

Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force

Minutes

October 25th, 2023

Task Force Attendees:

Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)
David Fischer (Taylor Local Users Group)
Susan Washko (Western Colorado University)
Steve Anders (USGS)
Hannah Cranor-Kersting (Gunnison County Stockgrowers)
Brandon Diamond (Colorado Parks and Wildlife)
Mike Rogers (City of Gunnison)
David Gardner (City of Gunnison)
Dustin Brown (Commercial Boating)
Julie Nania (High Country Conservation Advocates)
Ashley Bembenek (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Erin Wilson (Wilson Water Group)
Lee Traynham (Bureau of Reclamation)
Ed Warner (Bureau of Reclamation)
Carolyn de Groot (Town of Crested Butte)
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County)
Neal Starkebaum (Town of Mt Crested Butte)
Shannon Hessler (Town of Mt Crested Butte)
Nicole Gibney (National Park Service)

Staff/Consultants:

Carrie Padgett (Harris Water Engineering)
Stacy Beaugh (Strategic by Nature)
Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Cheryl Cwelich (UGRWCD)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)

I. Introductions, Agenda Review and Working Agreements:

Stacy Beough outlined the objectives for the day. The first goal was to finalize approval of the detailed work plan. The second objective was to delve deeper into the topic of stakeholder engagement. The third and final task was to foster a productive and motivating discussion that would position the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservation District (UGRWCD) and water users to make the most of their efforts in the Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Planning process. Stacy emphasized that UGRWCD holds the authority for making final decisions, with the Task Force serving as a guiding entity that sets the course and determines priorities. The Task Force aims to reach a consensus among its members who are actively participating in the Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan Process.

II. Review Comments and Approve Detailed Workplan:

Carrie Padgett provided a brief overview to the Task Force regarding the purpose of the Drought Contingency Planning (DCP) process. She highlighted that throughout the DCP process, they would be addressing three key questions: 1) How will we identify the early stages of the next drought? 2) What will be the impact of drought on us? 3) How can we safeguard ourselves for the next drought? The planning process has been structured with the intention of facilitating the answers to these questions and fostering an open and inclusive planning effort that adopts a proactive approach to establish long-term resilience to drought.

Carrie also informed the Task Force that they are currently in the initial stages of reviewing the detailed work plan and aim to kick off the process at the beginning of the new year. She further noted that in January, the consultants would be generating more work products related to Tasks 1, 2, and 3.

Carrie Padgett requested feedback from the Task Force members on the draft detailed work plan. She informed the group of early comments received from Julie Nania and Erin Wilson.

Julie emphasized the importance of including environmental and economic impacts in the work plan, specifically highlighting the impact of drought on environmental base flows within the District and its potential cascading effects. She suggested integrating information on instream flow call records, CPW fishing closures, and gathering additional insights from recreational and environmental communities. Julie also stressed the significance of understanding the implications of fast-approaching drought and proposed strategies to proactively address it. Carrie acknowledged these points and assured that these suggestions would be incorporated into the vulnerability assessment section.

Erin highlighted the need to consolidate as much existing information and ongoing work in the Basin as possible. Rather than duplicating efforts, the focus should be on identifying and addressing gaps. Erin noted that much of the information gathered from stakeholders is already part of the Bureau of Reclamation forecasting, emphasizing the importance of concentrating on areas where information might be lacking or incomplete.

Sonja Chavez pointed out that the District already utilizes reclamation forecasting, and she suggested that the Task Force consider collecting data from the WRF-Hydro model development currently in use

for Taylor Park Reservoir. She agreed on the importance of avoiding duplication of efforts and, instead, focusing on collaborating to identify areas where data gaps may exist.

Ashley Bembenek mentioned that it is common for water users to rely on SNOTEL sites for forecasting purposes.

