



Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force

Minutes

April 23, 2025

Task Force Attendees:

Heather Miller (NRCS)
Dustin Brown (Scenic River Tours)
Casey Smith (Bureau of Reclamation)
Jon Hare (High Country Conservation Advocates)
Shannon Muenchow (USFS)
Brandon Diamond (CPW)
Steve Moore (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Shannon Hessler (Mount Crested Butte)
Brinnen Carter (National Park Service)
Carolyn De Groot (Town of Crested Butte)
Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)
Susan Washko (Western State Colorado University)

Staff/Consultants:

Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)
Bailey Friendman (UGRWCD)
Stacy Beaugh (Strategic by Nature)
Carrie Padgett (Harris Water Engineering)
Lisa Brown (Harris Wilson Water Group)

I. Introductions, Agenda Overview and DCP Progress

Carrie reviewed the overall Drought Contingency Plan (DCP) schedule, noting that only one stakeholder meeting and one task force meeting remain. She gave a brief overview of the planning process and the six core elements of the DCP. Mitigation actions were shared and discussed in their listed order of priority.

II. Drought Plan Six Elements Review

Carrie Padgett led a discussion on the six drought plan elements and reviewed how mitigation actions were categorized.

The Task Force suggested to change “basin wide community engagement” to “basin wide action plan engagement” to better reflect the goal of involving stakeholders in actionable steps, not just

Carrie will follow up with municipal representatives to determine if any actions should be prioritized. Lisa Brown questioned why the municipal category—despite early high interest—did not yield many high-priority items. Carrie responded that the lack of immediate implementation capacity likely influenced their placement. Carolyn de Groot agreed with Lisa and suggested raising the priority of source water resilience. Jon Hare pointed out that many medium-priority items are important, and the list might benefit from elevating some based on significance rather than implementation ease.

Sonja highlighted confusion around the term “priority,” suggesting that many may interpret it as “ready-to-go” rather than “impactful.” Several members recommended including notes or alternate language to clarify that timing, feasibility, and impact were all considered in assigning priority levels. For instance, while conservation easements have basin-wide value, they may not yield immediate drought mitigation compared to other efforts.

Brandon Diamond proposed renaming “Expanding Grazing Management Practices” for clarity. Suggestions included “Encouraging Grazing Best Management Practices” and “Enhanced Use of Grazing Best Management Practices,” with agreement that “best management practices” aligns with common terminology used by NRCS and state agencies.

Brinnen Carter proposed categorizing actions based on direct versus indirect drought impact, allowing stakeholders to better understand the practical influence of each action. Participants agreed to add contextual caveats to prevent the perception that lower-priority items are less important.

Jon emphasized including “drought conservation easements” explicitly.

There were no comments on the proposed timeline update.

III. Communications Plan Overview

Savannah Nelson presented the communications strategy for the Upper Gunnison Drought Plan, outlining three primary objectives to guide drought-related outreach and education across the basin.

The first objective is to build and maintain drought awareness throughout the Upper Gunnison River Basin by providing timely, accurate, and locally relevant technical information—such as water supply data, streamflows, snowpack levels, and other key indicators. The goal is to increase transparency and awareness so that water users across sectors can make informed decisions about water use and conservation practices.

The second objective is to foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing between local stakeholders, building on the work and partnerships developed through the drought contingency planning process. The communications plan positions the Upper Gunnison Drought Plan as a central hub for sharing knowledge, tools, and feedback, enabling stakeholders to coordinate more effectively and adapt to changing drought conditions.

The third objective is to broadcast recommended drought mitigation and response actions identified in the plan to ensure that stakeholders and the broader public understand and can engage with the plan's recommendations.

Strategies for the Upper Gunnison Drought Plan website include creating and maintaining a one-stop dashboard for drought-related resources, providing regular updates on drought conditions, promoting understanding of drought risk and appropriate responses, and raising awareness of the tools developed through the plan. The communications will also emphasize encouraging coordination among stakeholders, responding to each sector's unique needs, and educating the public about the effects of drought through accessible messaging. Collaboration with local and regional media partners is also a key component to amplify messages.

The implementation approach includes launching sector-specific campaigns via the website, social media, and email newsletters, which will feature tailored content for different water sectors. UGRWCD proposed hosting webinars and public events—on a quarterly, semi-annual, or annual basis—focused on each water sector's drought management strategies.

Target audiences are grouped by sector, each with customized messaging, unifying themes, and partner organizations identified to help amplify drought communications:

- **Agriculture:** Messaging emphasizes that sustainable water use is essential to protecting livestock, crops, and the region's agricultural economy. Themes include stewardship of the land, resilience in times of scarcity, and community collaboration. Key organizations identified to promote these messages include the Gunnison County Stockgrowers' Association, Colorado Farm Bureau, and CSU Extension.

