

DOLORES RIVER RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP
Biannual Meeting
Oct. 28, 2014

All PowerPoint presentations mentioned in this summary (delineated by a * next to the speaker's name) will be made available at the DRRP web site, <http://ocs.fortlewis.edu/drrp/>

Welcome: BLM Southwest Associate District Manager Matt Azhocar welcomed the group.

Agenda: The agenda was approved with no changes.

Discussion of the Updated MOU

Daniel Oppenheimer*, restoration coordinator for the Tamarisk Coalition, gave a PowerPoint titled "Updated MOU: Implementing the Transition Plan for Monitoring and Maintenance". He said the original memorandum of understanding for DRRP was completed in 2010. It was for a five-year term, and 20 entities signed it. The MOU is a very important document that clarifies roles and responsibilities and gives legitimacy to the DRRP. It has also provided a tool for fundraising. Without it, for example, the Partnership would not have been eligible for the \$50,000 Colorado Collaboration Award received recently.

The Partnership has begun its transition from the first five years of heavy work to less-intensive monitoring and maintenance. The transition plan for 2015-19 is available online at the above Website and was shared and approved at the last DRRP meeting in Moab. At that time it was agreed that there was a need to update the original MOU as needed. A draft of the updated MOU was sent to DRRP members on Oct. 14 for review. The purpose of this MOU is to affirm the commitment to implementing the transition plan.

Daniel said most of the changes made to the original MOU were minor. Some language was added regarding other organizations that have become involved with DRRP since the original MOU was written. The original signatories to the MOU were retained and some other key partners were added, such as the Bureau of Reclamation and Gateway Canyons Resort.

Daniel discussed some other revisions to the document, which included:

- Under Article 6, "Roles and Responsibilities", language about "primary" and "secondary" partners was eliminated.
- The "Statement of Mutual Benefits" section was updated to monitoring and maintenance actions outlined in the transition plan, such as securing funding.
- If organizations have evolved since 2010 in terms of their interests and restrictions, this was captured.
- Under "Decision-making", the meeting frequency for the Partnership was changed to annually.
- The list of subcommittees was revised.
- Governance structure may be continued to be refined.

Comments:

- Daniel asked the group if any partners were missing. Peter suggested looking to the signatories of the Native Fish Three Species Agreement for other entities who might be relevant.
- It was suggested there also could be another category for parties who are supportive but aren't signatories.
- It was asked whether new partners would actually sign the MOU. Daniel said this should be a living document and as the Partnership forms new relationships, the MOU should be updated and new signatories added.
- It was suggested, and agreed, that the group should make sure everyone is on board with new partners joining before they sign. It was also agreed that if someone is added they need to have a role.
- Because Article 4 says the MOU takes effect "on the date of the final signature", if a new partner is added, that would theoretically extend the MOU. It was agreed this probably should be changed.
- It was suggested that the use of science be mentioned in Article 7.
- It was suggested that the meeting frequency be stated as "at least" annually, in case there is a need to meet more often.
- The new MOU should be tiered to the original one, offering history and acknowledgment. Daniel said the new MOU does mention the previous one in the background section, but maybe it should explicitly acknowledge the other MOU.
- The term "other invasive weeds" was questioned. This may need clarification.
- In Article 6, there is a reference to "BLM lands". This should be replaced with a phrase more like, "the public lands each agency is responsible for".
- The Core Team's duties should be clarified now that the Partnership will be meeting just once a year.

Next steps:

- This is a draft document. Anyone whose agency has protocols, laws, regulations, or policies that need to be added should send them to Daniel and they will be included.
- Any DRRP participant or entity with other comments should send them in written form to Daniel by Nov. 4. Comments will be integrated in late November.
- Signatures will be collected at the beginning of 2015.

