

WCN-SMcCall
ENV-4.00
PRJ-13.00

Subject: Wayne N. Aspinall Unit Operations

Dear Interested Party:

Enclosed is a summary of our August 21, 1996, meeting to coordinate Reclamation's operation of the Aspinall Unit. The next meeting will be in Grand Junction on January 13 and 14. On January 13, the meeting will begin at 10:30 a. m., and presentations on resources associated with the Gunnison River and Aspinall Unit will be made. The actual operation meeting will be conducted on January 14. Additional details will be sent out later this year.

Highlights of the August meeting include:

-- A preliminary meeting was held with recreation interests to discuss concerns with the 1996 spring operation. There were two main concerns with the operation expressed: First, actual inflow to the Aspinall Unit was underestimated, which caused two "spring peaks," the second of which was not anticipated. Second, news releases predictions were for flows of around 1,000 cfs following the first peak; the sudden increase to 4,000+ cfs came without timely notification to river users. Significant safety problems resulted, as well as economical losses to outfitters.

-- John Elliot with the U.S. Geological Survey reported on channel studies in the Black Canyon and Gunnison Gorge. Occasional flows of around 10,000 cfs are important to maintaining the river channel. The frequency of this type flow occurring has decreased since the construction of the Aspinall Unit from every 2.5 years to every 10 years.

-- Problems with the spring 1996 operation resulted from larger than expected inflows, heavy rains in the upper basin, and transformer problems at Crystal Dam.

-- A work group reported on "accounting" for allocating storage water releases; additional coordination will be arranged between endangered fish researchers, National Park Service water right investigators, and the accounting work group.

If you have questions, please call me at (970) 248-0654.

Sincerely,

Ed Warner
Water Resources Group Chief

Enclosure

cc: Chief, Curecanti Field Division, Attention: CCI-100, 1820 South Rio Grande Avenue, Montrose CO 81401

Regional Solicitors Office, Attention: Scott Loveless, 125 South State Street, Room 6201, Salt Lake City UT 84138

Regional Director, Salt Lake City UT
Attention: UC-288, UC-297, UC-600, UC-320, UC-332
(ea w/copy of encl)

bc: WCN-DMutz, -EWarner, -CStanton, -MSteves, -LWest, -SMcCall, JWright, -RStorbo (ea w/copy of encl)

WBR:SMcCall:rb:4/22/96:970 248-0638:asapr.sm

Aspinall Unit Operation Coordination Meeting
August 21, 1996

Recreation pre-meeting: Prior to the regular operations meeting, Reclamation, NPS, and BLM met with recreational users represented by Trout Unlimited and Gunnison River Expeditions to discuss the spring 1996 operation. There were two primary concerns expressed: First, there were sudden increases in river flows to 4,400 cfs+ following Reclamation's announcement that flows would remain in the 1,000 cfs range; and second, that notification of river changes needs to be improved. Very real safety problems occur at higher flows if users are expecting and are equipped for moderate flows. Although not a problem this year, it was also pointed out that river increases from the 500 cfs to 800-900 cfs range can strand anglers who have waded across the river. In addition, there are trips canceled which can cause economic hardships both to outfitters and people who have planned trips from out-of-state.

Solutions to these problems are not easy, but fall into two areas. First, inflow forecasting can be followed more closely and possibly data sources increased. Secondly, public notification should stress that when Blue Mesa is near filling in the spring, there is little control on releases and sudden river changes are most likely to occur at these times. Also, Reclamation normally puts out a news release in April predicting flow levels, and significant changes can occur between then and June. It was recommended that an updated news release be prepared around Memorial Day, and this news release stress the range of flows and the uncertainty that may be encountered.

It was also agreed that notification on flow changes would be made via faxogram to agencies and businesses that are key information sources for the public, and that agencies can set up "phone trees" for contacting their personnel and their publics. Reclamation will develop a faxogram system by the January operation meeting for informing key people of river changes and operational plans. This will include agency people but also private parties who are often the public's source of information on river conditions. River flow phone numbers (1-800-276-4828 and 1-800-277-7571) should continue to be used also.

