



Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program

Water Acquisition Committee Summary February 6, 2023: 9:00 am – 1:00 pm (MST)

ATENDANCE:

Committee Members: Tom Pitts, Kara Scheel, Laura Belanger, David Jones, Erik Knight, David Graf, Jared Hansen, Melissa Trammell for Mark Wondzell

Interested Parties: Paul Badame, Michelle Garrison, Russ Franklin, Kyle Whitaker, Julie Stahl, Koreen Zelasko, Shannon Nelson, Tildon Jones, Kevin McAbee, Joe Trungale, Lee Traynham

Review / Modify Agenda – The agenda order was modified as reads below.

Consent Agenda: December 5 WAC summary was approved and will be posted the Program website.

Review Action List from December 5, 2022:

- **PDO** will develop a straw dog of how to implement the post-2023 recommendations relevant to Instream Flow and have them ready for the WAC in February. *Purpose was reframed and will be discussed at this meeting (Feb. 6).*
- **WAC** to complete a review and edit process for Wyoming's 2016-2020 depletion accounting report by Dec 31. **David Graf** will work with **Charlie Ferrantelli** to receive and incorporate edits and distribute a copy back to the WAC for email acceptance. David will then provide a final draft to **Ecological Services** for final approval. The **PDO** will then put an informational item on the subsequent Management Committee agenda to inform them that the document has been approved by Ecological Services and will be posted on the website. *Completed and approved during this meeting.*

Review Committee Chair rotation – David Jones (Utah Division of Water Resources) tentatively agreed to chair in 2024 and Laura Belanger (Western Resource Advocates) indicated she could likely take over the chair later post-2024. >**Paul** will develop a tentative list that will be presented at the next meeting.

Bureau of Reclamation Update – Lee Traynham asked what information was needed for today's update. The Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) landing page from Reclamation was shared as a resource (<https://www.usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/SEIS.html>). The intent of the SEIS is to be an add-on to the existing guidelines to assess and implement

modified operations for FY23-24. All comment letters have been posted on the website. The SEIS doesn't supplant or supersede the Post-2026 process that will be a major effort for BOR. Lee provided a link to the presentation summary:

https://www.usbr.gov/ColoradoRiverBasin/documents/post2026/2007InterimGuidelinesSEIS_ScopingWebinarPresentation.pdf

The states have provided an alternative for the SEIS and it is also posted on the site.

DROA planning for 2023 is getting started based on the current and developing hydrology. BOR is considering how the potentially above average snowpack and wet hydrology could be used. Melissa Trammell asked how DROA may be incorporated into the SEIS. Lee said the comments received could affect the scope of the SEIS and that answer is not resolved yet.

Tom Pitts asked if changes to the Roller Dam were on Lee's radar. Lee said she has heard from Tina Bergonzini (General Manager, GVWUA) and they are working through possible options. Lee will bring updates back once she has met with Tina about the scope of the project. Kara noted that Tina has also been applying for CWCB grant opportunities. Kara does not believe they are related specifically to the headgate. The project is focused on the inlet to the diversion canal, not the roller dam itself.

Basin Summaries: 2022 Review 2023 Look Ahead – David noted the importance of connecting the conditions on the ground back to the RIPRAP actions that we are tracking as a Program and leaning into some of the harder problems going forward. David reiterated all the issues in the larger basin and noted concerns remain that will likely affect us more and more over time. David showed drought graphs and noted that much of the watershed has come out of drought conditions, but parts of Utah remain in drought.

CO 15-MR Operations / Flows – David reviewed the complexity involved in managing water in the 15-Mile Reach. He thanked all the water users in the area for how well they work to keep water in the river. David summarized operations in 2022. No additional flows were added to the peak through CROS in 2022. Baseflow augmentation included about 48,000 acre-feet of water for the 15-MR, including the traditional storage pools (Program pools and other leased water, including donations) and the HUP surplus made available in 2022. David reviewed the overall performance of the Program in reaching flow recommendations in 2022, including being very close to monthly flow recommendations in August and September and meeting them fully in October.

Yampa River – Elkhead Reservoir Operations / Flows – David talked about how releases from both Elkhead and Stagecoach helped the river. Stagecoach releases were designed to meet temperature standards downstream of the wastewater treatment plant, but these releases lack flow protection below the City of Steamboat WWT plant and are not operated to benefit the Program. Elkhead releases are protected releases due to the language in the enlargement

decree for Elkhead, but there has been some confusion regarding legal protection when these releases result in flows at Maybell that exceed the minimum flow targets (93 cfs for 'Dry Years'; 134 cfs for 'Ave Years'). While there has been some written confirmation from the Division 6 Water Engineer of the benefits of these releases for Recovery Program purposes, further discussions this winter should clarify the protocols and understanding of releases if they result in flows above minimal 'targets' at Maybell. David noted some gaining flows between Maybell and Deerlodge which may warrant additional investigation. The Program successfully implemented flow augmentation from Elkhead in 2022, with short dips below 93 cfs in mid-August and again in early September because of very hot conditions and the difficulty accurately forecasting the how spotty monsoon moisture translated into streamflow.

David noted the importance of leased water both in the Yampa and Colorado River. The PDO is currently proposing that we would transition the funds from the depletion account into the annual work plan. Tom Pitts supported that recommendation.

Other Basins – Green (Jones), Gunnison, Duchesne - In the Duchesne, CUWCD was working to meet the 50 cfs target. A gage issue made it difficult to determine the actual flow levels. Once the gage was fixed, the 50 cfs target was met more frequently.

