

Green River Stakeholder Meeting

Held at 10:00 am on Friday, July 20, 2018, at the Uintah Conference Center located at 313 East 200 South, Vernal, Utah

Notes:

Dale Hamilton (Bureau of Reclamation, Provo) opened the meeting, introduced the open-meeting format and purpose: get everyone together to discuss how to make things better and to make sure concerns are heard. Dale led an exercise where meeting participants placed sticky notes on a plot of Flaming Gorge Operations—2018 reservoir, inflows and releases, and average 1962-2017 inflows—in an arrangement that represents how they would like to see average releases made from Flaming Gorge.

T. Wright Dickinson (Vermillion, Green River Stakeholders Group) gave a presentation of an alternative method of operating Flaming Gorge. Goals and objectives: fish recovery, safe and dependable recreation flows, enhance economic viability of all users along the river (erosion mitigation). Proposed new program: replace annual flooding of reach 2 with “aqua culture”/hatchery/fish rearing hybrid system. Suggested actions: alternative management plan for the reservoir - store more water in wet years and utilize as much water as possible for power production which will fund other suggested actions, create partnerships with local ranchers and farmers, replace non-native vegetation, keep flows below 30,000 cfs, bank protection (due to the dam flows in reach 1 are eroding at an accelerated rate).

Curtis Rozman (Green River Conservation) expressed concerns with periodic flooding and the resulting damage and economic loss in Reach 3. The desire of Reach 3 communities is to keep flows in Reach 3 below 28,000 cfs.

Lorie Fowlke (Representative John Curtis) stated that Representative Curtis is interested in working with all sides to find the best solution.

Tom Chart (USFWS - Fish Recovery Program) stated that flow recommendations were established through a collaborative process in an attempt to periodically mimic the shape of the natural hydrograph by providing flows up to 26,000 cfs in Reach 2.

Concerns with the normal operating level/target elevations of the Flaming Gorge water surface were expressed, and Dave McDonald (Dutch John Council) recommended that the May target elevation be lowered in an attempt to minimize high releases from the reservoir. Tim Gaylord (Holiday River Expeditions) reminded the group that we need to be careful in drawing the reservoir down as we're not assured of being able to fill it.

Ryan Kelly (Flaming Gorge Chamber of Commerce) expressed concerns with rapid changes in the reservoir water surface elevation that can cause damage to docks, prolonged high releases that can create currents in the reservoir that negatively impact kokanee fishing in the reservoir, and a fall-time rise and fall in reservoir elevation that can negatively impact kokanee spawning.

Dave McDonald stated that lowering the mean operating level of Flaming Gorge would essentially be a one-time impact - the reservoir would still fluctuate similar to its current operation, but do so around a lower mean operating level.

The point was made that in 2017, large releases began in February to compensate for the increasing runoff projections, there was just so much water that releases had to increase.

Clayton Palmer (Western Area Power Administration) stated that WAPA is subject to Reclamation when it comes to operations, but having a lower reservoir elevation would lower the ability to efficiently produce power, and there would essentially be no long term impact on power production at Glen Canyon from the one-time release of water from Flaming Gorge. Dave McDonald expressed that the new “mean” would likely only need to be 10 to 15 feet lower, resulting in a roughly 1% loss in power efficiency, which could potentially be made up if instead of making large bypass flushes, the water is run through the turbines.

Ron Dean expressed the interest of Senator Hatch in keeping an eye on costs and who will pay them.

A passionate farmer expressed frustration with the cost of flooding damages and the time spent talking, “find the ten dumbest farmers on the river, let us run the river, and it’s probably all going to work out in the end.”

Tim Gaylord mentioned the one-day \$1,000,000 earning potential of white water rafting contracts, and stated that there is a huge component of recreation interest in high flows. Rafters benefit from high flows.

The need for consistency was expressed. Johnny Spillane (Trout Creek Flies) mentioned that his fishing business runs May 15 to October 15, with clientele coming from around the world, and unexpected high flows are bad for business. Dave McDonald stated that not just businesses, but the town of Dutch John, through decreased tax revenue is impacted by unpredictability/decreased business. The current peak timing has significant variability and unpredictability. Tom Chart noted that there is significant variation in peak timing with the current operations.

Jack Lytle (Dagget County Commissioner) stated that perhaps we need to keep in mind what we can live with, not what we want, to come to a solution. Todd Adams (Utah Division of Water Resources) expressed interest in modeling, evaluating the whole system to find a good balance. James Greer (Utah Division of Water Rights) expressed the need to continue with the fish recovery efforts, because it allows us to continue to divert and use the water for other purposes. Mark Wondzell (National Park Service) was also interested in modeling impacts and expressed interest in mimicking natural flows without injuring other communities as high flows help not only fish but the health of the entire river system. Rob Billerbak (National Park Service, Colorado River Coordinator) stated the importance of discussing and modeling changes to address as many concerns as possible and minimize introducing unintended consequences.