Operations

The purpose of these meetings, held three times per year, is to discuss and plan the operations for the Aspinall Unit (Blue Mesa, Morrow Point, and Crystal Reservoirs). Participants in the meeting included representatives of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado Water Conservation Board, Bureau of Land Management, Trout Unlimited, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Western Area Power Administration, Gunnison River Expeditions, High Country Citizens Alliance, Sierra Club, and Reclamation. Individual participants are on the attached distribution list. If you have any corrections for, or questions about, this summary or need a copy of handouts, please call Steve McCall at (970) 248-0638.

At the beginning of the meeting, Chuck Pettee of the NPS reported that field

studies related to the quantification of the Federal Reserve Water Right for the Black Canyon are nearly complete, and information will begin to be available. Next, John Elliot of the U.S. Geological Survey gave an interesting presentation on the role of river flows in channel maintenance in the Black Canyon and Gunnison Gorge. Since the construction of the Aspinall Unit, flows in the range of 10,000 cfs have decreased in frequency--from every 2.5 years to every 10 years. Average minimum flow levels have increased during this period as have winter flow levels. As a result, some bank heights have increased noticeably, and sediment and rock that enter from side tributaries are moved out less frequently. Occasional flows in the 10,000 cfs range seem important for maintaining channel conditions.

April-August-1996 Operation: April forecasts called for reservoir inflows to be 125 percent of normal; this estimate decreased to around 100 percent in late May. As a result, releases were cut in late May to around 800 cfs following a mid-May peak of about 3,100 cfs through the Black Canyon. However, a combination of higher actual inflow; heavy rains in the upper basin; and transformer limitations at Crystal led to filling Blue Mesa and required sudden increases to flows of over 4,000 cfs beginning June 18.

Proposed August-January Operation: Flow projections for the Black Canyon and Gunnison Gorge were presented: 700-800 cfs for August through October, and 1,100-1,200 cfs for November and December. Flows will be reduced to 600 cfs September 23 through 26 for trout studies.

Because of the dry weather patterns this summer, there is a possibility that flows downstream from the Redlands Diversion Dam could drop to below 300 cfs during the trout studies. The Fish and Wildlife Service said that a drop to 200 cfs for a short period would be acceptable, but they would monitor the area for problems. Reclamation will also look into possibly diverting extra water through the Gunnison Tunnel, making releases from Ridgway Reservoir, and coordinating with Redlands Water and Power maintenance periods to keep flows above 300 (following the meeting it was determined that the Redlands' maintenance would occur in October so this option will not work out).

Special Flow Requests:

Previously, DOW requested 600 cfs from September 23 to 26 for their annual fish census. The FWS reported that planned operations would provide flows needed for their study activities on endangered fish.

No other special flows were requested.

Agency/Organization Activities and Comments

National Park Service - John Chapman introduced Sheridan Steele who will assume duties as Superintendent at Curecanti and Black Canyon this fall. John is going to Rocky Mountain National Park. Welcome to Sheridan and thanks to John for his work over the years. The NPS also reported that the draft General Management Plan and Environmental Assessment for Curecanti/Black Canyon has been released and the comment period ends October 31. The dinosaur bone recovery was hampered by high waters in Blue Mesa in June but work

progressed.

Colorado Division of Wildlife - Sherman Hebein reported that there is a strong 1996 year class of rainbow trout in the Gorge; however, the fish are heavily infested with whirling disease and survival may be low. The Division is considering stocking 3-5" Colorado River strain rainbows in the Gunnison Gorge in the fall of 1997 to compensate for whirling disease losses. The Division would appreciate any comments on this plan. Brown trout are continuing to maintain excellent numbers through natural reproduction. The kokanee spawning operation at Roaring Judy Hatchery is scheduled for October and early November--fish will be given away there the last three Fridays in October and the first Friday in November.

Western Area Power Administration - Jeff Ackerman reported that Morrow Point and Blue Mesa peaking operations are more and more important to the western states as restrictions are placed on Glen Canyon and Flaming Gorge peaking operations. He also suggested improving communication between agencies doing research downstream from the dams in the event that notification is needed on sudden flow changes.

