

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

### Landowners Meeting

August 13, 2018

7—8:30 pm

The Grainery

Idalia, Colorado

Responding to an invitation sent to all registered property owners, about 30 landowners along the South Fork of the Republican River gathered to hear about the project and give input to the project team.

Yuma County Commissioner Robin Wiley kicked off the meeting by framing the issues that brought together members of a grassroots coalition to seek improvements to the channel of the South Fork Republican River. He said that several entities formed a group called the South Fork Republican Restoration Coalition (SFRRC) 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, he 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. Commissioner Wiley said The Nature Conservancy is also contributing significant funding to this phase of our project.

Commissioner Wiley 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”, he said.

Dana Shaw from Three Rivers Alliance, Dave Hornung, Kit Carson County Commissioner, and Rod Lenz, president of the Republican River Water Conservation District each gave their story of why they joined the coalition, followed by Frank McGee from Colorado Parks and Wildlife and William Burnidge from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). TNC’s Nancy Smith, who serves in the role of project manager, then gave an overview of the project components and the consultants who have been hired to do the work. She stated that CWCB 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.

Commissioner Wiley introduced MaryLou Smith from CSU’s Colorado Water Institute who will be facilitating public meetings throughout the study. Smith opened up the dialogue by expressing that a key facet of this work is input from those on the ground, particularly the landowners whose properties are directly affected by the problems as well as 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.



*Yuma County Commissioner Robin Wiley is joined by RRWCD president Rod Lenz, Kit Carson County Commissioner, Dave Hornung, and the Three Rivers Alliance board member Dana Shaw in telling why they joined the South Fork Republican Restoration Coalition.*



Landowners were encouraged to take a look at maps of the study area and note the location of their particular property.



## Questions/Ideas/Concerns

Those in attendance brought up a number of issues, including:

1. *Russian Olive, Tamarisk, Red Cedar*: The question was asked whether there is going to be a program to remove Russian olive and tamarisk. Response was that the Yuma County Pest District is working to remove these trees, but that the study will identify further work that needs to be done. It was pointed out that Red Cedar is also a problem that the consultants need to be aware of.
2. *Grazing in lieu of large machinery for restoration work*: One landowner expressed the opinion that large machinery is not the answer. He recommends using cattle to graze the area to help with restoration instead of bringing in large machinery. He suggested that cattle be used first, to define the best path for mechanical equipment to use eventually. He suggested that starting grazing operations on CPW and Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) lands be considered. CPW's Frank McGee pointed out that the BOR, separate from this study, is working on a plan that could incorporate grazing.
3. *Fire issues/road maintenance*: One member of a local volunteer firefighter's group pointed out that there was a week-long fire near the focus zone. He wishes that someone would maintain the roads so that firefighters could safely get to and from problem areas.

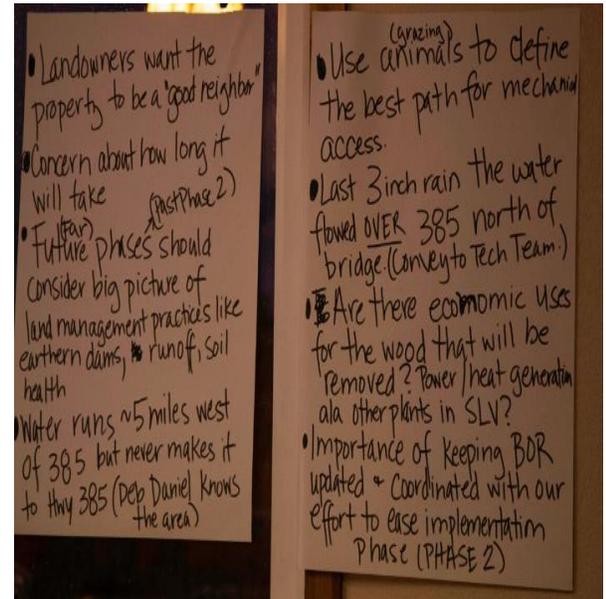
4. *Dredging when wetlands could be impacted*: One landowner pointed out that dredging needed in 2009—2010 could not be done because of wetlands impact concerns.

"Will this be a problem going forward?" Response was that

this project will identify where dredging is needed and what permits need to be attained, and that the coalition has secured outside expertise for this purpose. One individual, who is a member of the Colorado Livestock Association, shared a newspaper article about an agreement recently made between the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency that should give states more permit authority to take action. "This should bode well for the project," he suggested. Frank McGee stated that the CPW has \$500,000 to put towards wetlands management once the planning study identifies where that should best occur.

5. *Private land access*: A landowner asked, "What are your plans for dealing with any 'hot spots' you identify on private land?" Response was that the project consultants will identify where the hot spots are and report that to the coalition, particularly the county commissioners who are involved. The commissioners of each respective county will then come to the landowner on whose land the hot spot has been identified and "see if river restoration—including removing trees or digging the channel out would be possible on your land." Landowners were assured that no consultants would be on their land without permission secured ahead of time by the respective county commissioner on the coalition.

6. **Timeline:** Support for the project was voiced many times. The coalition asked whether landowners saw any downside to this project, and the only concern voiced was the length of time required to get the work done. Attendees wanted to know what the timeline is. Response was that the CWCB contract calls for the planning phase to be completed by June 2020, but that the consultants are shooting for a faster timeline. There will be two public meetings in November, one in Idalia and one in Burlington. The technical consultants will be participating in the public meetings in March and August 2019 to share information and gain additional input. The coalition hopes to have a very preliminary report ready to roll out in a public meeting in March, 2019. Nancy Smith stressed that “we have local, state, and federal agencies invested in these issues, and we hope to attack from all three angles.” “Future phases should consider the big picture of land management practices like earthen dams, runoff, and soil health,” she said.



