

Aspinall Unit Operations Meeting January 20, 2022

Background: A Record of Decision for the Aspinall Unit Operations Environmental Impact Statement was signed on May 3, 2012. The EIS modifies the operations of the Aspinall Unit to provide sufficient releases of water at times, quantities, and durations necessary to avoid jeopardy to endangered fish species and adverse modification of their designated critical habitat while maintaining and continuing to meet authorized purposes of the Aspinall Unit. Meetings regarding the operations of the Aspinall Unit are open to stakeholders, and take place tri-annually, with meetings typically occurring in January, April, and August of each year.

Water Supply Outlook – Ashley Nielson (CBRFC)

Fall moisture conditions have improved from near record dry levels last year but still remain below normal. Snow accumulation had a slow start until late December when impressive storms with significant SWE (snow water equivalent) arrived. So far the northern half of the Gunnison Basin is doing better than the southern half.

Gunnison basin runoff averages have transitioned from the 1981-2010 period to the 1991-2020 period. This results in averages about 5% to 15% less than previous. This also means water supply forecast volumes will show a higher percent of average compared with the same volume last year.

The January mid-month forecast for Blue Mesa Reservoir is 650 Kaf (102% of average). There is still much uncertainty in the forecast as 60% of the snow accumulation season remains. Future runoff forecasts will be dependent on late winter and early spring weather and snow conditions.

Aspinall Unit Operations

Current Conditions: Blue Mesa Reservoir finished 2021 at an elevation of 7434.5 ft, which is 55 feet below the winter target of 7490 ft. Current content at Blue Mesa Reservoir is 235,000 AF which is 28% full. Releases at Crystal Dam are 325 cfs and flows in the Gunnison River through the Black Canyon are 325 cfs. Flows in the Gunnison River at the Whitewater gage are estimated to be just above the baseflow target of 750 cfs. (current readings at the Whitewater gage are ice-affected)

Snowpack: After a December snow accumulation at 225% of average, snowpack in the Upper Gunnison Basin is currently 143% of normal. Snowpack for the entire Gunnison Basin is at 131% of normal. So far January snow accumulation is right at average.

Spring Flow Targets: Current runoff forecasts for major streams within the Gunnison Basin range between 80% and 110% of average. The runoff forecast for Blue Mesa Reservoir would put this year into the Average Dry category. In the Average Dry category the ROD peak target would be 8,070 cfs. In an Average Dry year there are 10 days of duration at the half bankfull flow of 8,070 cfs. This essentially makes the peak at the Whitewater gage a 10 day peak. The Black Canyon water right 1 day peak flow target would be 5,250 cfs if the May 1 forecast is the

same as the January 15 forecast. The shoulder flow target would be 540 cfs for the period from May 1 to July 25.

Future Operations: After the spring peak, operations at Aspinall will continue to meet the baseflow targets at the Whitewater gage. In the Average Dry category these targets range between 1050 cfs and 1500 cfs from spring into winter. Blue Mesa Reservoir is currently projected to fill to a maximum content of 530,000 AF (64% full).

Weather Outlook – Aldis Strautins (NWS)

Water year 2021 temperatures were above average and precipitation was below average in the Gunnison Basin. So far in water year 2022, temperatures have been much above average in the fall and early winter. September thru early December were very dry but late December has provided significant precipitation. January has returned to warmer and drier conditions.

Drought conditions have improved since the fall of 2021. La Nina conditions are expected to continue into the spring and then give way to ENSO neutral conditions. Little precipitation is expected over the next week and warmer than average temperatures are expected for the next few weeks going into February.

Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program – Daly Ryden (FWS)

The Recovery Program was established in 1988 to address conflicts between the Endangered Species Act and water development. The goal of the program is to recover the endangered fish as water development proceeds in compliance with the Endangered Species Act and all applicable water laws, compacts, and agreements. Flow recommendations exist for many Upper Colorado Basin rivers including: Green River, White River, Colorado River, Gunnison River and San Juan River. Flow recommendations typically consist of spring peaks and baseflows.