Project Implementation

Tres Rios Field Office: Mike Jensen*, rangeland management specialist, said the Tres Rios BLM Field Office has six river reaches from the Dove Creek pump station to the Uncompahgre Field Office. Active tamarisk treatment was planned on five of those reaches, and as of last year, they had finished all their initial target tamarisk removal in those five reaches. Reach 6 is in the Wilderness Study Area and was left for biocontrol. Work has also been done on portions of Disappointment Creek.

Mike said following tamarisk control, efforts switched to secondary weeds, using a noxious-weed inventory completed by Southwest Conservation Corps interns on a total of 734 acres from the Dove Creek pumps to Coyote Wash. Treatment of secondary weeds began in 2012. In 2013 the FO took a hiatus because of a shortage of staff. In 2014 a total of 60 acres was treated, primarily for musk thistle and Dalmation toadflax. Because the terrain is rugged, workers with backpack sprayers are being utilized. Mike said the SCC crews will work through the end of November. He plans to continue to use an SCC strike team to do secondary-weed treatments

and treating of resprouts. Monitoring will evaluate treatment effectiveness and changes over time.

Where possible they will integrate other Tres Rios BLM Field Office efforts to build on work that has been done in the watershed and to expand into areas that are vectors and different avenues for weeds.

Uncompahgre Field Office: Amanda Clements*, ecologist, said during 2014 the Uncompahgre BLM Field Office has been working on portions of its obligations under DR-RAP.

On the 8-mile Cement Bridge reach, they did seeding, tamarisk mosaic treatment, and secondary weed treatment on 9 acres. They worked with a major private landowner and decided not to remove all the tamarisk (because the beetle is killing it), but to carve pathways through the tamarisk using a hydroaxe to create a mosaic approach. They seeded 9 acres before the mosaic treatment, then followed up with weed control. Amanda said she visited the area recently and most of the residual tamarisk is dying or dead. A bigger concern is the presence of secondary weeds including whitetop and Russian knapweed, as well as some annual weeds. These secondary weeds will take more treatment. This is a long-term process.

Amanda said last spring the Uncompahgre BLM Field Office worked with the Tamarisk Coalition on salinity-testing and cottonwood-planting. A contractor with a stinger on a track hoe created holes for cottonwood saplings. If the onsite soil test showed salinity was sufficiently low, the saplings were planted. They planted 25-30 cottonwoods as well as some New Mexico privet. Three or four monitoring wells were installed so they could check groundwater levels. However, Amanda said the cottonwood survival rate has been quite low.

This reach borders the Dolores Canyons WSA and they do not want to do major tamarisk removal there, so they chose a very targeted approach, clearing tamarisk from sites that have been campgrounds in the past and are identified on river maps. Crews cleared out about five of those campsites, working from the south to the north. They have addressed much of the tamarisk they had identified and now need to focus on weed control and revegetation. The contractor is spraying knapweed in the WSA, using a mule for access.

Amanda said the treatment of weeds is producing significant secondary kill on big sagebrush and skunkbush, so there is a concern about the side effects of weed treatments. It was agreed this will need further study.

Grand Junction Field Office: Sparky Taber*, natural-resource specialist, said to date the Grand Junction BLM Field Office has done active tamarisk treatment on 94 distinctive polygons ranging in size from 1/10th of an acre to 96 acres. Tamarisk was removed and secondary-weed treatments have been done. Units have been treated at least once and some have been treated three or four times.

A total of 19 miles of river (approximately 800 acres) has been treated on both sides for knapweed, and more will be treated. There are patches of whitetop, kochia, and lamb's quarters that will be treated in the spring. Cheatgrass suppression utilizing Plateau will be done on some polygons in the fall, as will residual knapweed treatment.

Sparky said hundreds of natural-start cottonwood trees have been wrapped and caged. Three or four years later, they are starting to growing taller than the willows. In addition, thousands of willows were planted on numerous sites and there has been some survival of those. Many units were also reseeded with grasses and shrubs.

