



Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Stakeholder Meeting

Minutes

June 11th, 2025

Attendees:

Brinnen Carter (National Park Service)
Bella Biondini (Gunnison Country Times)
Andy Spann (Spann Ranches)
Raquel Flinker (Colorado River District)
Brian Moore (USGS)
Scott Morrill (Gunnison County)
Ryan White (Gunnison County)
Cory Williams (USGS)
Chase Codova (Western Colorado University)
Sherry Ford (Western Colorado University)
Shannon Muenchow (USFS)
Tonya Carr (Gunnison Conservation District)
Jonathan Houck (Gunnison County)
Brandon Diamond (CPW)
Steve Ooden
Steve Moore (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Jeff Writer (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)

Staff/Consultants:

Sonja Chavez (UGRWCD)
Carrie Padgett (Harris Water Engineering)
Stacy Beaugh (Strategic By Nature)
Savannah Nelson (Sunshine Creatives)
Alana Nichols (UGRWCD)
Lisa Brown (Wilson Water Group)

I. Agenda Overview and DCP Progress

Stacy Beaugh emphasized the importance of community engagement in addressing drought issues in the Upper Gunnison Basin. The meeting will cover the drought monitor, draft actions, and involve participants in small group activities. Attendees are encouraged to actively participate and share their perspectives while adhering to meeting agreements.

II. DCP Process Overview and Drought Monitor

Carrie Padgett presented an overview of the DCP process, highlighting key objectives such as early drought recognition, understanding impacts, and developing resilient strategies. She emphasized that the plan is supported by the Bureau of Reclamation and coordinated through a multi-stakeholder task force representing diverse water users. The planning framework is built around six required elements, including drought monitoring and vulnerability assessments to ensure comprehensive preparedness.

Carrie introduced a draft drought monitoring framework for the Upper Gunnison River Basin, focusing on indicators, classification levels, and methods for future data tracking. Key monitoring elements include reservoir storage, snowpack, and soil moisture. A draft color-coded drought level table was shown to help visualize conditions ranging from average to severe drought.

Soil moisture data, as Carrie noted, is sourced primarily from the Colorado Basin River Forecast Center, though it only provides a moment-in-time snapshot.

Raquel questioned how soil moisture data is captured during fluctuating winter-to-spring conditions, especially around April.

Andy Spann questioned the lack of soil moisture monitoring in April and May and asked whether Dave Gochis has relevant information. He also pointed out the complexity of assessing soil moisture in the spring due to snowmelt and suggested increasing the number of soil moisture sensors.

Sonja responded that Dave does have relevant data, but it remains difficult to interpret due to the active runoff period. There was shared concern about ongoing federal funding to support critical monitoring infrastructure. Sonja confirmed these concerns and mentioned that efforts will be made to document the importance of continued support. The Upper Gunnison District helps fund USGS streamgages and SNOTEL sites and has an interest in maintaining these programs.

Brinnen highlighted the value of ASO (Airborne Snow Observatory) flights, noting their importance for water forecasting. Sonja confirmed that ASO data is integrated into their

WRF-Hydro model and used in weekly forecasts for the East and Taylor Rivers. Raquel cautioned that while ASO flights help forecast runoff, they are not as useful for Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) comparisons due to the lack of long-term historical data. Carrie noted that ASO data requires technical expertise to interpret. A participant raised the broader question of how the monitoring program could be expanded overall.

Scott explained the drought classification system being developed, which uses soil moisture and historical averages to establish conservative thresholds and encourage proactive water use. The drought tracker will be regularly updated to reflect current conditions and improve public awareness.

Carrie then presented the Upper Gunnison drought monitor strategy. The approach begins with public education and tools at Level 0, progressing through increasing levels of drought response. Higher levels include voluntary conservation measures and formal communication protocols. The plan also highlights the importance of mitigation—actions to always reduce vulnerability, not just during drought events.

III. Mitigation and Response Actions

Participants were split into three groups to discuss proposed mitigation and response actions based on three key themes:

- **Environmental and Recreation**
- **Municipal and Agriculture**
- **Education and Outreach**

Participants were asked to provide feedback on what they liked, what was missing, and how they could be engaged in implementing the proposed actions.

