

Rio Grande Natural Area Commission

Meeting Notes

October 12, 2011

Attendees:

Helen Hankins, BLM Colorado State Director
Mike Blenden, Project Manager, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Craig Cotten-Division 3 Water Engineer, Colorado Division of Water Resources
Rick Basagoitia, Area Manager, Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife
Steve Vandiver, Commission Chair, General Manager, Rio Grande Water Conservation District
Rio de la Vista Commission Vice-Chair, Citizen
Harold Anderson, Citizen
Mike Willet, Citizen
Paul Robertson, Citizen

*All members were in attendance.

8:00 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. -Group takes tour to Rio Grande Natural Area

1:30-1:46 p.m. – Lunch

1: 46 p.m. – Meeting continues at the Inn of the Rio Grande, Alamosa

Group approves agenda

Review of existing land-use plans: Paul Tigan gives presentation on Land-Use Plans (presentation available by email format and posted online). Two key elements to managing San Luis Area. RMP came out Sept. 1991. Paul explains what BLM has done in the past 20 years of the San Luis Resource Area. Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan-page 9 gives some of BLM's goals and work that was done. Never a decision record signed by Colorado. Paul explains Coordinated Resource Management Plan (CRMP). 142 bridge area includes public education (field trip did not include that area) The CRMP explains there should be more public education. BLM has not carried out some of the things that are mentioned in the plan. Group talks about signage. Until BLM adopts a new plan the current plan remains in effect.

Costilla and Conejos County Comprehensive Land Use Plans overview- Paul explains the difference between land use plans and codes. Goals of the plan are highlighted in the presentation points. The plan recommends a wildlife code. Explanation about 1041 maps-1041 map is an area of interest with multiple characteristics, state statute dictates 1041. This had not taken place with the county. Statistics included in the plan on subdivisions--Apx. 1500 are within the RGNA border.

Conjeos County Comprehensive Land Use Plan-Maps were not included in the presentation but Paul explained the maps, codes and plan.

Audience is asked to introduce themselves:

Sean Noonan – BLM
Heather Salas – BLM
Clayton Davy -- BLM

Chrestina Martinez -- Costilla County Commissioner

Brenda Felmlee -- Cong. Tipton's office

Overview of the Rio Grande Compact and the Closed Basin Project: chairman and Craig Cotten presents:

The compact came about in the early 1900s due to increased uses on the land. Depletion of the river due to development around Rio Grande in Colorado and New Mexico

In 1938, compact made among CO, TX and NM. Study was conducted on the river and uses, how the uses could be best allocated. Joint investigation among the three states and the government. The Compact allocates the water among the three states. Caps the use of the water by Colorado and New Mexico based on a sliding scale. For Colorado, the projected annual river flows in the upper portion of the Rio Grande and Conejos are used to determine the amount of water that needs to be sent down to the downstream states. The average amount of water that Colorado needs to send down is approximately 25-30% of the annual upper basin flows. The compact is set up on a calendar year flow. Almost all water is passed through to the state line during the winter, but this is only a small percentage of the annual yearly flow. Ditches are usually turned on during April. An accurate forecast is critical to the administration of the river. Ditches are sometimes curtailed to allow water to flow through to the state line. There is currently 0% curtailment of ditches on the Rio Grande and 50% curtailment of ditches on the Conejos River. May have to turn off ditches at the Conejos system early.

Question on how the data is collected. Gauging stations-satellite telemetry data is collected every 15 minutes, information is sent to the satellite hourly. 10-day report sent out.

Question from Helen: some years there's more water than other years, is there any requirement in the compact about when you deliver the water? Answer: There is not, Colorado and New Mexico decide when they send the water to downstream states. However, especially in Colorado's case, there is very limited storage available so the water is usually sent down as it is physically available.

Question on return flows: Return flows may be used to help pay Colorado's compact obligation but if they enter the rivers below the upper compact gaging stations, they are not required to be sent through. Do you know the percentage of return flows? Answer: it varies based on several conditions.

When CO was sued by NM and TX in the 60s, CO was ordered to meet its compact obligation each and every year until the debt was repaid. Elephant Butte Reservoir spilled in 1985, resulting in the debt being wiped out.

Closed Basin Project: The main purpose of the project is to pay a portion of Colorado's yearly compact obligation. Other priorities are 5,300 acres of water obligated to wildlife areas. Any extra water would be for sale to anyone who wanted to purchase the water. The soils in the Closed Basin aquifer have iron bacteria, which has reduced the ability to pump as it clogs the pumps. The Bureau of Reclamation has done everything that they can think of to address the iron bacteria problem. This is a high-maintenance project. The production of the project is currently about 15% of what the original design was. Almost completely funded by the Federal government.

Question: what is the cost per acre? Answer: \$270 per acre.

The production of the project is split 60% to Rio Grande 40% to the Conejos.

Must produce water quality is 300 parts per million TDS or less.

Project Timeline Development: Group discusses project timeline. This commission runs until Oct. 12, 2016. Its 10-year charter was enacted in 2006. Question asked is there an additional date to complete the plan? No. The act contemplates the plan is completed and submitted to the Secretary of the Interior. The Secretary will either approve it or not approve it and provide reasons why. Authorization to implement needs to have an approved plan before implementing. It might make sense to come up with a plan then ask for money. Group discusses funding and timeline and the plan of action. Question asked about the audience for this plan.

Public Comment Period Begins:

Public member points out that you can't plan on funding, and just go with the plan, the funding will have to come later.

Group talks further about the funding and the plan. The group thinks members of the public need to give feedback on the plan during development. Legislation provides resources the plan should consider.

No further comments from the public.

Future Commission Meeting: Group decides everyone should bring back ideas on what resources should be identified and discussed in the plan. Recommendation was made to use Google docs to begin document implementation. Group concluded they will spend a large majority of the next meeting discussing the resources, the goals, stakeholders and communication.

Reports from subcommittees: Counties are behind the plan and are willing to help in any way they can. Both counties recognized the issues. Chrestina, Costilla County Commissioner wants a county presence at every meeting and wants to support the process. County comm. offered to help reach out to public land owners if needed and offered to include information on their website. Ben Doon with Costilla County was asked to give a presentation at the next meeting.

Subcommittee on studies, maps, research, plans, etc.: Tried to identify what is out there. Inventory spreadsheet is explained. Front Range RAC is addressing some horse trespass issues will be working with the Rio Grande Natural Area Commission on that issue.

Additional items: Articles in the Ag Journal, Valley Courier and the Pueblo Chieftain mentioning the Rio Grande Natural Area Commission are discussed.

Next meeting scheduled: December 14, 2011, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.