In the Gunnison, Reclamation met all releases as recommended in the ROD for Moderately Dry conditions. The peak flow and baseflow targets were slightly relaxed based on drought rules. The 2023 projections are currently looking good with a potential to recover storage in Blue Mesa Reservoir.

David reviewed how successful the implementation of Flaming Gorge flow experiments was in 2022, capitalizing on the DROA flows. Thanks to Reclamation for working with the Program to implement all three experiments!

Currently, the Upper Colorado basin is sitting at about 136% of normal snow water equivalent, with projected 117% average inflow to Lake Powell.

WAC Motion: WY Little Snake 2016-2020 Depletion Report – David reviewed the Wyoming Depletion Accounting report for the Little Snake River basin. Two comments were received on the report, both regarding the procedure of using a 5-year average. The comments noted that some uncertainty remains based on remote sensing imagery (NVDI) and how when those photos are taken. Removing that uncertainty remains very difficult. Tom Pitts moved to approve the report. Laura Belanger seconded. The committee approved the report.

Plan Development to Assess the 15-Mile Reach Flow Targets – Graf

A small work group held the first meeting with Don Anderson and Tom Chart on the 17th of January. Tom and Don continue to note that this is an iterative process and input is welcome from all parties throughout the process. They are providing a deep literature review of current

knowledge and identification of areas where we need additional information. The Service is interested in any new information found in response, including potentially tweaking how the flows are assessed. SOW will need to be created to provide that additional information, likely for inclusion in the 2024-25 workplan.

Julie opened the floor to comments. Kyle asked David to clarify his comment about looking at the biology of the system. David explained that all sides would be evaluated and assessed, both from a biological and water perspective. David noted there may be changes in channel morphology that may indicate changes to target flows are warranted. He called attention to the lack of biological response in those reaches and the need to figure out how water deliveries may impact that, and how we may need to more carefully prioritize specific flow components with the scarce water supplies that are made available. He noted that there is widespread acceptance of the ability of water users to provide water into the reaches. Kyle thanked David and expressed support for different calculation methods to deal with the challenge of managing limited water supplies. Tom Pitts agreed and noted the importance of historical hydrology may not exist and need for applying climate change models that may indicate a more realistic range of future conditions. David said we have models available from CWCB that could be used for that purpose.

RIPRAP Discussion – Paul briefly reviewed the schedule and process for the WAC to review pertinent sections of the 2022 RIPRAP. One change Paul described is that RIPRAP will now report on the previous *calendar* year only and not extend into the current year as has been done in the past. David highlighted some areas where he had questions around different actions in the RIPRAP that could be clarified with help from the committee. He added an action (row) this year: *Identify and capitalize on opportunities that arise because of drought and climate change in the Colorado River basin*. David called attention to the Flaming Gorge experiments and noted that other opportunities may come forth as the basin changes because of drought. These opportunities may encompass demand management and system conservation planning.

David opened a discussion regarding the current RIPRAP structure and possible changes for this Program element moving forward. He noted that permanent flow protections are still desired for many of basins, but that ‘permanent protection’ is an elusive concept given drought and generally junior water priorities for instream flows (CO). David called attention to the CIRES proposal to use satellite radar to document river stage (surface water elevation) throughout the west. He suggested this as a new tool and that may also be available for the WAC to consider, referencing RIPRAP rows in multiple basin-tabs citing the need to correlate flows to habitat availability. Kyle supported the opportunistic strategy to supporting listed fish and called attention to the fact that water is a zero-sum game and that every ‘opportunity’ also comes with a downside (e.g., return flow diminishment, decreased carryover storage...). He noted that each decision changes when water is released in often unanticipated ways. Laura agreed and noted that the new programs are designed to keep more water all the way to Lake Powell,

which could make available more water in the system. Kyle agreed that new water is possible with demand management but suggested that it may not be in System Conservation Pilot Programs (SCPP).

White River Management Plan Update – Kara Scheel shared that the plan is relatively complete and ready for review. Further changes regarding implementing a PBO are on hold while determining the best approach or if it is needed in this situation. The current focus is on ensuring that the current recovery actions listed in the plan are sufficient for listed species needs. ERO is finalizing changes made to Chapter 6, ‘Management Activities’, and (hopefully) will forward the WRMP for technical editing and finalize before the February 17 WRPT meeting.

David then described a few of the potential management actions that could have tangible positive benefits for listed fishes (e.g., a flow spike), or provide additional information about the role of sediment shaping downstream habitats or its role in preventing further propagation of small mouth bass. He also provided an example of how one item in the RIPRAP in the White River tab - ‘Protect Flows in Colorado’ - could be parsed into the steps necessary to achieve this outcome. Inserting rows into the RIPRAP would allow for detailed step-wise tracking toward achieving this goal, but would also need to be a collaborative, multi-partner project due to its complexity.

Next meeting to review the 2022 RIPRAP is scheduled for March 24, 2023 from 8 AM – 12 PM. The meeting will be virtual.

Paul provided FileShare link for WAC documents and meetings that are not typically posted with summaries on the Program website. This link will be updated periodically and the committee will be notified when new materials are available.

<https://fileshare.fws.gov/?linkid=KZi4zr6VWWVJaoUWImVzkZY/4gntQHDx8YDODS6ncAGbVD1eQJoVwA>

Action List as of February 6, 2023:

- **Assigned 2-6-23: Paul Badame** will develop a chair rotation list for the WAC for consideration and acceptance at the March 24 meeting.