It is difficult to measure the success of the Flow Recommendations for the Upper Colorado Basin rivers since many of the years during implementation of the program have been on the drier side of historical hydrology.

The number of Colorado Pikeminnow using the Gunnison River historical habitat remains low. The number of razorback suckers using the habitat has been increasing but much of this is from stocking. Larval fish sampling data confirms razorbacks are successfully spawning in the Gunnison River.

Reports from Agencies

BLM GGNCA – Alex Miller, Henry Atkinson, Edd Franz – Highest commercial use in 2021 and private use was up too. BLM is continuing to work on designating campsites and developing and allocation/reservation system on the Gunnison River through Dominguez Escalante NCA.

WAPA – Chrystal Dean, Derek Fryer – Watching drought operations closely. Implemented a new 2-year rate. Used Reclamation flow modeling to determine rate to help alleviate pressures on the basin fund. Energy pricing shows summer pricing spiking.

CPW – Eric Gardunio, Dan Brauch, Ryan Unterreiner – Eric – added flows during spawning period would help increase the spawning habitat. Flows to sample in Oct for rainbow population. Smallmouth bass suppression efforts have been successful. Screen on Ridgway Reservoir is complete which helps. Dan- drought conditions impacts to boat the reservoir. Kokanee spawn take was up. Full schedule of Kokanee this year. Lake trout tournament was successful and happy with the population, so no tournament this year. Ryan – transferred water from Silver Jack through Cimarron State wildlife area ~1100 af over a few months.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Dale Ryden, Darek Elverud, Dave Graf, Julie Stahli, Aimee Crittendon, Ann Timberman, Kathleen Gissing – continue larval fish monitoring through spring. Fall monitoring as in past years.

Tri County WCD – Mike Berry, Kathleen Margetts, Tony Mitchell & Teddy – Fish screen at Ridgway is nearly complete and will be operational. Will be nice to fill without worrying about spilling. 13-14' higher in the reservoir than last year.

Trout Unlimited – Cary Dennison, Marshall Pendergrass – Marshall (concerns are the spawning flows late march early April. Would like flows 450 cfs. Cary- keep eye on diversions on South Canal. Noted flows dipped below 300cfs. Marshall – appreciate work of partners. Adding another mile of public water in Montrose.

Hutchins Water Center (CMU) – Hanna Holm -

USGS - Steve Anders – Absent but sent report: O&M issues at Silver Jack Res and Paonia Res. Many of the streamgages are affected by ice but we're still visiting all the sites and making discharge measurements. We're hoping CO maintains abv avg snowpack.

UVWUA - Steve Pope, Doug Wilson, Daris Jutton, David Bridges – winter maintenance

Fire Mountain Canal & Paonia Reservoir – Steve Fletcher – annual shareholder meeting tonight. High pressure gage is working.

CWCB – Michelle Garrison, - Next board meeting next Monday/Tuesday before water congress virtual only. Agenda posted online. In stream flow leases and filing. Water planning relevant to the Gunnison Basin. 100 year anniversary of the Colorado River Compact. 500+

plan for lower basin conservation – keep a lookout for that. Tier 1 shortage will be taken by lower basin. DROA- upper basin reliant on hydrology, so forecast will determine a lot.

Colorado DWR – Bob Hurford, Greg Brown, Jason Ullman – Jason has taken a different position, Greg Brown will be Jason’s replacement. A few vacant positions left to fill.

Colorado River WCD – Dave Kanzer, Raquel Flinker – Board meeting moved to February. Community Partner program is still approving projects for multi-benefit, multi-purpose projects.

Reclamation Provo Area Office – Gary Henrie – Similar hydrology conditions, below 30-yr median and hit record lows.

Reclamation Power Office – Eric Langley, Dave Klein, Grant Wilson – construction improvements completed Dec 2nd. Should be open this spring., **Travis Jensen** – normal outages and maintenance