

South Fork Republican Restoration Coalition: Stream Management and Restoration Planning Project

Public Meetings

November 8 and 14, 2018

7—8:30 pm

Burlington, Colorado

Idalia, Colorado

The first of two public meetings to share information about the project and gain public input drew about 20 people to the Burlington Community and Education Center. A week later, at The Grainery in Idalia, about the same number turned out. Though the meetings did not draw large numbers, they were successful in that, like the earlier meeting with landowners, they gave visibility to the project and provided an opportunity for the project coalition to hear and pass along to the consultants' ideas and concerns from those attending.

Introduction of the Coalition and the Project

Yuma County Commissioner Robin Wiley and Kit Carson County Commissioner Dave Hornung, respectively, kicked off the November public meetings by framing the issues that brought together members of a grassroots coalition to seek improvements to the channel of the South Fork Republican River. They said that several entities formed a group called the South Fork Republican Restoration Coalition (SFRRRC) and received a \$99,000.00 grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board to develop an improvement plan for the stretch of the river from Flagler to the state line, with a focus area consisting of the river reach from a few miles west of Highway 385 to Bonny Dam.

Coalition members, they said, include Three Rivers Alliance, the counties of Yuma and Kit Carson, the Republican River Water Conservation District, The Nature Conservancy and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. The Nature Conservancy is also contributing significant funding to this phase of the project.

The two commissioners stressed that the project is not about compact compliance, it is not about the voluntary retirement of irrigated acres in the South Fork Focus Zone, and it is not about refilling Bonny Reservoir. "It's about how we could work together to make improvements such as restoring streamflow on the South Fork Republican, and creating a more natural system with recreational opportunities that will benefit the region", Commissioner Wiley he said.

Dana Shaw from Three Rivers Alliance, Rod Lenz, president of the Republican River Water Conservation District, and Frank McGee from Colorado Parks and Wildlife each gave their story of why they joined the coalition. An overview of the project components and the consultants who have been hired to do the work was given at the November 8 meeting by The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Nancy Smith, who serves in the role of project manager. She stated that CWCBCB is funding the first phase of the project which consists of a study to better understand river function and health; engineering concept designs for restoring the river channel; a river vegetation restoration plan; and an assessment of opportunities to restore recreational opportunities along the restored river. The project overview at the November 14 meeting was given by Robin Wiley as Nancy Smith was ill.

Participant Dialogue

MaryLou Smith from CSU's Colorado Water Institute, the facilitator of public meetings throughout the study period, opened up the dialogue by expressing that a key facet of this work is input from those on the ground, not only the landowners whose properties are directly affected by the problems, but the general public that stands to gain from the improvements. She pointed out that reports of these meetings will be written,

documenting the ideas, questions and any concerns of those attending the meetings. These reports will be critical to inform the consultants conducting the study.

Questions/Comments from the November 8 meeting:

- 1) Senator Gardner is very supportive of this project. His aide, Darlene Carpio, who was in attendance at the meeting said the senator is “anxious to hear an update. He wants to help in any way possible.”
- 2) “Are you hoping to use the existing building at Bonny?” Yes.
- 3) “What about the beaver dams west of Hwy 385? Are they helping or hurting? How do they impact landowners?” Beaver dams are seen differently by different folks. The consultants will be looking into them.
- 4) Dealing with the silted-in channel will be very difficult.
- 5) “How will the new channel handle the new sediment that would come with a flood—especially a flood like the one we had in the 60’s?” The consulting team will consider this.
- 6) “Where will money to fund improvements you identify come from?” Potential funders include Colorado Parks and Wildlife (through their \$5M wetlands grant, for instance), Colorado Water Conservation Board, South Platte Basin Roundtable, The Nature Conservancy, and others.
- 7) “Who will be responsible for keeping the channel open after it’s established?” Colorado Parks and Wildlife, along with the Bureau of Reclamation and private landowners will work together to manage it.
- 8) “What will happen to wetlands? How do they fit into the habitat restoration plan?” Consulting team is analyzing the wetlands and how to manage silt.
- 9) “The culvert north of the bridge over Highway 385 is where more water passes through than actually under the bridge. Be sure the consultants know about that.”
- 10) “Excavation should start at the dam and go to the bridge—in that order.” That opinion will be shared with the consulting team.
- 11) “Are we trying to build the habitat of our dreams? Is that possible, or even desirable? Lush vegetation has fire concerns.” The Coalition and the consulting team are looking at real possibilities—reality, not a lush result that doesn’t fit the area.
- 12) “Is this feasible given that the Bureau of Reclamation owns the dam and reservoir?” Coalition members have met with the Bureau and given input on the Bureau’s rewriting of their best management practices plan. Having a coalition of the various organizations makes it more likely that we can be successful moving forward. “Senator Gardner is informed and willing to assist with the Bureau to streamline the process,” said his aide, Darlene Carpio.
- 13) “Could we have some small fishing ponds? Legal requirements of the compact limit the size, but they can certainly be considered.
- 14) On the topic of trees: “What will happen to the green trees that are not next to the channel?” and “The trees in the bottom of the dam are much bigger than they appear. How will we deal with those?” The consulting team will be addressing the trees issue.
- 15) “Would Kansas ever allow water to be stored in Bonney again?” That’s not off the table; anything we come up with in this restoration plan should not preclude that possibility.

Points made at the November 14 meeting:

1. Dealing with built up silt and sustaining streamflow improvements will not be easy. “You are going to have to dig a lot of dirt and make an adequate settling pond or you are just going to move the problem downstream.” The same issue will have to be faced on Bonny Creek.
2. Dams that have been put in on the draws are preventing a lot of water in the draws. There is not a lot of flow because of this. It’s good that we have a common goal to improve stream flow, even though we will probably never have the stream flow we had before. Landowner buy-in will be critical for us to accomplish this improvement.
3. It’s important to think through how we are going to sustain project improvements over the long haul. “How is this community going to sustain the project once the contractors are gone?” In the case of recreation improvements, perhaps what’s needed is to “put the burden of management on businesses who come out to the area—develop some guidelines for that purpose.”

4. Economic development ideas brought forward include restoring the air strip, hunting, motorsports (including a road course for motorcycling,) “even sleigh rides in winter.”
5. Bringing back Bonny Reservoir is not likely to happen, but the planned actions coming out of this process should not preclude that. “Even a lot of people in northwest Kansas would like to see that happen, as its absence affects their recreational enjoyment as well.”

Next Steps

Reception to the project appears to be quite positive. Those attending the meetings are looking forward to seeing and hearing what the consultants come up with as alternative approaches to addressing the challenges and opportunities on the South Fork. A meeting for the public and landowners to hear from the consultants has been set for the evening of March 14 in Idalia.