**Upper San Juan Watershed Enhancement Partnership**

**Meeting Notes**

**STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING:** January 8, 2021

**Where**: Zoom Conference Call

**Attendees:** Becca Smith, Kurt Laverty, Tom McCarthy, Tim Haarmann, Chris Pitcher, Tobi Rowher, Al Pfister, Ryan Unterreiner, Justin Ramsey, Robin Young, Aaron Kimple, Mandy Eskelson

**NEXT MEETINGS:**

* + **Friday****, Jan. 22nd 2-3 pm Special Meeting:** Phase II Preliminary Results from Lotic Hydrological & SJCD
	+ **February 12, 9-11 am:** Steering Committee Meeting

**Phases I & II Review**

Background In 2015, Colorado Water Plan (CWP) and Southwest’s Basin Implementation Plan (BIP) identified a significant gap in information necessary to understand and protect environmental and recreational (E&R) water needs in Colorado.

* Combination of local interest and funding available through Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) and Basin Roundtables to develop their own unique Stream Management Plan (SMP) or Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP) processes.
* Supports formation of local watershed groups to develop new tools and evaluations to address these gaps and needs. Upper San Juan Watershed Enhancement Partnership began process in 2018.
* Multiple SMP/IWMP groups across state (<https://www.coloradosmp.org/>) Some groups focus on E&R only, on a specific stream reach, some are broader and incorporate agricultural and municipal water needs into planning, some can be reactive (focus on known issues) or exploratory (assess current & future conditions).
* WEP approach: mixture of wanting to address immediate issues for multiple water uses in San Juan River Basin, with consideration of a potentially hotter and drier climate.

Phase I Overview

* May 2018-April 2020: Mountain Studies Institute (MSI), Trout Unlimited (TU), and Western Wildscapes (WW) gathered a stakeholder group to begin a community-led process to assess water values, needs, and priorities for the San Juan River Basin.
* Objective**:** Envisioned as a three-phase process, the ultimate purpose of this project is to implement the SMP/IWMP process to seek opportunities to conserve the San Juan Basin streams and their uses, with wide-ranging community support and decisions based on local input and current scientific analysis.
* Now guided by a steering committee called the Upper San Juan Watershed Enhancement Partnership.
* Building upon the E&R water needs focus of SMPs, this process has evolved to consider agricultural and municipal water needs and uses in planning to create what the state now calls an Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP).

Phase II Overview

* May 2020-May/June 2021: Phase II focuses on developing the technical information needed to help the community identify issues, opportunities, and potential projects to address these different water uses and needs in the San Juan Basin through what we are calling a “watershed assessment.”
* While the group’s representation and desire to understand and identify watershed needs covers a geographic scope in the Upper San Juan, Rio Blanco and Navajo, Phase II’s watershed assessment focuses mainly on the upper San Juan.
* This focus on the upper San Juan is based on several factors: detail/refinement capacities of models, budget constraints for sub-contractors, past restoration work completed/underway in Navajo and Blanco, and goal to accomplish projects on the San Juan and possibly extend these processes into other sub-basins/watersheds.
* Three main tasks with the objective of utilizing Phase II assessment results in Phase III to identify opportunities for cooperative projects to address the multiple water needs into a comprehensive IWMP that includes specific options for projects, actions.
1. Mountain Studies Institute, Western Wildscapes, and Trout Unlimited continue project coordination and stakeholder engagement formed in Phase I
2. San Juan Conservation District (SJCD) conducting inventory of agricultural irrigation structures, starting with major ditches then opening up to interested private landowners
3. Lotic Hydrologic develop an assessment of E&R water supply needs and compile this data and agricultural irrigation inventory, plus hydrological, climate and forest health variables into models to evaluate current and potential future climate scenarios.

