



Upper Gunnison Drought Contingency Plan: Task Force Meeting

Minutes

July 30, 2025

Attendees:

Steve Moore (Coal Creek Watershed Coalition)
Nathan Darnell (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)
Brandon Diamond (Colorado Parks and Wildlife)
Jesse Kruthaupt (Trout Unlimited)
Casey Smith (Bureau of Reclamation)

Consultants/Staff:

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

I. Public Comments and Discussion

Stacy Beaugh opened with an overview of the Drought Contingency Plan (DCP), emphasizing the collaboration with stakeholders and how feedback from a range of water sectors has shaped the plan. She reminded the Task Force that this effort has spanned approximately 18 months or longer since the first meeting.

The process began with the formation of the Task Force, followed by interviews with both Task Force members and additional stakeholders to gather input on vulnerabilities and possible drought mitigation and response actions. The planning framework followed the Bureau of Reclamation's six required elements, and technical assistance from Wilson Water Group helped support the modeling of potential actions.

Stacy described how the DCP admin team engaged in a prioritization exercise with the Task Force and then held workshops with stakeholders in key sectors—recreation, agriculture, environment, and municipal to identify realistic and community-supported actions for improving drought resilience. In addition, the DCP admin team coordinated with other efforts like the Uncompahgre drought planning process, which wrapped up in the spring, and collaborated with broader initiatives like the wildfire group to ensure that both plans reference one another and reinforce each other's objectives.

A final stakeholder meeting took place in June. The public comment period began in July after presenting the draft plan to the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District Board. The public comment phase is wrapping up now, and all feedback will be reviewed and addressed before submitting the final version to the Bureau of Reclamation. One major response action included in the plan is the creation of a communications plan. A website was launched to serve as a living platform for the drought plan—allowing for updates, progress tracking, and community engagement with the drought monitoring system.

Stacy noted that the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District Board will be reviewing the final version in August. Once approved, it will be submitted to the Bureau of Reclamation for their formal comment period.

Carrie Padgett spoke next, summarizing public outreach activities and the comments received during the public comment window. Six public comments were submitted, with most offering constructive feedback and ideas for improvement.

II. DCP Process Evaluation

Savannah Nelson introduced the drought tracker and walked the group through the color-coding system used to represent drought stages. They noted that aligning this visual system with the U.S. Drought Monitor was challenging due to differences in methodology and categories. While the U.S. Drought Monitor uses seven categories, the DCP tracker uses fewer, with a color gradient from yellow to orange to red. These were simply chosen to represent increasing drought severity.

Savannah explained that the U.S. Drought Monitor is based on both scientific inputs and public observations, which makes it hard to directly match it to numerical indicators. In contrast, the DCP tracker is built on specific water supply benchmarks:

- Level 0: Water supply (stream gauges or snowpack) above 100% of median
- Level 1: Between 80%–100%
- Level 2: Below 80%

Because of these differences, Savannah noted that aligning color schemes directly wouldn't make sense.

Sonja recommended using GIS tools to overlay DCP data with the Drought Monitor for improved local relevance. There was a broader discussion on whether the public would be confused by having a different system.

Steve suggested reducing the number of categories to make it simpler, and Jesse proposed using a lighter color for Level 0 to avoid raising unnecessary concern. The group agreed on keeping the tool accessible, with links to more technical information for those who want it.

Sonja Chavez raised concerns from the community about drought impacts on fisheries and stressed the need to improve how this information is shared.

Brandon proposed incorporating stream temperature data and pushing communications through social media channels.

The Task Force discussed how to create a more systematic approach to sharing information and whether temperature thresholds could be added to future drought indicators.

When Stacy asked if the website had received any strong feedback, Carrie said most comments were positive but not very specific. Savannah added that some users want a search tool to find certain data, and she recommended combining events and calls to action into one calendar view to improve navigation.

Savannah presented the website, which serves as a central place for drought-related information. It includes a color-coded drought map and a variety of resources. Suggestions from the group included:

- Adding a search function
- Clarifying terminology
- Including stream temperature data
- Making the map more functional with additional layers

The site will be updated monthly by the District. Task Force members discussed adding a “call to action” table to help users understand what actions they can take. Stacy emphasized the importance of clear messaging to the community about drought status and response.

The Task Force reflected on what has worked well for engagement, with Sonja noting that one-on-one interviews were particularly effective.

Steve Moore drew on his background in water conflict resolution to highlight the importance of collaboration among water users, especially in times of scarcity.

Jesse Kruthaupt said the process had gone smoothly but expressed interest in having had more time to fully engage.

Alana Nichols said the workshops helped improve communication across sectors.

Jon Hare responded to concerns raised during the public comment period, especially around maintaining river flows. He pointed to actions W2 and A2 as part of the plan's approach to mitigation and clarified that the plan focuses on voluntary actions due to the lack of regulatory authority. He encouraged people to stay involved in conversations around agriculture and water use to build understanding.

Sonja recommended enhancing the environmental section of the plan to better reflect water leasing programs and nonprofit support. Stacy supported creating a list of resources for the website.

Lisa Brown asked about including examples of successful collaborations between ranchers and Trout Unlimited. Carrie proposed developing a web page to showcase these partnerships and how they benefit both agriculture and fisheries.

UGRWCD will work on creating success stories for the Upper Gunnison Drought Plan website.

III. Next Steps for the Task Force and District

Sonja emphasized the importance of education and public outreach in making the drought plan successful. She suggested that UGRWCD is considering creating a new position focused on community engagement and managing drought-related resources. She asked the Task Force to support this position, noting that it will be vital for maintaining the Upper Gunnison Drought Plan website.

The Task Force will meet again in September to revisit key priorities and discuss potential funding opportunities for agencies. Additionally, there was support for organizing a broader spring meeting to update the community on drought conditions.

It was suggested that this meeting could take place after the first ASO (Airborne Snow Observatory) flight in March or April, as it would provide helpful snowpack data.

Stacy mentioned that April would be a good time to reconvene and assess conditions, even if drought remains an issue. The Task Force could then coordinate on public messaging based on what they're seeing on the landscape, especially across public lands.

IV. Wrap Up and Thank You

Stacy said she would send a final email to the Task Force, closing out the process and asking for feedback on what aspects were successful and where improvements could be made. She also asked that members let her and Carrie know if they'd like help organizing the September meeting or if they plan to manage that internally.

The final Task Force meeting was adjourned by Stacy Beaugh at 10:15 a.m.