- **Environmental:** Messaging focuses on the need for drought resilience to protect the basin's ecosystems. Themes include ecosystem health, scientific and data-driven solutions, and long-term sustainability. Organizations such as the Western Colorado Alliance, The Nature Conservancy in Colorado, and the Gunnison River Basin Roundtable were identified as potential amplifiers.
- **Municipal:** Messaging centers around the importance of efficient water management to maintain community well-being and long-term economic stability. Themes include transparency, innovation, and adaptation. The Colorado Municipal League, Colorado Water Conservation Board, and Colorado Association of Municipal Utilities were named as partners.
- **Recreation:** Communications will highlight how water conservation helps secure the future of the Gunnison Basin's recreation economy and preserve outdoor experiences. Themes include shared responsibility and economic interdependence. The Gunnison-Crested Butte Tourism Association, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Western Slope Outdoors Alliance, and Gunnison County Chamber of Commerce will help distribute this messaging.
- **General Public:** Messaging to the broader public focuses on the importance of every individual's role in water conservation: "Every drop counts in safeguarding our water future." Themes include community-wide drought resilience, accessible education, and opportunities for engagement. Amplifying organizations include the Gunnison County Times, Gunnison County Public Library, Gunnison School District RE1J, Gunnison Arts Center, Gunnison Rec Center, and the Crested Butte Center for the Arts.

Savannah then detailed the core communication products that will support this strategy:

- A **Project Overview Factsheet** to summarize the drought plan's goals, drought stages, recommended actions, and stakeholder roles. It will be promoted via the UGDP website, stakeholder meetings, community events, and partner distribution.
- **Drought Status Updates**, distributed via the website, social media, email blasts, and print ads, to inform stakeholders of any changes in drought levels.
- **Sector-Specific Factsheets** that tailor drought risk and response information by sector, with distribution support from CSU Extension, town councils, and partner websites.
- An **Upper Gunnison Basin Profile**, providing an overview of the region's geography, hydrology, and drought vulnerability, to be shared online and during planned meetings.
- **Stakeholder Testimonial Flyers and Videos** to share personal stories and demonstrate the plan's real-world impact; these will be promoted through the UGDP website, social media, community events, and local media outlets.
- **Drought Stage Summary Sheets**, which will serve as quick-reference guides showing drought triggers and response actions for each drought level; these will be made available at public buildings, included in utility mailings, and posted online.

- **Newsletter Updates** to keep stakeholders informed about drought conditions, local mitigation actions, and success stories; these will be distributed through email, partner newsletters, and community bulletin boards.
- An **Interactive Upper Gunnison Basin Map** to demonstrate how drought conditions vary by subbasin and to contextualize drought stages and trends across the region.
- **Webinars and Recordings** on drought management and education tools, to be hosted by UGRWCD and available online for continued learning.
- A **Media Toolkit/Press Kit**, containing pre-packaged content for local press and social media to support widespread promotion of the drought plan.

The consultants will email the full draft of the communications plan, alongside the draft Drought Plan document, to all Task Force members and requested that they review and submit feedback by the May 16 deadline. All edits and refinements will be incorporated into the final plan based on comments received.

IV. Roles & Commitments

Carrie Padgett facilitated breakout groups to identify commitments and support structures needed to move forward with the drought plan. Participants shared specific roles, activities, and needed resources.

Group 1:

USFS will share soil moisture and fire data. Western Colorado University may lead native garden efforts via student projects. UGRWCD will focus on wet meadows work. Coordinated grazing management and expanded data sharing (RMBL) were noted. Regular agency input is necessary to ensure aligned messaging. Suggestions included building a contact network and considering contract support. The group recommended integrating drought education into summer programs.

Group 2:

HCCA and others plan to leverage existing stewardship efforts and develop recreation-related messaging. A public event was proposed to launch and promote the plan. Continued UGRWCD coordination and maintenance of the website were seen as essential. Susan offered irrigation contacts.

Group 3:

Focus areas include phasing out Kentucky Bluegrass, riparian and agricultural water management, and addressing mining and source water impacts. The group stressed celebrating ongoing projects and encouraging relationship-building with less-involved partners. Messaging strategies should highlight current successes and collective efforts to protect the basin.

Group 4:

Task Force expressed interest in improving grazing on state lands and clarifying responsibilities across state and federal lands. Coordinated communication with Blue Mesa management was identified as a key need. Highlighted actions include wet meadows and the ag return study. Access to funding and expert guidance were identified as primary needs.

The overarching theme across groups was a strong need for financial resources to initiate and sustain both new and ongoing drought resilience efforts.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned by Stacy Beaugh at 10:54 a.m.

The next task force meeting will take place on Wednesday, May 21, from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. and will be held in a hybrid format.