# Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force Meeting

## Minutes

## April 24th, 2024

**Attendees:**

Jon Hare (High Country Conservation Advocates)
Ashley Bembenek (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Shannon Muenchow (USFS)
Dustin Brown (Scenic River Tours)
Shea Early (Town of Crested Butte)
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County Commissioner)
Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)
Kyle Koelliker (MCBWSD)
Jon Kaminsky (BLM)
Susan Washko (WCU)
Casey Smith (BOR)
Mike Rogers (City of Gunnison)
Dan Brauch (CPW)

**Staff/Consultants:**
Carrie Padgett (Harris Water Engineering)
Stacy Beaugh (Strategic By Nature)
Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)

## I. Welcome and Introductions

Stacy Beaugh reviewed today's meeting agenda, which includes gaining foundational knowledge on municipal water use needs in the Gunnison Basin, determining the drought indicator/criteria and communication dashboard, and engaging in a productive and motivating session that positions the UGRWCD and water users to maximize the Drought Contingency Planning efforts.

## II. Introductions & Overview:

Following introductions, Carrie Padgett updated the Task Force on the status of the Drought Contingency Planning Process. She mentioned that we are currently in the heart of the drought monitoring process and emphasized the importance of reaching a consensus on the drought indicator and trigger worksheet.

Stacy Beaugh gave an update on the stakeholder assessment. The consultants have conducted a total of 20 interviews with Task Force members and stakeholder supergroups. There has been a total of 27 drought surveys completed. Stacy asked the Task Force to reach out to her with any recommendations and to help identify additional interviews and focus groups to engage over the summer. She also asked the Task Force to assist in distributing surveys to stakeholders and the public by using the QR code and clicking "drought surveys" on the DCP webpage, where there are four surveys to choose from. Stacy informed the Task Force that she will be presenting the preliminary stakeholder assessment results during the May meeting.

## III. Educational Presentations: Municipal Water Use

### City of Gunnison

Mike Rogers, the division aid director for the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District, presented on municipal water use in the City of Gunnison. Mike has been involved with municipal water since 2010. He discussed various forms of municipal water use, including water treatment, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, and irrigation. The Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (CDPHE) oversees water treatment in Colorado, issuing permits for wastewater treatment facilities and monitoring drinking water quality. Operators must be certified through CDPHE, with certification levels ranging from A through E, depending on the size of the facility and the volume of water produced.

Mike highlighted the importance of irrigation water rights, which must be protected to ensure water can be allocated to residents while meeting those rights. Balancing irrigation and residential water use is particularly challenging in Western Colorado municipalities. He emphasized the critical nature of the Drought Contingency Planning (DCP) process, noting the need for collaboration to identify the most relevant and efficient drought

monitoring indicators and methodologies for mitigation and response actions in the Upper Gunnison Basin.

**Town Of Crested Butte**

Shea Early, Public Works Director for the Town of Crested Butte since 2018, shared insights into the town's water and wastewater systems. Shea noted that when the town was founded in 1880, no municipal utilities existed—residents relied on wells and cisterns. Formal municipal waterworks were not established until 1960. Today, the Town owns and operates a comprehensive water treatment and distribution system, a wastewater collection and treatment facility, and solids processing operations. Crested Butte also manages backcountry infrastructure essential for conveying water rights to their treatment facilities.

The Town relies on surface water diversions, primarily from Coal Creek, with supplemental supply from Lake Irwin. Releases from Lake Irwin help ensure adequate water supply, and infrastructure spans approximately 2.5 miles from the intake to the treatment plant. The state's regulatory requirements differ based on whether a municipality uses well water or surface diversions—Crested Butte's reliance on surface water imposes more stringent treatment standards.

From a drought perspective, the Town is particularly concerned about water quantity and fire risk, as well as flooding potential from extreme precipitation events. They are actively working with the Upper Gunnison District and other partners to explore alternative water sources, including the development of a well field on the Slate River. Given the proximity of Coal Creek and the Slate River, wildfire in one watershed could severely impact both. Discussions are underway to potentially install a west well and further diversify the Town's water portfolio.