7. **Log piles:** One landowner expressed concern about log piles, stating that they “will cause issues if a 100 year flood happens.” The point was made that the issue applies west of Highway 385 as well, and that this concern should be conveyed to the technical consultants. A variety of responses were given.

- The Yuma County Pest District did the work of piling Russian olive and other invasive species; now it is landowner responsibility to remove them.
- CPW has removed some and is seeking additional grant funds to remove more.
- The logs cannot be burned because of fire danger (the National Forest Service had a fire get away from them while doing this).

8. **Flood control:** One landowner voiced concern that without Bonny, there is “a huge flood risk right now,” and that “this effort to have restored flow is extremely important for flood control.” This point reinforced the need for the study and subsequent action the study will recommend.

9. **The bridge on Highway 385:** Considerable discussion ensued about the need for work to give greater clearance under the bridge to accommodate streamflow. Someone pointed out that the technical consultants should be made aware that during the last 3-inch rain, there was water running over the bridge. Commissioner Wiley pointed out that the bridge is indicative of “exactly why we started this coalition. Many agencies know the bridge is a problem, but they don’t have the funding to do anything.” He expressed the hope that once the study identifies potential solutions, funding can be sought to take action. The point was made that Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) says they cannot appropriate funds to help with the bridge because it is structurally sound.



Landowners listen to details about the study and how it will be conducted. About 30 landowners from all along the South Fork came to participate in the meeting.

10. **Recreation potential:** Several had questions about what the coalition is thinking about bringing recreation to the restored area. Commissioner Wiley described an economic analysis done a few years ago by Yuma County that determined that a number of activities could be promoted, including horseback riding, fishing, ATVs, canoes and kayaking. The point was made that people on the Front

Range have shown interest in the South Fork as a recreation area because the mountains have become so crowded. Even airplane groups have shown interest.

11. *Jurisdiction questions*: “Who do you talk to for stream restoration at Bonny Dam?” Response was that the BOR owns the property and CPW manages it, so the coalition talks with both entities.

12. *BOR Ownership*: The question was asked whether there is a way to change the ownership of the Bonny property such that an entity other than the BOR would own it. Responses included:



- Right now, local agencies do not have the resources to maintain the site.
- Commissioner Wiley said that “at one point, Yuma County wanted to buy it but because of disagreements between CPW and BOR about the property maintenance issues, it seemed pursuing that idea might involve a lawsuit between the feds and the state.”
- “It would take an act of congress to transfer ownership of Bonny away from BOR.”
- Anyone who would like to buy the land wouldn’t want to buy the dam because of liability issues.

13. *Bureau of Reclamation’s planning process*: Some in the room had heard about the planning process the BOR has underway, separate from this coalition study. Deb Daniel, RRWCD manager, reported that the BOR had been very receptive to comments made by South Fork stakeholders in response to their planning process. “We are hoping that our planning process here will help with the BOR process,” she said. The coalition will keep the BOR updated and coordinated with the coalition’s efforts in order to ease implementation in the next phase of the project, according to Nancy Smith. The BOR plan is supposed to be completed by October 1, but issues with their New Mexico contractor is slowing things down, according to one landowner. He said his understanding of the BOR plan is that it is a resource management plan that tells what you can and cannot do on BOR property. The coalition team said that they have already asked the BOR to write their plan broad enough to include anything the coalition recommends be done.

14. *Economic uses for removed wood*: “Are there economic uses for the wood that will be removed?” one landowner asked. “For example, could we bring in a chipper and use the chips for electrical/heat generation like such plants in the San Luis Valley?” Conversation ensued as to whether there would be enough wood to merit the investment in such a plant. The topic brought up a lively debate about which kind of wood is suitable for burning!

15. *Hunting*: One young member of a landowner family asked if the coalition’s study would have any impact on his ability to hunt along the South Fork. Response was that it is one of the goals of the coalition to make the land even more accessible for recreational activities like hunting.



16. *Areas included in the plan*: “We live five miles west of Highway 385. What is your plan for our area? What can we be looking at?” Response was that the coalition consultants are aware that water runs in this area but never makes it to 385. There are problem areas upstream and downstream. North of Vona, for instance, where it is all sand, the river may not ever run again, even in Flagler. Rod Lenz suggested that the question this study will be

addressing is “how can we put the river bed in the best possible position to let the stream flow as best it can.”

17. *Dams, farming practices, pasture draws upstream*: The question was asked whether this study would address dams, farming practices and pasture draws upstream. Responses included:

- That may just be something we have to live with. The reality may be that we can't get the river flowing like it was 50 years ago.
- The pasture draws are not all negative. “Those pasture draws help prevent flooding the neighbor downstream.”
- There is a lot of water moving upstream on Homm and Bar T Ranches, but it doesn't make it downstream to 385 or the dam.

In closing, RRWCD president Rod Lenz said, that he thought the only downside to the project would be not pursuing the project. “Please come to us with any questions. Do not let inactivity be a downside,” he said.

Commissioner Hornung closed the meeting, reminding everyone that he or Commissioner Wiley would be calling ahead if the technical consultants wanted access to landowners' land for the study. He said “Thank you for coming out tonight, you had a lot of good input.” Regarding upcoming public meetings in November, he said “We hope you have more questions and we hope we have more answers.”