Crews walked through all 94 units following monitoring protocol. They described what is growing and created “to-do” lists. This information will be critical for future plans.

Final work to be done on the 94 units includes:

- Finish resprout treatments (probably this winter).
- Finish last monitoring.
- Finish initial tamarisk removal.
- Finish initial knapweed treatments.

Sparky added that cottonwoods will also need to be unwrapped before they outgrow their cages, and some sites where mulch was too thick will need to be reworked in order to expose more soil.

Moab Field Office: Ann Marie Aubry, hydrologist with the Moab BLM Field Office, discussed her findings. Working with the county weed department, the Moab BLM FO has been doing herbicide treatments for knapweed and kochia. They are hiring an intern through the BLM to help. They have visited the areas that are easily accessed and have done a thorough inventory. They have also been doing maintenance on sites that were treated in 2010. In the last year Canyon Country Youth Corps crews worked for eight weeks cutting tamarisk resprouts and applying herbicide treatments on those and on knapweed.

Ann Marie said the Moab BLM FO has also done some replanting and she believes they had good success with this year’s efforts. They planted last fall and it snowed immediately after the planting. A local contractor was hired to water the plants once a week. They also weed-whacked weeds that were close to the plantings and that proved helpful. By the monsoons they had stopped watering for the most part. Ann Marie said they did not have much success with trees but had good luck with grasses and shrubs, so they are planting more of those now and trying to let trees come in on their own. This coming year they will experiment with adding soil amendments.

Q&A:

*One person asked why so many cottonwoods are dying when there are clearly some sites conducive to natural reproduction.

Amanda said many of the cottonwoods planted on the Uncompahgre FO failed to even leaf out although the water table was present and salinity levels were acceptable. She said something else may be affecting salinity levels that crews were not able to measure at the time. Some of the cottonwoods did well initially but died after a big flood event; possibly the rising water levels mobilized salt.

Julie Knudson, scientist with the Tamarisk Coalition, said she helped coordinate the cottonwood studies. Salinity and water table were the primary driving forces. Crews made sure there was substantial water in the bottom of the hole when they planted. She said it’s best to plant when

poles are dormant and when water is low. Sometimes an irrigation draw will pull the water level down in the summer. Her guess is the water table dropped below the cottonwoods' feet in many cases and there were salinity issues as well. She said the data will be interesting.

Sparky said he thinks there might have been a better survival rate in his area, but there was a hard frost after many trees had leafed out.

* Rusty Lloyd of the Tamarisk Coalition said he would like land managers who are dealing with kochia to share their strategies and successes. He said kochia seems to be a huge issue this year and he would like to learn more.

Next steps:

→ Anyone with information about managing kochia should send it to Rusty, rlloyd@tamariskcoalition.org.

▪ It was asked whether there are other projects of note on private lands. Julie said some cottonwood planting has been done on private land. Sparky said many of the treatments on the plants were on both public and private lands. Daniel said there are about 20 private landowners with whom the Partnership is working. Amanda said work has also been done on Bureau of Reclamation land.

Tres Rios Southwest Conservation Corps Strike Team: Mike Wight*, river-restoration director for the Southwest Conservation Corps, said this strike team was modeled on work that has been done with the Grand Junction FO. He said there is a lot of maintenance work as efforts move on.

Katie Birch and Kristin Maier*, the two-member Southwest Conservation Corps strike team working with the BLM, discussed their monitoring and cottonwood-suitability follow-up work throughout the four field offices. They also did some mapping of infestation sites and some treatment of secondary weeds.

Kristin said she was excited by the work and found it physically challenging. Katie said it was very rewarding to be working on the river-restoration project.