**Mount Crested Butte**

Kyle Koelliker, representing Mount Crested Butte Water & Sanitation District, explained the structure and operations of the special district, which provides water and wastewater services to the area. The district draws water from a combination of spring sources on the mountain and the East River pump station on the valley floor. Water is conveyed via Ditch No. 5 to a central treatment facility. All water rights trace back to Meridian Lake, which also supports fisheries. The district has been coordinating a pumping exchange agreement with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) to improve operational flexibility. A key challenge in drought planning is the limited capacity of spring sources, which are insufficient during high-demand periods. Kyle emphasized the effectiveness of modifying the tiered water rate structure as a conservation tool. Since implementing this change, the district has observed a measurable decline in water usage.

## IV. Presentation Discussion

Stacy Beaugh opened the floor for questions and reflections on the presentations. She inquired about the tools and strategies presenters found most helpful in managing their municipal water systems.

Shea Early discussed the Town of Crested Butte's engagement in source water protection planning, including the development of a Source Water Protection Plan. They have partnered with the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) and the Wildfire Ready program to fund a wildfire assessment, acknowledging that water utility staff often lack fire-related expertise.

Mike Rogers noted that proactive drought planning is essential as drought becomes more frequent. He encouraged collaborative planning, considering what to do during consecutive drought years.

Ashley Bembenek referenced QQ's (Northwest Colorado Council of Governments) model code and comprehensive planning work. She shared resources for integrating land use and water conservation, including a water savings guide and model code:

- QQ Policy One: Integrating Land Use and Water Planning
- Water Savings Resource Guide (PDF)

Shea emphasized learning from communities that have *not* implemented successful strategies, such as Glenwood Springs. He believes it's important to understand historical context and failures, not just successes.
Ashley added that Hot Sulfur Springs, which relies on groundwater, may offer lessons about post-wildfire response that could apply to Gunnison.

Kyle Koelliker reiterated the importance of real-time data and tools and adapting strategies to fit available resources. He mentioned that Mount Crested Butte has had water restrictions in place since 2016. Although public feedback is minimal, the tiered rate structure—changing the base rate from 11,000 to 16,000 gallons—has proven effective in reducing usage.

Shea shared that Crested Butte enforces restrictions regularly and relies heavily on community self-policing. They've adjusted their tiered rate structure to support both conservation and necessary revenue for infrastructure maintenance. Some residents use as little as 40–50 gallons per month. Upcoming code updates will include water-wise landscaping provisions such as xeriscaping or "Coloradoscaping" to replace traditional turfgrass.

Ashley mentioned that the Crested Butte Metro District is implementing new billing systems to reinforce conservation pricing signals.

Sonja suggested providing municipalities with a design playbook that includes landscaping templates, plant options, and cost estimates. This could assist with implementing landscaping codes or turf replacement programs.

Kyle confirmed that Mount Crested Butte has compiled a drought-tolerant and native plant list and supports Sonja's suggestion.

Ashley agreed and noted that affordable housing projects have been used to pilot conservation landscaping approaches. She aims to continue this work next summer with an established budget.

Shea raised concerns about artificial turf and the long-term implications of its disposal.

Sonja added that artificial turf is now prohibited on state properties, including schools.

Jonathan raised concerns about rate structures disproportionately affecting low-income renters who cannot upgrade water-efficient infrastructure. He questioned how municipalities can support equitable conservation efforts.

Shea stressed that raising rates must be part of a multi-pronged strategy that supports conservation without penalizing affordable housing. Rates must also support infrastructure improvements.

Jon Kaminsky mentioned soil moisture sensors as a viable tool for efficient irrigation management, assuring residents they are using only the water needed.

Shea reaffirmed that Crested Butte's senior water rights on Coal Creek are non-negotiable and highly protected.