Phase II so far

* Jun 2020-Jan 2021: Steering Committee has continued to regularly meet, usually every other month, with the option to join project management meetings with Lotic and SJCD.
* Although these meetings can be admin heavy, keeping this open communication and dialogue ensures the group is better prepared and engaged for when we start interpreting assessment results and identifying locations and project opportunities.
* Solidifying the group as an active watershed group with a new logo, several public presentations, marketing for the [San Juan River Improvement Project](http://www.mountainstudies.org/s/WEP-San-Juan-Improvement-Flyer.pdf) and [Mesa Canyon takeout projects](https://cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/News-Release-Details.aspx?NewsID=7656), recognition through the [BIP’s IPP list](https://waterinfo.org/resources/southwest-basin-roundtable/#1595281837623-59108c88-5928), and continuing to secure funding for smooth transition to Phase III later this year.
* 2020 Highlight: group got together for Banded Peak Ranch visit to explore implemented restoration, conservation and forest management projects that may be applicable in other areas of the San Juan Basin.
* Viewed/discussed stream gauge on Navajo River, SJ Cutthroat trout habitat, head cuts and stream rehabilitation, fish barriers, fire modeling and conservation easements, oil field conversion to an irrigated hay pasture, irrigation structures.
* Lotic and SJCD completed their field work during the fall and summer, currently synthesizing this data to be shared with the Steering Committee and later the public. As we know, it can take some time to interpret or format data to use in modeling to make it understandable and answer the group’s questions.
* SJCD completed evaluations on 5 major ditches (Park, Fourmile, Echo, Snowball, and Dutton) and their laterals along the San Juan River mainstem and its tributaries. Worked with water users to assess current conditions of their irrigation delivery system and identify opportunities to improve system efficiency.
* inventoried and mapped approximately 61.7 miles of ditch thus far
* 325 structures were identified along these ditches which include division boxes, headgates, diversions, inlets, measuring devices, check dams and culverts.
* Condition of each structure was rated: Poor - Replaced Immediately; Fair - Functioning with major defects; Good - Functioning with some minor defects; or Excellent - Properly functioning with no defects.
* Cost estimates are being developed for structures that rated Poor or Fair.
* Lotic has experienced a few delays with the loss of an employee and are currently in the hiring process. This employee led the recreational survey and data collection, so they hope to have this rolled out as soon as possible.
* Seth Mason and his team collected available hydrological from current and historical USGS stream gauges and forest/vegetation data from the US Forest Service and County lidar surveys.
* Adjusted CWCB hydrological simulation data from a monthly timestep to a daily timestep at key locations along each of the study reaches.
* Assessed climatological factors that predict characteristics of streamflow and forest vigor to help with the hydrology/forest health nexus portion of the assessment
* Sediment transport and fish habitat characteristics were surveyed in the field.
* Constructed hydraulic models constructed to show how climate change and/or population growth make affect streamflow, sediment transport and habitat quality.
* Timeline
* Only minor delays so far, even during pandemic. Still on track to finish Phase II in May/June 2021, but contract with CWCB has flexibility for us to continue Phase II until May 2022, if needed.
* If Phase III funding approved, scheduled for smooth transition to start right after Phase II in summer 2021.
* Next steps
* Goals:
* Better outreach: MSI to provide faster turnaround on meeting notes and more consistently update WEP website. MSI could also provide stakeholder newsletter with local water events, news, and resources. Mandy currently compiles this info about every other month from Animas River watershed and could reuse some information and include events/resources pertinent to Archuleta County. Could be opportunity to share news of other local orgs like conservancy districts, PAWSD, San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership, Resilient Archuleta, Friends of the Upper San Juan River, etc.
* More technical presentations: Beneficial for Steering Committee and public to learn the details of project options, similar to the stream gauge presentation given by DWR hydrographer in 2019.
* Stream gauges were discussed in more details, covering how the San Juan Water Conservancy District has submitted an IPP project to the Southwest Basin Roundtable for a potential stream gauge on the West Fork of the San Juan. Talked about how historical stream gauge was removed from the West Fork, but this may be an area of interest to monitor not only for stream flows or water quality measures but also correlate with forestry treatments/wildfire mitigation work.
* McCarthy Ranch expressed interest in possibly re-installing stream gauge on East Fork of San Juan, and open to discussing why this gauge was decommissioned in the past to determine potential benefits of reinstalling.
* Reminder to the group that new stream gauge installation estimate costs around $15-20k and around $5k for operation and maintenance (O&M) to ground truth/calibrate This cost can sometimes be reduced by using historic sites if original lines or housing still in good shape.
* Determined Lotic’s analysis and modeling in Phase II will help identify stress points and inform where a possible stream gauge may be useful for water administration, conservation, research, recreation, etc.
* Champion ongoing projects in outreach (Mesa Canyon takeout) and partner efforts, too.
* Climate and drought may become priority topics to discuss in 2021 considering current conditions and forecasts.
* Drought impacts to possibly carry forward as it relates to this project area and communities: calls on water rights if early spring runoff (e.g. impacts on Four Mile, instream flow right), timing of angling recommendations (e.g. fish only certain times of day).
* Webinar on 1/12 to be shared on new technology CWCB using with lidar to predict snow depth and water runoff.