Colorado Collaboration Award

Rusty congratulated the Partnership for winning the 2014 Colorado Collaboration Award. It was created by the Colorado Nonprofit Association (CNA) in 2011 to celebrate exceptional collaboration. DRRP applied in 2013 and was one of the top three finalists out of more 300 applicants. This year, DRRP reapplied and won. The award is \$50,000 with no strings attached. Representatives of the Partnership recently accepted the award in Denver at the annual luncheon of the CNA. The group held a toast with sparkling apple juice and received a copy of the "Wordle" done in Moab, a graphic made up of words describing the DRRP. Everyone had a chance to go around and say why they think the DRRP won. Some examples of the answers included: a) I feel welcomed here. You are inclusive. b) This group gets things done. I drive the river a lot and say to myself, "Wow, a lot of the tamarisk is dead or gone in that section." You can see what the group is accomplishing. c) All categories of nonprofits competed, not just environmental/conservation groups. You all should feel proud. I was at the ceremony and it was quite impressive. d) The group is flexible adapting to needs on the ground. e) You all should be proud. This is quite an effort.

Rusty then recognized Daniel Oppenheimer for all his work. He filled out the award application and just in general, Rusty and Marsha said, Daniel does a ton of behind the scenes work.

How Can the Implementation, Evaluation and Monitoring Plan for Native Fish and the DRRP Transition Plan Complement One Another?

Peter Mueller* of The Nature Conservancy gave an update on progress on the Implementation Plan (IP). He said the group should consider the idea of integrating landscape-scale restoration projects – one regarding vegetation, the other native fish. How can these efforts start to integrate with each other?

Peter said these are challenging hydrologic times and challenging times for fish and riparian species. The Implementation Team was created for the Lower Dolores to try to find ways to help native fish in the hopes of preventing an endangered-species listing for any of the three species present in the Dolores (the flannelmouth sucker, roundtail chub, and bluehead sucker). The IT embarked on a project called “A Way Forward” to evaluate the needs of native fish. Three researchers were employed to review and synthesize all available research regarding native fish in the Lower Dolores. Their report listed nine opportunities to help the fish. The Implementation Plan was created to discuss ways those opportunities could be utilized.

Peter said the initial IP had far-reaching ecological goals. Many were not place-specific or fish-specific and, as a result, raised concerns among the farming community, who worried that the plan would mean a demand for more water for native fish. Following feedback, the plan has been revised. Much of the revision involved shifting from the idea of having a sudden “revolution” to making continuous progress toward improving resources and addressing the needs of native fish in incremental ways. An effort was made to make the plan more site-specific and fish-specific. The revised version offers more information about each of the three native fish.

Peter said since McPhee Dam was built, much of the power of the river to reshape habitat has been removed, and the overbank flooding that cleanses soils has been diminished. Other problems affecting native fish include barriers to fish movement, predatory non-native fish, and changes to the flow regime.

He said the river basin yields about 300,000 acre-feet per year, and most of that is allocated. Just 70,000 acre-feet is moving down the river. This means the river lacks the power to create the deep pools that existed pre-dam and provided places where native fish could survive the summers. He said this is not a judgment, merely a fact. Because the river has changed, baseflows become even more important.

Peter asked if there are opportunities to pair aquatic restoration with riparian restoration.

Mike Preston, general manager for the Dolores Water Conservancy District, continued with the PowerPoint presentation. He said the core objective of the Dolores Project was to settle Indian water-rights claims. As a result of the Project, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe now has a 7,600-acre farm that is one of the most productive in the country. The water from the Project has also fueled other types of development on the reservation. Mike also discussed the many benefits of the Dolores Project for agriculture, local municipalities, and recreation, especially boating.

Mike said the problems of reduced flows in the Dolores River are very real. He said no one is “in charge” of the riparian ecology below McPhee. CPW manages the fisheries, BuRec owns the facilities, and the DWCD operates the reservoir and dam. In addition, some organizations such as DRRP have made major investments in riparian health. No one entity is in charge.

