Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force

Minutes

February 26, 2025

Task Force Attendees:
Ashley Bembenek (Coal Creek Watershed)
Michelle Pierce (Town of Lake City)
Shannon Muenchow (USFS)
Brinnen Carter (National Park Service)
Heather Miller
Cody Tusing (City of Gunnison)
Shea Early (Town of Crested Butte)
Susan Washko (WCU)
Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)
Shannon Hessler (Mount Crested Butte)
Casey Smith (BOR)
Scott Morrill (Gunnison County Emergency)
Steve Moore (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County)
Nathan Darnall
Dustin Brown (Scenic Rivers)
Ryan White
Jon Hare (HCCA)
Reece Carpenter

Staff/Consultants:
Stacy Beaugh (Strategic by Nature)
Carrie Padget (Harris Water Group)
Savannah Nelson (Sunshine Creatives)
Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)
Bailey Friedman (UGRWCD)

I. Agenda Overview and DCP Process

Stacy reviewed the meeting outcomes, emphasizing the goal of reviewing and providing input on the draft mitigation and response actions, as well as setting up prioritization. She also reviewed the current steps in the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) process. After the Task Force reviews and edits the actions, they will be presented in full draft form. Stacy then presented the revised meeting schedule.

II. Action Tables Review

Carrie provided an overview of the actions table for each water sector, explaining how each sector is organized. To review the draft actions click here: Summary Tables of Actions.

Municipal and Industrial Actions:

Carrie began by reviewing the Municipal & Industrial (M&I) section, outlining the description, key partners, focus area, and timeline. The discussion then shifted to how municipal providers could benefit from a modeling tool designed to assess water savings associated with turf replacement and irrigation practices.

Lisa Brown proposed the creation of a modeling tool to help municipal providers understand the potential water savings from turf replacement in the Upper Gunnison Basin. The tool would aim to estimate the impact of replacing traditional turf with water-wise landscaping, such as xeriscaping or native plants. The analysis would focus on providing high-level estimates of water savings rather than getting into the details of individual water use.

Shannon Hessler, representing Mount Crested Butte (Mt. CB), shared that their town already has a strict landscape code that prohibits turf for single-family homes but allows it in multi-family and public areas. Shannon noted that Mt. CB has enough background data to make decisions for their population, but they are interested in exploring how turf replacement could be applied in public areas like ski areas and multi-unit residences. The model would not need to be overly specific, and could be developed in collaboration with other municipalities.

Cody Tusing from the City of Gunnison explained that their city has numerous parks and uses ditch water for irrigation, which reduces the demand on the potable water system. Residential areas in Gunnison use a mix of ditch water and potable water, but there is currently no data on residential water use, and it would be valuable to gather this data moving forward. Cody emphasized that while there is value in the modeling, the findings would need to be reviewed by city leadership for decision-making. Additionally, Gunnison is working on a master plan for their ditch system, and Cody suggested that the modeling could provide high-level data, such as water use per square foot or per acre, instead of focusing solely on "in-turf/out-of-turf" distinctions. Gunnison has roughly 50 acres of parks with irrigation.

Shea Early, representing the Town of Crested Butte, stated that the modeling tool would be useful for the Town Council to help vet various landscaping designs and their potential water impacts. Shea noted that Crested Butte is a relatively dense town, with many lots consisting of 70% building structures, leaving limited space for turf. Outside of parks, there is not much grass to convert. However, understanding the water treatment plant reductions and impacts of turf replacement would be valuable.

Michelle Pierce from Lake City expressed that there are no current restrictions on outdoor irrigation, but outdoor use is the largest use in the summer. Michelle sees value in understanding the extent of turf areas, especially as Lake City has several large parks covered in grass. However, she noted that converting these parks might not be feasible due to their public use. The town is also working on an affordable housing project and could potentially encourage alternative landscaping as part of the development. Michelle raised concerns about the wildfire risks in the area and questioned whether the state's irrigation model is the best starting point, as she suspects that some residents may be overwatering compared to what the model suggests.

The group also discussed the challenge of establishing a baseline for water use. While the goal is to estimate the water needed for different types of landscaping (e.g., bluegrass vs. xeriscaping), it is difficult to control for the variability in how residents irrigate. The level of effort required to analyze individual water bills would be expensive, so the team agreed that the analysis should focus on providing a range of water use estimates based on typical grass requirements, estimating high and low use cases.

Reservoir Augmentation Program

There was concern about the growing pressure on the state's reservoir augmentation program, which allows developments to purchase credits for both indoor and outdoor water use. If these credits are depleted, agricultural water use could be impacted. The group discussed the possibility of introducing a separate credit for xeriscaping, which could help alleviate some of the pressure on the augmentation program.