Brief Phase III proposal refresher

* Follows similar funding strategy and tasks of Phase II. [CWCB grants](https://cwcb.colorado.gov/grants) (Watershed Restoration Program + Water Supply Reserve Fund) support 75% of direct project costs, with local partners and grant programs supply remaining, required 25% cash and in-kind matching funds.
* See full proposal [here](https://waterinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WSRF-App-Upper-San-Juan-WEP-11-19-20.pdf). Three main tasks:
1. Continued coordination and stakeholder engagement (MSI & WW)
2. Extend agricultural infrastructure inventory to Rio Blanco, and Navajo River, if time and budget allow (SJCD)
3. Incorporate ag inventory into modeling, finalize Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP) for upper San Juan Basin, with priority projects formatted for easy incorporation into the Southwest BIP IPP List.
* Next Steps: Several funding sources approved funding in 2020! Currently waiting for approval from CWCB at March 10/11 Board Meeting, plus local (Southwestern Water Conservation District) and Forever Our Rivers Foundation grants (May 2021).

**Updates & Partner Check-In**

* Welcome new USFS Interim Pagosa District Ranger, Rebecca “Becca” Smith! We will miss Kevin Khung, but really appreciate Becca stepping in to help with coordination and collaboration between WEP and USFS.
* Great Outdoors Fund (GOF)-San Juan River Public Access Project
* Background: Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW) asked to submit recreation projects to the GOF to pilot program for crowd-source funding. Three potential projects submitted, with Mesa Canyon takeout as the most prepared for work on the ground and selected for major promotion.
* Campaign kicked off in December, with donations $8,275 so far. GOF is purchasing social media ads to encourage folks to click and donate.
* Chris provided update that the concept designs have been completed, with potential for some construction to begin early spring if things are thawed and river is not too high, but more likely after spring runoff and before summer monsoon storms.
* Other funding opportunities:
* [CPW Partners in the Outdoors](https://cpw.state.co.us/aboutus/Pages/Partners.aspx)-Small grant (~$10,000 grant every year) available again in 2021, due late January. CPW encouraged the Town of Pagosa Springs to pursue. Requires a 1-1 match of cash or in-kind services. Initial conversations with grant administrators mentioned the Town and its partnership with WEP could be a good fit.
* Governor Polis’s Executive Order on [Wildly Important Goals](https://dnrweblink.state.co.us/CWCB/0/edoc/212970/Water%20WIG%20One%20Pager.pdf): encourages the Basin Roundtables on multiple fronts and could enhance chances of WEP identified projects getting support/funding:
* Through June 30, 2021, the CWCB will work with basins to identify 500 critical water projects - including 160 Tier 1 (ready to launch) and 340 Tier 2 (priority projects in need of further evaluation, phasing and/or data collection).
* WIG challenges each of the eight basins to identify at least 20 projects that have sufficient data - including cost estimates - that are ready to launch (known as Tier 1) as well as a pipeline of critical basin projects that are moving forward (Tier 2).
* Note: Shovel-ready projects may not always have a physical shovel - projects that enhance stream flows, education, or planning efforts are just as critical as just infrastructure projects. Shovel-ready means they are ready to launch.
* [Colorado Outdoor Partnership](https://copartnership.org/) (signed late last year): This partnership offers planning grant funds, which may be able to help with the decreased amount/loss of CWCB funds in the future.
* [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/rcpp/) (RCPP): part of the 2018 Farm Bill, allocates $300 million per year, promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners on projects that help with watershed function. Broad range on types of projects including improvements with agricultural infrastructure, recreation, forest health, or combination.
* WEP may be primed for submission/joining due to: NRCS staff expressed support of WEP/area joining, located within a Critical Conservation Area (Colorado River Basin), may have access to Trout Unlimited staff experienced with putting together the paperwork.
* Considerations: Opening for applications in summer/September, but will need to start planning sooner than later. Has to be shovel ready projects. Mentioned the Audubon may have a RCPP in place already.
* PAWSD/SJWCD property: likely the lease will not be renewed and may be opening up in Jan 2023. Currently having discussions with the Town about recreation use/opportunities. Use of this lower area cannot affect reservoir development, as promised by the purchase of that land, but recreation would not impact that.

