landreth (City of Cortez); James Dietrich and Rachel Medina (Montezuma County); Aaron Kimple and Anthony Culpepper (Mountain Studies Institute); Mike Battaglia (Rocky Mountain Research Station); Rebecca Samulski (Fire Adapted Colorado); Phil Ayers (Wildfire Adapted Partnership Board and Southwest Colorado Cycling Association); Ken Charles and Eric Sprague (Dolores Water Conservancy District); Derek Padilla and David Casey (San Juan National Forest); Jason Lawhon (RMRI Project Manager for U.S. Forest Service); Jordan Van Sickle (Natural Resources Conservation Service, Cortez); Bruce Short (Consulting Forester, Short Forestry LLC); Mike Preston (Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative Steering Committee and DWRF Coordinating Committee); Molly Pitts (Colorado Timber Industry Association); Andrew Hawk (Timber Age System); Eric Janes (Retired BLM Hydrologist); Bill Baker (Retired Ecologist); Duncan Rose (Trout Unlimited); Danny Margoles (DWRF Coordinator); and Gail Binkly (Meeting Recorder).

**Operating Principles**

Danny reviewed stakeholder responsibilities/expectations, ground rules and meeting agreements. He said he wants to encourage everyone to participate as much as possible and to listen to other people's opinions. Diverse voices are the power of the collaborative. He advised using the chat box for links, etc., rather than private conversations.

**Updates**

**Community education and outreach:**

- **Senator Hickenlooper visit:** Danny said DWRF had the opportunity to put together a conversation with Colorado Sen. John Hickenlooper a couple of weeks ago, and he thanked Helen for that. Helen said she works throughout Southwest Colorado. Her job is to keep an ear to the ground regarding the issues that are most pressing, such as forest health and water. Senator Hickenlooper was out on the landscape for Public Lands Day and received a great deal of information on what's happening.
- **Forest ambassador training:** Danny said San Juan Mountains Association and RMRI helped with the training. Forest ambassadors will be stationed in the RMRI landscape and in higher-elevation areas, serving as liaisons for sustainable recreation, ecological knowledge and management questions people may have. They will be in a more expanded landscape this year than in years past. Becca said it's critical to track these people and what kind of contacts they have. Danny agreed, saying tracking how many folks are outreaching to whom and in what capacity would be a good cross-collaborative effort.
- **Forest health signs:** Danny said the signs have finally arrived. They will be posted at Boggy Draw and Chicken Creek.

- **“Feel the burn” mountain bike ride with SJMA:** Danny said it was a great ride. It took place in Boggy Draw on May 15 and focused on the area’s natural history, actions in the landscape, and ways of reducing wildfire risk.
- **DWRF video:** Danny said the video is near completion, and thanked everyone who has been a part of this so far.
- **Mitigation on private lands:** Bruce said there are some private lands by Mancos undergoing mitigation via logging that he wants to recognize. He said the landowners involved would probably be willing to host tours. Anyone interested in taking a tour of what they have been doing should contact Bruce. Andy Hawk said it was good working with Bruce.
- **Funding:** Helen said this is the season for congressionally requested funding. Those requests can be tied to forest health. Nonprofits, counties, and some federal agencies are among those eligible. Applications are due Friday. She would be happy to connect at 970-342-3005 or helen\_katich@hickenlooper.senate.gov.

#### **Collaborate with land management agencies:**

- **CFLRP:** Danny hopes an RFQ for a third-party facilitator will be going out this week. Ideally the facilitator will begin working in July.
- **Monitoring meeting:** There will be a monitoring meeting Friday, June 4. Region 2 is allowing some local input into that. Danny sent out an email earlier with a link and some documents. It would be excellent to have broad participation.
- **RMRI:** Jason said the regional RMRI and shared stewardship program manager, Tara Umphries, will be permanently filling that role. The Southwest Steering Committee changed its schedule and is now meeting monthly, which is more frequently.

