

Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force Meeting

Minutes

June 26th, 2024

Attendees:

Jon Hare (High Country Conservation Advocates)
Ashley Bembenek (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Bryan Moore (USGS)
Brinnen Carter (National Park Service)
Mike Rogers
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County Commissioner)
Nate Seward (CPW)
David Gardner (City of Gunnison)
Dave Fisher (TLUG)
Steeve Moore (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Dustin Brown (Scenic River Tours)
Susan Washko (WCU)

Attendees via Zoom:

Lisa Brown (Wilson Water Group)
Lee Traynham (BOR)
Jon Kaminsky (BLM)
Carter
Cody

Staff/Consultants:

Carrie Padgett (Harris Water Engineering)
Stacy Beough (Strategic By Nature)
Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)

I. Welcome and Introductions:

Stacy outlined the goals for the day, emphasizing the focus on the vulnerability assessment. This meeting aims to consolidate insights from previous stakeholder outreach and discussions to refine the vulnerability assessment and drought impacts, and to set goals for the action phase of the planning process. The Task Force will discuss potential goals for the Upper Gunnison DCP. The aim is to consolidate the discussion and return with a short list of agreed-upon goals by the end of the meeting.

Carrie Padgett provided a DCP status update, indicating that they are wrapping up the vulnerability assessment, which involved extensive interviews conducted by Stacy. She highlighted this as a turning point, where the focus will shift to developing actions to enhance resilience. Carrie mentioned that they have already worked on drought monitoring and data source identification. Moving forward, the team will concentrate on goal setting and actions until the final plan is reached.

II. Vulnerability Assessment Element- Purpose and Discussion

The purpose of the vulnerability assessment is to understand risk factors, identify impacted sectors, present and refine stakeholder input, and determine which basins are more at risk based on these factors. Actions should address these underlying conditions rather than just seeking more water. The goal is to understand how to do more with less and to focus on the real reasons behind vulnerabilities. This framework aims to identify the social, economic, and environmental causes of drought impacts.

Stacy provided an overview of the process used to assess vulnerabilities, which included interviews, surveys, and discussions with Task Force members and stakeholders. A diverse range of input was gathered from various water user interests. Stacy shared a summary of 32 surveys, 22 interviews, and a focus group with members of the Stock Growers Association.

Key findings included:

- Drought impacts span all water user interests, affecting agriculture, recreation, municipal, and industrial sectors.
- Agriculture faces operational challenges and decreased economic viability, with concerns about wildfire risk.
- Recreation is impacted economically and through stress on resources, including habitats for fish and wildlife.
- Municipal concerns focus on potable water, increased costs, and the need for supplemental supply, with a noted gap in industrial stakeholder outreach.
- Environmental impacts include aridification, habitat degradation, increased non-native species, and contaminants.
- Other issues identified include increased workloads, especially for public land agencies, user conflict, community stress, and the necessity for greater collaboration.

Stacy introduced another way to look at drought impacts, based on drought survey responses. The responses provided insights into where people saw the most significant drought impacts. For agriculture, the major concerns were damaged crop quality and decreased productivity, along with a lack of adequate grass on permit areas (public lands) and an increased presence of weeds. It was noted that no respondent's indicated impacts were severe enough to cause layoffs. In the recreation sector, the primary concerns were stress on fisheries, shorter seasons, and a decreased quality of recreational experiences. For municipal concerns, survey respondents indicated increased portable water use for outdoor irrigation, pressure on water availability, and the need for advanced treatment

technology. Environmental impacts of drought included increased aridification and wildfire risk. Decreased species abundance and the encroachment of non-native plants were significant concerns.

The discussion then moved to community vulnerability. Stacy reviewed details from the last meeting, noting that many in the Upper Gunnison community feel vulnerable due to degraded agricultural infrastructure and less efficient practices, which vary by individual operations. Grazing permits on public lands are maxed out, leaving no room to move cattle during drought years. Ecological pressures and degradation mean that less healthy ecosystems provide fewer services, stressing the importance of maintaining healthy streams and rivers. Reliance on recreation and water flows for recreational activities was another significant vulnerability, since drought concentrates use at specific access points, increasing stress on land and resources.

The stakeholder assessment showed the multifaceted impacts of drought on agriculture, recreation, municipal services, and the environment, highlighting the community's vulnerabilities and the need for targeted strategies to mitigate these impacts.