**Spring Phase II Public Meeting Planning**

* Committee determined late March/early April best timing, after Durango and Pagosa Spring school spring breaks.
* Discussed the benefits of having in-person public meetings, and how other entities may be handling this issue during the pandemic.
* Some examples in other watershed/forest collaboratives hosting a hybrid version of virtual meeting with option for field session/trip but may be too cold/snowy/early in the year for this mid-Phase II public meeting.
* Likely to use virtual platform for upcoming public meeting, but may offer other options for end of Phase II. Allows for different comfort levels of engagement/stakeholder feedback collection and better suited for Archuleta County communities.
* 2020 stakeholder survey results prioritized the following topics, but this focus may be different in 2021 considering persistent drought conditions.Identified potential speakers, including Steering Committee members. See survey results and speaker options below.



**Potential Public Meeting Speakers/Topics** (red highlight=priority speakers to contact for Mar/Apr meeting)

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| **Topics** | **Guest Speaker Suggestions So Far** | **Local Speakers** |
| Local water conservation planning | Regional/state efforts-* Heather Dutton or Emma Reesor ([Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project](https://riograndeheadwaters.org/))
* [Paul Bruchez](https://www.watereducationcolorado.org/paul-bruchez-grand-partnerships/) (Grand County cattle rancher/fly-fishing operator)
 | PAWSD Drought Management Plan, Landowners, irrigators, businesses implementing water efficient systems |
| The "plumbing" of the river | Dagmar Llewellyn ([Bureau of Reclamation-Chama Diversion](https://www.coloradomesa.edu/water-center/documents/dagmar-llewellyn-bio-9_05_18.pdf)) | Local DWR hydrologist/ Joe Crabb |
| Potential reservoir/water storage development |  | San Juan Water Conservancy District |
| Unique species of San Juan River |  | Jim White or other CPW Biologist |
| Economic impacts of recreational water uses |  | Pagosa Outside, anglers, etc. |
| Colorado Water Law and water rights |  |  |
| Other: Climate forecasts for San Juan Basin | Jeff Lucas ([Western Water Assessment](https://wwa.colorado.edu/)) |  |
| Other: Rio Blanco Restoration | [Val Valentine](http://pagosasun.com/archives/2011/06June/061611/riverrest.html) ([local author](https://www.amazon.com/-/es/Val-Valentine/dp/B00RH2GCOW), Southwest Basin Roundtable rep) |  |

**Next Meeting**

* Friday 22nd 2-3 pm Special Meeting-Phase II Preliminary Results with Lotic & SJCD
* This meeting will be recorded and video shared with Steering Committee members. Results and interpretation will be further refined into appropriate formats for sharing with the public in March/April.
* Since WEP did not meet in December, the Steering Committee will meet in February to plan for March/April public meeting and discuss any other pertinent topics to keep in mind for 2021.