Environmental Social Marketing and Peer Influence

One of the proposed actions is an environmental social marketing campaign aimed at encouraging responsible water use through peer pressure and community engagement. Signs and public outreach could help influence water use behavior, particularly in areas with high outdoor water consumption.

Engagement with Homeowners' Associations (HOAs)

Steve Moore, representing Skyland, emphasized the issue of gross overuse of water in his development, noting that the area has water rights but could still benefit from turf replacement initiatives. He expressed a willingness to help engage other HOAs in efforts to replace turf. Steve also mentioned that large developments, particularly those not served by municipal water systems, could benefit from the modeling information to guide their decisions. He proposed that

a sub-action could involve engaging HOAs to gather relevant information on their water use and to understand what types of data would be most useful for decision-making.

Policy and Strategic Considerations
The Task Force discussed the policy challenges around turf replacement. Shannon Hessler noted that it is easier to implement policies for new developments, where there is more control over the landscaping, than for retrofitting existing properties. She also suggested using the term "manicured high-density grass" as an alternative to "turf" to describe areas that require intensive landscaping. Additionally, the group discussed how the information from this modeling tool could inform rate structures for municipal providers, particularly in addressing overuse and incentivizing water conservation.

Recent Turf Removal Projects
Sonja Chavez shared that two turf removal projects on the Front Range recently received approval with $2M in funding from the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB). These projects resulted in a savings of 40 acre-feet of water, which could serve as a model for other regions considering turf replacement.

Agricultural Actions:

CSU Extension was identified as a potential champion for agricultural education efforts. For the grazing management toolbox, the Stockgrowers were suggested as the lead, with NRCS also contributing through Conservation Stewardship Practices. While the Upper Gunnison District could play a role, they have some limitations but could collaborate or coordinate with the champions to provide support. It was noted that different champions might be needed for each subgroup, with CSU Extension helping with initiatives like virtual fencing, while the Stockgrowers would be more suited for leading efforts related to grass banking. Additionally, the term "pasture reserve" was proposed as an alternative to "grass banking."

Education and Outreach:

While the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD) is listed as the champion for education and outreach, it was suggested that the responsibilities could be divided among various stakeholders to better coordinate and communicate community engagement efforts, ensuring momentum is maintained. A sub-action was proposed to hold a meeting once a year to share forecast information and gather feedback from the community. For Basinwide Community Engagement, it was noted that this could be an opportunity for NGOs, such as Trout Unlimited and HCCA, to get involved. Alternatively, Task Force members could be listed as individuals contributing to this effort, as well as for the education initiatives.

Ideas for the Outreach/Communications Plan included having municipalities incorporate relevant information into utility bills to reach residents directly. Additionally, social media posts and

website blogs would be created and shared by multiple Task Force members to ensure broad distribution and engagement across platforms.

Environmental and Recreation:

Carrie reviewed the environmental and recreation actions, which are broken out into six actions.

Sonja suggested a name change for the Tomichi Creek Wildlife Area, noting that other subbasins experience similar issues.

Jesse proposed that some of these actions could be led by Trout Unlimited (TU), specifically in relation to mitigating mining impacts.

Scott Morrill shared that they are working on a mitigation plan with the county, with drought being one of the valley's growing concerns. Carrie expressed uncertainty about the accuracy of the numbers, as the mitigation plan is ongoing, and the estimates might become outdated over time.

Shannon Muenchow mentioned that the Forest Service is in a state of funding turbulence but would be willing to partner where possible, especially on wet meadow projects and other initiatives identified in the action plan.

Jonathan Houck agreed with the topics discussed and suggested renaming the Tomichi project to a more generic term, with the Tomichi Creek as a pilot project. He emphasized focusing on low flow, dry-ups, temperature issues, and stream reaches impacted by drought, with Sonja offering ideas for specific locations. He also recommended using the term “Coordinated Water Conservation” and listing TU as a partner.

For the mitigation of mining impacts, Carrie agreed to follow up with Ashley Bembenek and emphasized the need for a study to better understand where mining impacts are occurring and identify associated risks. TU would be listed as a partner in these efforts.

III. Criteria & Set Up Prioritization Process

Stacy reviewed the prioritization process, explaining that the goal is to focus on the most important actions and emphasize those accordingly. Actions are categorized as priority or secondary. The overarching goal of the DCP is to increase the UGRWCD's resilience to drought while preserving diverse community values such as safe, high-quality drinking water, agricultural and ranching viability, ecosystem health, and fire resilience.

Stacy also outlined the guiding principles that emerged from the DCP process and mentioned she would send the criteria and guiding principles to the group. Additionally, the Task Force will have. the opportunity to review the draft actions on their own time and make any additional edits.

IV. Adjournment

The next Task Force meeting will be held in person from 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM on March 26, 2025.