#### **Resilient forests and communities:**

- **DWCD and McPhee Reservoir water update:** Eric Sprague gave a brief overview of the drought in Southwest Colorado, saying the situation is dire. 2020 was an abysmal precipitation year, with a record dry spring and summer and low snowpack. It was the third year in a row that Southwest Colorado was devoid of a monsoon. DWCD was able to offer 85 percent of full supply for agriculture and the downstream fishery in 2020, but that left McPhee basically empty going into 2021. This year, there was a drier spring and a smaller snowpack. Every year when it is dry and there is no monsoon leaves the next year with a reduced runoff. Now, last year’s allocation of 85 percent supply is looking good. This year users are looking at a 5 to 10 percent supply – the smallest supply ever distributed in the life of the Dolores Project. It could take farmers years to recover from the economic impacts. After 2002 it took seven years for most farmers to recover. 2021 is worse for them. If next year isn’t better, if there are more than two years of this pattern, there could be drastic economic impacts. Farming families in the full-service area could face hard decisions financially. The ecological impacts on the downstream fishery will also be severe. Flows in the Dolores River will drop to 5 cfs for the remaining months of the year. Normally, at this time of year the river is running at greater than 50 cfs. 5 cfs is the lowest in the life of the Project and it will continue through most of the year; July is when they make that switch. No one knows what the fishery will look like in 2022. Chances are it will look similar.

Eric Janes asked whether the water shortage will affect the ability of firefighters to scoop up water for helicopter attacks from places such as stock ponds. Eric Sprague said the amount of water involved in such drops is very small compared to what reservoirs hold, just 100,000 to 200,000 gallons, and there will be water in McPhee, Narraguinnep and Totten reservoirs for that. But MVI is planning on draining Groundhog later this year for maintenance, so that will be one less place available.

Derek said there are stock ponds across the landscape, but their water is spotty. Whether they can be utilized will be dependent on whether the area keeps receiving small rainstorms to replenish the ponds. Everyone hopes the monsoons will arrive and be strong this summer.

In response to a question, Mike Preston said the Ute Mountain Farm and Ranch Enterprise holds an allocation in the Dolores Project. Simon Martinez, operating manager for the Farm and Ranch Enterprise, is also vice president of the DWCD board. They are trying to work with the Bureau of Reclamation to soften the impacts of this shortage. The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and DWCD are working together in approaching BuRec and ultimately the Department of Interior to obtain some relief. The Colorado Ute Indian Final Water Rights Settlement Agreement provides rights that could be helpful in buffering the situation. A push from Senator Hickenlooper might be helpful.

Bill Baker said many worrisome changes are under way in the ecosystem, likely as a result of the ongoing drought. Utah junipers, which are hardier than piñons and can be several centuries old, are now showing a dieback. Forest Service officials and others have noticed an extensive dieback on the Mogollon Plateau. Bill was in the Mojave Desert recently and saw large areas of creosote that appeared to be dead as well.

Bruce said the same things are being seen locally. There are very early indications of increased levels of bark beetles and *ips* beetles, tied in with black-stain root disease.

### **Highly Valued Resources and Assets/Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment**

Danny said DWRF completed a wildfire risk assessment in 2016 and is now working to update that, working alongside the Four Rivers Collaborative, which is doing its first risk assessment. A working group met on May 26 to refine HVRAs and discuss wildfire risk assessment. Brad Pietruszka gave a presentation at the meeting about what a risk assessment is, different components of wildfire risk, what HVRAs are, and other topics. From the meeting, participants identified broad HVRA categories, different values and components, and weighted the relative importance of each of the categories.

Danny displayed the chart of HVRA categories and sub-categories and explained it.

Another meeting to refine HVRAs is being planned and Danny hopes it can be held in person in a couple of weeks, perhaps outdoors in Mancos. It will be a somewhat technical conversation, but broad input would be welcome from people who are specialists in such areas as community safety, infrastructure, water, vegetation, and wildlife.

Becca asked how DWRF will use this. She said Four Rivers doesn't have an assessment like this, but DWRF has already identified high-priority areas, so how is this a priority for DWRF? Why should DWRF slow down and wait for Four Rivers to catch up?

Danny said the goal of this is to identify clear priority areas for treatments based on values. Ideally this information will feed into some future grant proposals, facilitating more work on private lands and across all lands. This isn't necessarily slowing down for DWRF. It's an opportunity to look at a broader landscape than already has been looked at for the upper Dolores watershed.

Mike Preston said the first assessment was done three or four years ago, and much has been learned since then. This is a refinement of what was done before. Putting things into a common format that meshes with everybody else's will be highly useful in these landscape-scale efforts.