Communications Plan Feedback:

- Participants noted inconsistencies in the prioritization of actions between the website and handouts.
- It was recommended that all action names be aligned across formats.
- Under Action E1, the "Gunnison County Emergency Response Plan" should be correctly titled as "Gunnison County Emergency Operations Plan."
- Ryan is working on updating the County website to link directly to relevant plans. Until that's ready, it was suggested to link to the Emergency Management page: <https://www.gunnisoncounty.org/145/Emergency-Management>.
- The drought tracker table was described as overly detailed and hard to interpret. A simplified, interactive map with clickable color-coded regions was suggested.

- Definitions and explanations should be provided at a fifth-grade reading level for public accessibility. Clarification is needed for terms like “SWE,” “storage,” and “stream flow data.”
- It was suggested that Blue Mesa and Taylor Reservoir levels both be included in resources and that the “Teacup” graph might be better categorized outside of “state drought” resources.
- Ideas such as river video feeds, better categorization of agencies (e.g., CWCB not being solely a drought-focused agency), and referencing the Ag Return Flow Study were also discussed.
- Participants noted excessive white space in mitigation action layouts and recommended reducing scrolling.
- Concerns were raised about language such as “non-essential” crops at Level 2 drought; better phrasing is needed to avoid misconceptions.
- The phrase “water efficiency” was preferred over “water saving” in agricultural messaging.
- Municipal actions should emphasize reducing outdoor water use and promoting drought-tolerant landscaping rather than using the term “xeriscaping.” Public education should focus on outdoor water use’s role in overall consumption.

Agriculture and Municipal Mitigation & Response Feedback:

- Participants noted that many actions are interconnected across sectors (e.g., return flows impact aquatic ecosystems and recreation).
- Action A1 should be prioritized and implemented quickly to inform Action A2.
- Participants stressed that results from the return flow study (A3) should guide future actions and cautioned against improvements that might unintentionally reduce important return flows.
- USGS’s current focus is on existing practices. Questions were raised about whether there’s a plan to monitor ecological changes if conditions like wet meadows are altered.
- The Colorado River District expressed interest in supporting all agricultural actions and in sharing technical expertise from other basins, particularly on salinity and water quality issues.
- Suggestions included a demonstration project on different irrigation methods and education on why practices like flood irrigation are still appropriate in certain contexts.
- For M3, questions were raised about the Upper Gunnison District’s role and whether there’s a mechanism to track municipal progress. A longer implementation timeline of 0–5 years was proposed. Coordination with the Gunnison County Community Wildfire Protection Plan was suggested for watershed resilience strategies.
- Participants recommended making M1 a high priority due to its synergy with M3.
- While M4 was agreed to be lower priority, ideas for promoting responsible lawn watering were proposed.

Education and Watershed/Recreation Feedback:

- Overall, the importance of adaptation was appreciated, especially in the face of uncertain federal support.
- Cory (USGS) asked whether Blue Mesa coordination efforts are based on post-2026 operations. He and Raquel (CO River District) offered to share helpful data and support outreach efforts.
- Ryan (Gunnison County) expressed support for collaborative community communications and emergency communication efforts.
- Scott (Gunnison County) recommended coordinated messaging between the District and municipalities, especially at each drought stage.
- Raquel questioned whether the need for outreach was identified through public feedback. She also suggested that the River District could assist in funding education efforts and that high-priority education actions should be addressed within a uniform 0–3 or 0–5 year timeline.
- Brinnen mentioned the “State of the River” event as a positive example of effective community engagement.
- Regarding watershed actions, Ryan raised the need for careful messaging when referencing private landowners to avoid overreach while still promoting collaboration.
- Participants supported a well-rounded approach that connects drought’s economic impacts to all users.
- W2 (coordinating limited water supply use among stakeholders) was seen as a top priority by Raquel.
- W3 (mining-related actions) was flagged as a higher priority due to the potential impacts on water supplies. Scott saw this as relevant to emergency management.
- W5 was seen as lacking specifics. Raquel questioned whether water access issues were truly drought-specific.
- The River District signaled willingness to engage in watershed actions W1–W3 and possibly offer funding support.

IV. Next Steps

Stacy Beaugh shared that the draft drought contingency plan will be finalized in time for the upcoming board meeting and will be available on the website for public comment from July 1st through July 30th. During this period, community members are encouraged to review the draft and provide feedback through an online Google Form, which will be linked on the website. Whether it's a suggested revision, a typo correction, or a broader comment on the content, all input is welcome and appreciated.

Stacy also encouraged participants to reach out directly to either Carrie Padgett or herself with any questions or thoughts during the review period.

V. Adjournment

The next Task Force Meeting will be Wednesday, July 30th from 9:00 a.m.- 11:00 a.m.

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