Mike discussed the USDA’s Regional Conservation Partnership Program, created as part of the 2014 Farm Bill to enhance regional cooperation to implement and maintain conservation activities. Awards are made competitively to conservation projects, using funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Thirty-five percent of the RCPP’s total funding will be directed to critical conservation areas, and the entire Colorado River Basin is one of eight critical conservation areas that have been designated.

David Graf of Colorado Parks and Wildlife said when McPhee was built, there were great hopes for a tailwater fishery, but it never truly materialized. When the first severe drought came, managers had to change the flow regimen into a “fish pool”, which provides more flexibility for water managers but has drawbacks.

David discussed the “Three Species Agreement”, an agreement among six states, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Forest Service, the BLM, and several tribes to improve the status of the three native fish species of concern in the Lower Dolores. He said CPW is working hard to implement this agreement, but the agency is limited in what it can do. Since the Implementation Plan has been in place, there haven’t been any spill years on the Lower Dolores. In 2013 there was a crippling water shortage.

David described the needs of the native fish, which require different habitat for different life stages. In addition, they need to be able to move up and down the river; they migrate hundreds of miles. They also need clean cobbles for laying eggs.

Threats to native fish include hybridization with similar species and predation by non-native fish such as smallmouth bass. David said in the past, there were no bass in the Dolores, so when fish were confined to pools during drought periods, they could survive. Now, they share such pools with smallmouth bass and may be eaten. The bass and other non-natives such as Kokanee salmon and green sunfish were introduced to the river in 1993, when managers were repairing the outlet works on McPhee Dam and fish were able to go over the spillway.

David said brown trout are also potentially voracious predators but there is not much overlap between their reaches and those of the warmwater native fish. CPW has removed bag limits on brown trout in an attempt to limit their numbers.

Peter said questions for discussion are:

- How might the nine opportunities benefit riparian habitat?
- What additional information do we need for native fish and riparian health?
- How can we coordinate our planning, implementation and monitoring work when necessary?
- Are there areas where habitat manipulation would advance riparian and native fish goals? If so, what are the criteria? Who would be best to plan, fund, and implement this work?

- In regards to reservoir releases, can we coordinate riparian flow needs with the needs of native fish?
- What should we do to bring the DRRP in closer with the Implementation Plan?

Daniel said on private lands DRRP is typically concerned about erosion because it results in loss of land. Would removing tamarisk to initiate erosional processes benefit the fish?

David said it is often suggested that habitat work be done to help native fish, but the issue is complicated. Tamarisk has stabilized the banks and trapped sediment. Ideally, the river should provide riffle activities, pools, and meanders, along with some braiding. Perhaps it would be possible to do some pilot work on public lands to try to reshape the bars, starting on a small scale and trying to coordinate the timing with a year where there is enough water. He said it would be best not to continue to degrade and downsize the channel if it can be made more diverse.

It was asked whether there is an opportunity to study the resurgence of native vegetation and microinvertebrates. David said the theory is that if more dynamics are introduced into the riparian setting, more woody material and nutrients, it starts a life cycle and there should be some responses from the fish community. He said it's not always possible to monitor the results completely because fish sampling is somewhat ad hoc and it isn't always possible for CPW to access the reaches to conduct sampling. He said sampling results are not really population estimates but metrics – fish per mile, etc.

Another question was asked about the status of instream flows on the Dolores. Mike said an ISF of 78 cfs has been in place for some time from McPhee to the confluence. Another ISF is under consideration by the Colorado Water Conservation Board for below the confluence. This one is variable but goes up to 900 cfs at peak times.

The need for outreach and education was discussed. Mike said basin implementation plans are being developed around the state. The Southwest Basin's plan is ready for review and feedback. That is one venue where projects are being vetted. He thinks there is a tremendous opportunity for coordination on the Dolores regarding research. CPW is doing most of the monitoring. It would be good to have coordination among the four BLM units and community-based processes. Mike said outreach should be a part of collaboration.