Bill agreed with Becca. There may have been some changes since the last assessment, so it's worth updating, but the real risk is on private lands. It's much more important to focus on private lands than broad-scale treatments. It is critical to help homeowners improve their fire-risk situation. Bill said the list should include escape routes, home ignition zones, etc.

Anthony said this won't exclude doing that work. All collaboratives have to do reassessments sometimes to keep up-to-date with the best available data regarding burn probability and land coverage. There is now better information to put into this model.

Becca said so far, no money has gone to WAP or directly into supporting work on private lands through efforts with RMRI. There has been a big focus on federal lands. Updating is good but it is critical to start supporting that work on private lands.

Mike Preston said what is most needed by RMRI is for people to identify projects – large-scale subdivisions where there is landowner buy-in. The connection with WAP is highly important and it needs more development.

Bruce said Cedar Mesa Ranches is the largest subdivision in Montezuma County. It is covered in piñon-juniper and oak brush. It has one major entrance and exit. Mike agreed that Cedar Mesa needs to be addressed, and urged people to shape it into a solid proposal.

Bill Baker recommended the creation of a working group to prioritize private lands. Danny said that makes sense and ideally it would be integrated with this updating effort.

Becca said the private-lands working group can be integrated with the countywide Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). There are projects drawn up with large landowners that simply haven't gotten funded.

**Next steps:**

- Danny urged everyone interested to attend the HVRA meeting in two weeks.
- Anthony asked folks who have values they want represented and have spatial data for those values to start compiling that data now and give it to Mike Remke or Rachel Medina.

### **Salter Environmental Assessment**

Derek discussed changes made by the Dolores Ranger District in response to comments on the Salter EA related to recreation. The Southwest Colorado Cycling Association made a number of comments related to trail availability, re-routing, and more, and Derek said the district incorporated much of what they said. The Town of Dolores identified additional dates of events when there should be no hauling or harvesting activities and those were also incorporated. Some signage about trail-crossing locations will be added. Other changes included:

- The district provided more clarification in the document to show that it will have a robust information-sharing protocol in recreation blocks where activity is occurring, so everyone is well-informed as to where activities are taking place.
- The district added more detailed information to the economic analysis regarding effects to the recreation economy in surrounding communities.

Derek said the district just finished its internal review. It is hoped that the final EA will be out in the next two to four weeks.

Phil thanked the Forest Service for taking SWCCA's comments seriously.

Derek said elsewhere the Forest Service has incorporated into timber-sale contracts a 15 mph speed limit required on national-forest lands in areas of high recreational use. Based on the field trip to Chicken Creek and actual recreational users' remarks that truck drivers were very courteous and slowed down, the Forest Service does not believe they have to make such a stipulation at this time. Derek said district officials also don't believe traffic within the Town of Dolores is a major issue. There is a certain level of commercial truck traffic on the road already, and they haven't heard that it is a concern. The Salter project will add to that traffic, but activities won't all be happening at the same time.

Phil commented that the surface of the Dolores-Norwood road is in bad shape and this project will make it worse. Derek said additional truck traffic will indeed have an impact, as all the affected counties have acknowledged, but forest-health benefits are important. All the involved parties are aware about the impacts and have made a commitment to not let the road's condition deteriorate to the point where passenger-car travel would be impacted.

Ken Charles raised the topic of hours of operation, saying the Town of Dolores commented on that and wanted the hours to be limited to 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. He said logging traffic travels directly through a residential area, and there is a great deal of school traffic there. The concerns are noise and safety. Derek said the district lacks authority and jurisdiction regarding this issue. The district can make those accommodations on the timber sale itself but Dolores is so far

removed from the timber area that it doesn't make sense. It is the responsibility of Montezuma County or the town to establish such restrictions if they want.

Molly said the timber industry prefers flexibility regarding hauling. It is desirable to do much of the hauling when most people are asleep. It's also desirable to be able to haul more than one load in a day. The industry prefers that maximum flexibility be allowed in a NEPA document.

**Next steps:**

- Danny will send out an email and possibly a poll regarding the next HVRA meeting and analysis. Everyone interested is encouraged to attend.
- A private lands/cross-boundary working group meeting will also be set up.