Concerning the annual fall fishery research flows, these would interfere less with hydropower production if they occur later in the year (after October 1) and occur on weekends. Sherman Hebein will check into this for the 1997 work.

Fish and Wildlife Service - The 5 years of field work on endangered fish in the lower Gunnison River is nearly complete. A "synthesis report" on these many individual studies will be completed in February 1998. A report on flow needs downstream from the Redlands Diversion Dam on the lower Gunnison River is being reviewed. Preliminary recommendations are for a 300 cfs minimum. The Service reported that over 7,000 fish have used the new Redlands fish ladder over the last 9 weeks, almost all have been native fish. Endangered native fish have not been observed in the ladder, but it did not begin operations until after the main Colorado squawfish migration period.

Bureau of Reclamation - The transformer at Crystal is now scheduled for replacement in March and April of 1997. Transformer replacement work at Morrow Point beginning in mid-October will limit releases to bypasses (up to 1,400 cfs). Overall, flows should not be affected by these activities. Stilling basin repairs will be made at Ridgway Dam during the next two winters. Minimum flows of 75 or 100 cfs will be maintained.

High Country Citizens Alliance - Coordination on operations should continue and is helpful. Concern with sudden high flows this spring downstream from Taylor Park Dam were reported.

Water Accounting

Randy Seaholm of the CWCB and Chuck Pettee of the National Park Service reported that the water accounting group was working on spread sheets for

allocating reservoir releases. The group recommended not relying on the existing formula for setting and accounting for releases; the formula has been a good learning tool, but many problems have come up with it. The operation team agreed.

Matrix

Input on the flow matrix should be provided to Reclamation or NPS.

Next Meeting - The next operation meeting will be on January 14 in Grand Junction. Reports on Gunnison River resource investigations will be given on the previous day, January 13. More information will be mailed out on these meetings later this year.

Distribution List - August 22,1996 Aspinall Meeting

*An asterisk indicates person attended the meeting

Individuals Ruth Hutchins
Argonne National Laboratory Ihor Hlohowskyj
Club 20 Greg Walcher
Environmental Defense Fund Jim Martin
Gunnison River Expeditions *Hank Hotze
Bo Gates
High Country Citizens Alliance *Steve Glazer
Trout Unlimited *Pat Oglesby
Western Colorado Congress Fred Wetlaufer
City of Grand Junction Greg Trainor
Colorado River Water Conservation District *Mike Gross, *Dave Kanzer, *Ray Tenney
North Fork Water Conservancy District Tom Alvey
Redlands Water and Power Company Gregg Strong
Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association Jim Hokit, Mark Catlin
Upper Colorado River Commission Clint Stevens
Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District *Tyler Martineau
Colorado Department of Agriculture Sally Schuff
Colorado Division of Water Resources Ken Knox
Colorado Division of Wildlife Rick Anderson
Robert Caskey
*Sherman Hebein
Colorado Water Conservation Board . Peter Evans, Gene Jencsok, *Randy Seaholm
Wyoming State Engineers Office John Shields
Army Corps of Engineers Grady McNure
Bureau of Land Management *John Arkins, Allan Belt
Roy Smith
*Dennis Murphy
Fish and Wildlife Service John Hamill
Reed Harris
*Chuck McAda, Keith Rose, *Terry Ireland
George Smith, Sam Williamson
National Park Service *Chuck Pettee, *Mark Wondzell
*John Chapman, *Sheridan Steele
*Myron Chase, *Dave Roberts
National Weather Service Jim Pringle
U.S. Geological Survey *John Elliot
*Paul von Guerard & *Bob Jenkins
Western Area Power Administration *Gary Burton
*Jeff Ackerman, Chris Brown
Tony Morton
Reclamation . Steve McCall, Russ Storbo, Coll Stanton, Ed Warner, Lorrie West
Paul Davidson, Tom Ryan, Ron Sutton
Jim Schumacher