Sonja informed the group that a Doppler gap weather radar station would be installed near Blue Mesa by the first week of December. She noted that this radar station would be a valuable resource for forecasting in the basin. She then turned to the municipalities, inquiring about the specific triggers they use to implement water restrictions. Sonja noted her awareness of water restrictions in Crested Butte and asked the town representatives about the criteria they use to determine these restrictions.

Ashley responded by explaining that Crested Butte maintains permanent water restrictions that do not rely on condition-based triggers for their water management.

Sonja brought up to the consultants another important data source, which is the soil moisture sensors. She mentioned that as part of the WRF-Hydro model, they have deployed soil moisture sensors in the field. These sensors have revealed that Taylor Park is entering the winter season with drier soil conditions compared to the end of 2021, which raises concerns.

Susan Washko added that the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) has monitoring equipment in the East River Watershed. She offered to check with RMBL, where she works part-time as a scientist, to gather more information on the drought indicators used by the lab.

Sonja encouraged the Task Force to engage with agricultural producers who possess valuable insights into drought indicators, particularly in the Basin, noting their close monitoring of cattle and spring conditions, which can provide essential ground truthing.

Jesse Kruthaupt suggested using USGS gages for tracking temperature data and emphasized the importance of filling in data gaps and utilizing existing information.

Susan mentioned she would reach out to RMBL, which holds instream water rights and monitors temperatures throughout the summer, to gather more insights on drought indicators.

Carolyn De Groot suggested collecting data from Crested Butte Avalanche, which conducts significant winter research.

Sonja also pointed out that Airborne Snow Observatory (ASO) flights could provide detailed information about how drought is affecting individual watersheds due to the variability across different areas.

Erin offered to provide an analysis of the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) forecast for the Upper Gunnison Basin and will reach out to Dave Gochis to identify data gaps, as the BOR possesses extensive information covering most of the basin.

Carrie continued the meeting by inquiring if the Task Force had reviewed the Scope of Work and invited questions or comments.

Steve Anders, Nicole Gibney, Ashley Bembenek, Brandon Diamond, Erin Wilson, and Susan Washko provided various comments on the draft detailed work plan, addressing issues related to the tone of writing, grammatical errors, and seeking clarification in sections discussing research.

Carrie Padgett also informed the group that the draft detailed work plan is intended for internal use by the consultants and the Task Force. This document will serve as the framework for the steps to be taken in the future. She clarified that the actual Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) would dive more into research and provide comprehensive details about the Upper Gunnison Basin.

Carrie Padgett offered to resend the previous PowerPoint presentation from the last meeting, which provides brief descriptions of each task required for the DCP. Additionally, she mentioned including a document from the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) that provides detailed explanations of the six tasks and how they are interconnected.

Carrie then proceeded to present the budget for the Task Force's review, emphasizing that each of the six elements had a different budget allocation based on the tasks that needed to be completed.

Stacy Beaugh proposed that the Task Force thoroughly review the budget and grant Carrie the opportunity to make necessary edits to the draft detailed work plan. Since the group was not ready to approve the plan, it was decided that another meeting would be scheduled for November to officially approve the detailed work plan.

III. Stakeholder Engagement Plan:

Stacy Beaugh discussed the importance of reviewing the Stakeholder Engagement Plan, seeking input from the Task Force members regarding the Stakeholder List and interview questions to be posed to stakeholder members. The objective of this plan is to encourage stakeholders to provide valuable information that will aid the District in mitigating drought and developing effective solutions.

The Task Force then divided into small breakout rooms to collectively review and discuss the stakeholder engagement strategies.

Stacy Beaugh informed the group that the consultants would review all the comments gathered during these discussions and present their findings at the next Task Force meeting, scheduled for either the end of November or the beginning of December. She also mentioned that an updated detailed work plan would be distributed within the next two weeks and that approval of the detailed work plan was planned for the next meeting.

Cheryl Cwelich suggested the creation of learning session videos for stakeholders and Task Force members to enhance their understanding of water use in various sectors and topics, a suggestion that will be considered moving forward.

The meeting was adjourned by Stacy Beaugh at 11:30 a.m.