Next steps:

- Daniel said at the annual Implementation Subcommittee meeting this winter, members might be interested in exploring some of these questions. The Science and Monitoring Subcommittee could also discuss them. It was agreed these questions should be discussed along with the conversation about how the two efforts could or should interface, share information, do joint fact finding, etc.

The Partnership Fund: Update and Vetting Approaches

Kristen Jespersen* of the Tamarisk Coalition, co-chair of the Funding Subcommittee, discussed the projected budget. She said the total spent in 2014 was \$891,920. (These are preliminary figures and don't include in-kind contribution or work on private lands.) Funding from the Walton Family Foundation, which has been a major contributor, is ending, so it will be necessary to replace those funds.

2015 and 2016 are the first two years of transition plan. For 2015, a total budget of \$522,300 is projected, and there is a current shortfall of \$101,980. Kristen said the Partnership has a good relationship with the BLM, which has a new Healthy Lands Initiative, and it possible that will provide some funding. In addition, in December the Partnership will learn whether it has received a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

In 2016, \$355,000 worth of work is planned, and the current shortfall is \$256,500.

Through 2022, costs will continue to go down until they plateau at about \$40,000 per year for keeping the Partnership functioning and doing monitoring and maintenance. Kristen said monitoring and capacity are the two hardest aspects of restoration to fund.

Kristen said potential long-term funding sources include:

- The BLM's Healthy Lands Initiative and other funds
- CPW's Native Species Conservation Trust Fund
- NRCS funding including the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and EQIP.
- Grants
- Private donations. These usually constitute the bulk of funding for most nonprofits. The Partnership's outreach might need to merge with looking at potential private donors. Kristen said DRRP does not currently have a strong donor base, and noted that the Dolores River is in a rural, sparsely populated area that is not wealthy.

Kristen said the Partnership needs to look at target audiences – who benefits and who cares.

Kristen said the Colorado Collaboration Award provides a unique opportunity. The Funding Subcommittee and the Core Team, she said, believe the \$50,000 award should be set aside so DRRP can decide how to use it to leverage new funding and develop a long-term funding strategy. This could be a seed fund for creating a partnership fund or hiring a development director. There was general agreement by the DRRP to pursue this direction with the understanding more details will be brought forth to the next meeting. Kristen said the Core Team also talked about using the \$50,000 award as an opportunity to thank funders.

Next steps (for the Funding Subcommittee and Core Team):

- Continue to research and apply for grants.
- Work with BLM regarding the Healthy Lands Initiative.
- Develop a private-donor strategy.
- Decide what a partnership fund would look like.

Facilitator Marsha Porter-Norton said a communications plan was identified as a DRRP priority at the last meeting and plans are underway to get this done. It was discussed at length by the Core Team at a retreat two months ago. She said the pieces are starting to fall together including the action step that a firm has been identified who can complete it (Athena Communications out of Durango). However, she said, the Core Team recently decided to finish the communication plan once the funding strategy/ies are identified since the two efforts (fundraising and communications) need to go hand in hand because influence one another.

There was consensus to approve this fundraising approach.

Interpretive Trail

Mike Wight* discussed the completion of the Gateway Canyons Dolores River Interpretive Trail on the Gateway Canyons Resort. He said the trail dedication was Oct. 12 and 13. The trail signs are all in place. They are working on a long-term maintenance plan with the resort to keep the trail in shape.

There was agreement that this is a great accomplishment and the signs look wonderful.

Meeting evaluation

Marsha asked for feedback. Comments were:

- Good lunch
- Well-organized, on-schedule
- Excellent information in the presentations

Announcements and comments

- Joe Meyer is the new district manager for the Grand Junction Field Office.
- Janet Ross of the Four Corners School of Outdoor Education suggested formal recognition of Sam Walton for his role in starting the Partnership and similar efforts. She said none of this would have happened without him. There was agreement this should be pursued.
- The next Partnership meeting will be in Montrose, Colo., in the spring.