Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force

Minutes

March 26, 2025

Task Force Attendees:
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County)
Brinnen Carter (National Park Service)
Shannon Muenchow (USFS)
Jon Hare (HCCA)
Susan Washko (WCU)
Jeff Rider (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Hearth Miller (NRCS)
Caroyln de Groot (Town of Crested Butte)
Cody Tusing (City of Gunnison)
Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)

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 Progress

Following brief introductions, Sonja Chavez welcomed the Task Force and reviewed the goals and outcomes for the meeting. Stacy Beaugh then walked participants through the meeting agenda and reviewed Zoom meeting protocols. She clarified that today's session would primarily focus on gathering input on the draft drought response and mitigation actions.
Stacy provided an update on the status of the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP), noting that the Task Force is now working with a refined list of 18 actions. These actions have been condensed and categorized, with a supporting appendix to provide additional context. She emphasized that

for the plan to be effective, it must be actionable and grounded in local realities. Once the actions are finalized, the full DCP will be reviewed in its entirety. The next Task Force meeting will include a review of the full draft plan, with a public comment period scheduled for early summer.

II. Communications

Savannah Nelson presented the draft communications strategy, including the launch of a new website: UpperGunnisonDroughtPlan.org. This platform will serve as a central hub for all plan-related materials.

Savannah shared a preview of the site layout, including visual elements and organization by mitigation categories. A dedicated section will highlight education, outreach, and collaboration efforts, expanding into specific policies and including a table outlining location, focus area, timeline, and estimated costs. Each action area will have clearly defined implementation steps. Another page of the website will focus on drought conditions, with data including soil moisture, SNOTEL information, and statewide drought forecasting. Additional pages will provide resources for residents and stakeholders. Savannah also presented a draft survey for Task Force review, which will collect feedback on education and outreach efforts. She will distribute website details and the draft survey to the Task Force for additional input and final review.

During the discussion, one Task Force member noted that fire ban information is important and should be included on the website, observing that this link is currently missing. Another Task Force member suggested incorporating the word “response” into the plan’s title, emphasizing that the DCP is a response to drought rather than an implication that drought is planned or preventable. Savannah agreed and committed to clarifying this throughout the plan and communications.

III. Action Table – Initial Comments

Carrie Padgett led the review of the action items table. Task Force members provided feedback on individual actions, wording, and focus areas. Key items included:

- **Resilience Among Recreation Service Providers (A1):** Grazing Toolbox should be renamed to “Additional Grazing Management Tools” to avoid confusion with existing programs. Shannon Muenchow offered to assist with refining this section.
- **Conservation Easements (W3):** Conservation Easements were discussed in terms of their drought relevance. Sonja Chavez noted they may not provide a direct drought response, and questions were raised about water right guarantees. Input will be sought from Crested Butte Land Trust and others.
- **Resilience Among Recreation Service Providers (W5): Water Recreation Resilience** should define specific river reaches. Examples include Almont to Whitewater Park, Taylor Park Reservoir, Slate River closures, Spring Creek, and Lake Irwin. Staffing needs

for boat ramps and ice management were noted. Follow-up with Dustin Brown (NPS) is planned.
    - Colorado River District will present harmful algal blooms on April 17 at the UGRWCD Board meeting. More information is needed.
- **Source water Resiliency (M3): Small Public Water Systems**—Carrie will contact small systems to identify needs and include them in the plan.
    - Dos Rios should be consulted for potable water planning and to help draft watershed management language. Cody and Jon offered to coordinate.
- **Drought Response Plan for Municipal Providers (M2):** Action Cost Concerns—Cody questioned the estimated cost and whether counties would approve the action. Sonja clarified the need to take early costs with flexibility, and UGRWCD may help identify funding opportunities. Lisa Brown asked whether actions should be clarified by community or jurisdiction.
- **Gunnison Recreation Access Management Plan (W6):** Clarification Needed—Stacy and Carrie will revisit Kestrel's notes for additional clarity.
- **Wildfire and Drought Nexus**—Task Force members emphasized the connection and discussed including fire readiness and emergency water sourcing. Past examples, such as hauling water to cattle in the Uncompahgre, were shared.
- **Bluegrass Replacement Analysis**—Lisa Brown reviewed water savings models. Cody noted potential applications for parks. Savings range from 8% to 77%, depending on landscaping choices.

Additional discussion focused on specific river sections most impacted by reduced flows, with attention to fisheries and recreation services. Some Task Force members advocated support and adaptation strategies.
There was also concern about the wide cost range ($200,000 to $1 million) listed in some actions. A Task Force member recommended refining cost estimates through collaborative planning. Carrie Padgett mentioned it was difficult to calculate costs, so the costs are currently a rough estimate.

IV. Criteria and Prioritization Process

Stacy Beaugh guided the Task Force through a three-step prioritization process. First, members selected their six favorite mitigation actions. Next, they evaluated which actions best aligned with the plan's criteria. Finally, the Task Force assessed the overall readiness and preparedness of each action for implementation.

The Task Force emphasized the importance of regional coordination; especially balancing water use priorities between agricultural users in the Uncompahgre Valley and recreational stakeholders in Gunnison. A suggestion was made to conduct a survey to absent Task Force members to ensure broader participation in prioritization.

The results of prioritization identified **E5 and E9** as the highest-ranked actions in the first round, while **A2 and E5** were most aligned with criteria and readiness.

V. Next Steps

All Task Force members are asked to review the draft mitigation actions document and submit their comments by Friday, April 4. This feedback will help shape the final version of the Drought Contingency Plan.

Savannah Nelson will send out the website link, access password, and Task Force survey for further review. She will also finalize the communications plan, which will include defined goals, key messages, and a proposed timeline for rollout.

VI. Adjournment

The next Task Force meeting will be Wednesday, April 23 at 9:00 a.m.

The meeting was adjourned by Stacy Beaugh at 11:00 a.m.