

## UGRWCD Board Member Profile

### MICHELLE PIERCE



Michelle Pierce was appointed to the UGRWCD Board of Directors in June 2015 representing Division 1, Hinsdale County. Michelle currently serves as the President of the Board. Her term expires in 2023.

Michelle describes herself as a “layman” when it comes to water issues even though she was instrumental in helping facilitate one of the most important watershed management projects in the history of Hinsdale County. During her tenure as Town Manager for the Town of Lake City, Colorado from 1985 to 2012, it came to light during the severe drought years of 2002 and 2003 that Lake City could be in serious trouble if drought conditions continued.

She and other local officials realized that there was a need for a secure source of augmentation water for Lake City’s water wells.

“The understanding prior to 2002 was that the Town of Lake City could rely on its long term lease for augmentation water in Blue Mesa Reservoir which could be released, or exchanged, to meet calls by downstream senior water users, rather than having to curtail its own use. But then we were made aware of in instream flow right held by the Colorado Water Conservation Board on the Lake Fork River, upstream of the Blue Mesa Reservoir, that could interrupt this exchange in dry years,” said Michelle.

It was well known locally that, for many years, the level of water held in Lake San Cristobal in Hinsdale County was artificially raised by up to three feet at certain times each year by strategically placing boulders to increase the water level in the Lake. Michelle and others in the county surmised that perhaps this process could be formalized as a “control structure” and the waters of Lake San Cristobal could serve as an augmentation source for Lake City and Hinsdale County.

“During this process, I learned all about augmentation plans, senior and junior water rights and I came to have an increasing awareness of our water supply and the importance of water resources in our state,” said Michelle.

Hinsdale County approached the UGRWCD about developing a joint water management plan for Lake San Cristobal to address the water augmentation issues for the Lake Fork Valley. As it turned out, in order for this joint contract to be formalized, the voters of Hinsdale County had to approve the measure by a ballot issue. Michelle, in partnership with the Hinsdale County Administrator, then developed a power point

presentation to educate voters about the importance of having a secure source of augmentation water, which they presented to various groups in the county over 20 times before the election. The measure ended up passing by just 23 votes.

In 2005, Michelle was appointed by the Lake City Board of Trustees to serve as the representative for Lake City on the Gunnison Basin Roundtable, where she served for 10 years. The Gunnison Basin Roundtable was one of nine such groups created earlier that year by the Colorado legislature with the goals of protecting, conserving, and developing water supplies within Colorado, including the Western Slope, for future needs. After Michelle retired in 2012 as the Town Manager of Lake City, she fulfilled her remaining term on the Gunnison Basin Roundtable and was then approached in 2015 to join the UGRWCD.

“I am happy to serve the District,” said Michelle, who believes she was elected president of the district in part because she is a “neutral party” with experience to help organize, manage and facilitate the Board’s involvement in District programming.

“I love our Board,” said Michelle. “We are a very diverse group with incredibly different backgrounds, yet we listen thoughtfully to each other and treat one another with respect, even when there are disagreements.”

Michelle feels that one of the District’s greatest challenges is the comprehension and execution of the Watershed Management Plan and its importance in guiding the Board and staff into the future. “The Watershed Management Planning Process will take a lot of coordination and leadership from the District,” said Michelle.

Michelle said the UGRWCD is the “gatekeeper” of all water issues in our district and that in order to protect our water supply and conserve our resources, the District must make our issues understandable to a layperson and all stakeholders in our basin.

When not tackling water issues, you’ll find Michelle engaged in her passion of genealogy research. “I am an avid researcher,” said Michelle, who admits to discovering a few “scoundrels” in her lineage. Michelle enjoys using her genealogy research skills by serving as the registrar for the Gunnison Valley Chapter of the Daughter of the American Revolution.

“Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to observe Director Pierce in her various leadership roles throughout the Gunnison Basin, and always with admiration,” said UGRWCD General Manager Sonja Chavez. “I’d definitely describe her as more than a “layperson” in the water world and so would many others who have had the pleasure of working with her. As a Director and our Chair, she works really hard to understand all water resource issues and perspectives and leads with a strong, fair and balanced

approach. Our organization has grown under her leadership and we're very lucky to have her."