Stacy mentioned that the comments in the middle were more reflective of the diverse range of people reliant on water in the Gunnison Basin. This diversity in water dependency, which includes various economic sectors, makes it difficult to prioritize one sector over another. There is also a lack of understanding of the water system among the general community. While people around the table are well-educated on how water works, they felt that the broader community lacks this understanding, leading to misconceptions between different user groups such as recreation, agriculture, environment, and municipal sectors.

Stacy also highlighted the issue of lenient and informal water administration. Currently, under free river conditions, there is a lot of flexibility, but this might not prepare the community for stricter administration in the future. Climate change, the location of the watershed, and limited water supply were discussed as factors that reduce water availability. These factors impact everyone and are compounded by the community's reliance on outdoor resources. Unlike urban areas, the Gunnison Basin community has a deep connection to these resources, which are crucial for its culture, health, and resilience.

Another vulnerability identified was the pressure from out-of-basin influences, such as transmountain diversions and an increasing number of people coming to the area. These external factors add to the vulnerabilities, showing that the community is not an enclosed system but is significantly affected by external dynamics.

Stacy continued the session by outlining the next step in the process for the Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan (DCP): goal setting. The purpose is to translate the vulnerabilities, impacts, and future concerns identified into actionable goals that would help guide the community's planning efforts. These goals would serve as the foundation

for narrowing down the potential actions. The aim was to ensure that all water users in the region were aligned and working toward shared priorities.

The Task Force was asked to define initial high-level goals, which would provide direction for narrowing the list of 60 potential actions into a manageable set of strategies. These actions must clearly connect to the broader goals to ensure community buy-in and to help secure funding and resources. Stacy made it clear that the focus today was on establishing goals, not specific actions, and provided a few examples to guide the discussion.

Examples included: (1) Win-win and multi-benefit solutions — prioritizing actions that benefit multiple sectors of water use, ensuring solutions that are cooperative and mutually beneficial; (2) Acknowledging differences among water users — recognizing that different sectors (e.g., municipal versus agricultural) have different needs and impacts, and making sure that actions are balanced and proportional across all sectors; and (3) Inspiring community change in water conservation and ethics — fostering a cultural shift toward water conservation through community education and outreach, addressing knowledge gaps, and encouraging long-term behavior changes.

The Task Force came together to share their ideas, and the following draft goals were developed:

- Ensure the DCP is actionable.
- Protect and enhance the community's built and natural water infrastructure.
- Preserve diverse community values such as safe/quality drinking water, thriving agriculture/ranching, ecosystem health, and a strong recreational economy.
- Be proactive and prepare for the future.
- Use data to inform decision making.
- Advance a collaborative approach to share responsibility, leverage resources, and connect with similar initiatives.
- Be creative to look for win-win and multi-benefit actions and solutions.
- Respect the hydrologic, ecological, and cultural differences in each subbasin.
- Promote a shared and consistent message.
- Inspire community action and a shared responsibility through education.

III. Communications Task:

The DCP admin team had drafted a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a communications consultant. The purpose of hiring this consultant would be to take the technical information developed by the Task Force and find effective ways to interpret it to the community. The consultant would help identify opportunities for public awareness campaigns and determine the best methods for outreach, whether through media such as PSAs on the radio, social media, website, or other strategies. The key goal was to have someone with expertise in the marketing and communications field develop a plan to effectively get the message out to the community.

The communications consultant would do much of the legwork in creating the strategy, while the Task Force would serve in an advisory role, ensuring the messaging aligns with

the Task Force's objectives. She stressed that creating a solid communication plan would be important for the success of the DCP, helping to inform the community about water conservation and the Task Force efforts.

To help guide this process, Carrie mentioned the formation of a communications committee within the Task Force. This subgroup of Task Force members would work directly with the consultant and provide ongoing input. The communications committee consists of Jon Hare, Carolyn De Groot, Mike Rogers, Brinnen Carter and the DCP staff team. Their role would be to ensure that the messaging remains consistent with the Task Force goals and provide directions on any necessary adjustments as the communication plan develops.

IV. Next Steps:

The communications committee will continue their work through the summer. The DCP admin team will be hosting a series of water user group workshops to gather input on mitigation and response actions. These workshops will focus on the goals developed so far and explore the potential impacts and benefits of various actions.

The workshops will be scheduled for September and October. As a result, the July Task Force meeting will be canceled. Instead of holding Task Force meetings in August and September, members will be invited to attend the workshops relevant to their specific interests. No additional Task Force meetings will be held during these months, and the results of the workshops will be brought back to the Task Force afterward for further discussion.

V. Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be the Upper Gunnison DCP Stakeholders meeting on Wednesday, September 25, 2024 at 9:00 a.m.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:49 a.m.