Kyle added that improving lawn irrigation efficiency and managing peak releases from Meridian Lake is part of their drought response strategy.

Shea noted Lake Irwin water is co-managed with CPW and other water right holders, requiring collaboration during water shortages.

Sonja confirmed that the City of Gunnison also holds senior water rights.

Stacy Beaugh concluded the discussion and transitioned to the next agenda item.

## V. Agree on the Drought Classification/ Triggering Criteria

Carrie Padgett provided an overview of the draft Drought Data Trigger Worksheet and demonstrated how adjusting various benchmarks alters the outcomes of the Drought

Monitoring Matrix. She walked through how the group can interact with and refine the tool.

Ashley expressed discomfort with assigning a "green" (non-drought) classification simply due to current conditions, stating a desire to instill a proactive conservation ethic. She recommended using a "blue" or "gray" status instead. The group agreed with this recommendation.

Sonja proposed adding Blue Mesa Reservoir levels as a drought indicator due to its economic and recreational importance. She emphasized that if the reservoir doesn't fill, it's a strong regional drought signal.

Shea asked how to appropriately weigh Blue Mesa as an indicator.

Sonja clarified that lack of fill in major reservoirs, like Taylor Park or Blue Mesa, signals drought across the broader Colorado River Basin.

Dan Brauch added that Blue Mesa has five operational categories used to manage it, which can serve as useful drought indicators.

Ashley asked whether the Upper Gunnison District controls storage in Blue Mesa.

Sonja clarified that the District does not—there was a one-time storage arrangement in 2005, and their current water rights total only 500 acre-feet for augmentation purposes. Ashley suggested that if stored water is being used during drought, this should be communicated to the public as a sign of urgency.Sonja added that regular calls on the Slate River and Ohio Creek often signal worsening drought.

Carrie mentioned she had not yet added summer indicators but would include instream flow calls and their timing.

Ashley questioned the use of January SWE as a trigger due to potential anomalies from early snowfall. She proposed incorporating prior water year conditions to normalize the data.

Carrie explained that SWE thresholds are based on historical records and confirmed she will incorporate precipitation and soil moisture data as additional indicators.
Sonja noted that even with high snowpack (e.g., 120%), the Gunnison Basin has recently experienced below-average streamflows—underscoring the complexity of drought signals.

Shea stressed the need for clear public messaging. He proposed developing separate drought classifications for technical use and public communication.

Ashley suggested incorporating other risk factors, like wildfire and beetle kill, into drought classification criteria to trigger stronger conservation responses.

Shea recommended holding an annual stakeholder drought meeting, especially in March or April when water outlooks are clearer.

Jon Kaminsky recommended including dust-on-snow events and ENSO patterns (e.g., La Niña vs. El Niño) in the drought trigger framework.

Stacy Beaugh confirmed that the next in-person meeting will be in May.

Jon K. discussed the importance of risk-based decision-making and proposed using a risk evaluation framework to assess community exposure and vulnerability.

Sonja mentioned that Dan Brauch recently completed a creel survey that may provide valuable environmental and recreational data. She also suggested Kestrel Kunz could provide additional insights in a future presentation.

## VI. Next Steps

Stacy Beaugh emphasized that a key outcome of the Drought Contingency Planning process will be the development of a public-facing communications plan. She noted that while the data and technical indicators discussed by the Task Force provide the foundation for drought classification and response, the way this information is communicated to the public will need to be reframed.

Stacy explained that the intention is to present drought stages in a clear and accessible format, so that community members understand what each stage means and how it may impact them. This communications component will help ensure that both decision-makers and the general public have a shared understanding of drought conditions and response efforts throughout the Upper Gunnison Basin.

## VII. Adjournment

The next Task Force meeting will be Wednesday, May 22nd at 9:00 a.m.

This meeting was adjourned by Stacy Beaugh at 10:58 a.m.