Tim Gaylord expressed that the rafting community is happy to have a seat at the table, and keeping the river as natural as possible is important to them. High flows are great for rafting, higher minimum flows have been good, and consistency is desired. Tim also expressed the importance of keeping in mind that the impact of Flaming Gorge operations on the lower river reaches is relatively small compared to other natural/unregulated flows, mitigating flooding may be beyond our control - like last year. Curtis Rozman stated that a major portion of the flow in Reach 3 is unregulated, but that makes the function of the dam that much more important.

Ashley Nielson (National Weather Service, Colorado Basin River Forecast Center) discussed the two biggest sources of error in runoff forecasting: 1) the model not accurately representing conditions - the Upper Green has limited data, and 2) uncertainty in future weather. Additional precipitation and streamflow data between Fontenelle and Flaming Gorge would be helpful, as would an accurate 3-month weather forecast.

Paul Davidson (Bureau of Reclamation, Upper Colorado Region) stated that this is a complicated system, anything we do has consequences that may affect other's interests, hearing concerns helps us as we make decisions, hopefully we can come to a resolution to operate in a better way. Wayne Pullan (Bureau of Reclamation, Provo Area Office) reemphasized that this is an unpredictable system, and stated that others' jobs look easier than they are, before giving a brief history of the authorization and purposes of Flaming Gorge and the unforeseen impact the dam has had on native fish. Legislation now requires operations to mitigate impacts of the dam. Wayne recommended formalizing the proposal (presented by T Wright), and designating representatives to engage with Reclamation and others. We need to look at what needs to be modeled, what is possible within the ROD, what might require additional environmental, and look at how these impact the Colorado River Storage Project purposes. We need to make sure this makes sense from a biologic, hydrologic, and economic standpoint. We will enter into a process to take into account what is being proposed and see to what degree is can and should be implemented.

Gawain Snow (Uintah Water Conservancy District) provided a little perspective, before 1965, we had a "no-dam problem" - high flows would take out irrigation pumps, ice dams would take out pumps, and by the time you the pumps were back running there'd be no water to pump. There are those that say their fields get flooded, well, they used to get flooded. Today we have a "dam problem," and I'm grateful for it. We've raised issues today, I think we're better off with the dam problem than the no-dam problem.

Tom Chart provided information on the recovery program. The program was established 30 years ago with the goal to compromise with other interests. It's science-based and reviewed annually. One of the strongest recommendations is the timing of spring peaks, also spiking (3-day 4,600 cfs, mid-June thru early July) to disadvantage non-native small mouth bass, and promoting elevated baseflows in dry and moderately dry years. The program goes until 2023. George Weekly (Fish and Wildlife) provides recommendations to Reclamation for operations to benefit endangered fish.

Dale Hamilton proposed altering the Flaming Gorge Working Group meeting schedule to add a meeting in March, prior to the April Working Group meeting, with stakeholders to discuss/propose flow requests. The meeting will be held starting next year. Clayton Palmer mentioned that WAPA, GROGA, and the State of Utah meet twice a year to discuss operations, perhaps these efforts should be coordinated. Wayne Pullan expressed that there is uncertainty that we'll see significant changes in operations based on the proposed process, but there will be more accountability. If operations don't change, we'll at least be able to tell how we took input into account and how it was incorporated or why it wasn't.

T Wright Dickinson posed the question of ensuring stakeholders are part of the conversation as the recovery program comes into 2023. Dave McDonald stated that economics need to be considered moving forward, stakeholders are entitled to more consideration than they've received in the past. Tom Chart responded that there will be economic evaluations through NEPA in the future, and to T. Wright he doesn't have a good answer - in the next 2 or 3 years we'll be trying to figure out what the future

looks like. Try to find a member on the committee to stay connected through. Wayne Pullan added that Reclamation doesn't have the luxury of ignoring economic impact.

Tom Chart closed by stating that he thinks the recovery effort is working. Wayne stated that the public servants take their responsibility to the public seriously, we will do our best to operate with collaboration, openness, and accountability.

Dale Hamilton closed the meeting and scheduled the next working group meeting.

The next Flaming Gorge Working Group meeting will be held at 10:00 am on Monday, August 27, 2018, at the Uintah Conference Center located at 313 East 200 South, Vernal, Utah.