

NORTHERN SAN LUIS VALLEY CONSERVATION ROUNDTABLE

MEETING NOTES OF APRIL 2, 2014

An audience of about 60 attended the 4/2/2014 quarterly meeting of the NSLVCR held at the Colorado College Conference Center in Crestone. Co-chairs for this meeting were Bill Sutherland of the Crestone Baca Land Trust and Ron Garcia, Manager of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. Unfortunately, Ron was too sick to attend but his role was ably assumed by Corrina Hanson, Assistant Manager at the Refuge. The meeting ran (heroically) from 3 until 7:30 PM.

Information Exchange Segment

1. Nancy Butler, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, happily reported the completion of two new major conservation easements. She also noted the many activities RiGHT has planned for this summer, including a June 14 picnic and walking tour at the Haywood Ranch, one of the new easements.

2. Mark Jacobi, Orient Land Trust, reported on the many conservation-oriented projects at the Everson Ranch and Valley View Hot Springs. A major irrigation project is going forward with help from NRCS. The hydroelectric power system has undergone a major upgrade with automation. Pigs and chickens have been added to the sources of interest and profit at the ranch.

3. Andrew Mackie, Land Trust of the Upper Arkansas, introduced Lucy Waldo, their new Conservation Director, who for some years had carried out similar activities in the Gunnison area. Andrew mentioned several upcoming events: a Wild and Scenic Film Festival on 4/10 at 6:30 PM in the Salida Community Center; a symposium on Conservation and Community on 5/2 at the Salida Community Center; Landscape Photography workshop with John Fielder, 5/31-6/1; and a membership picnic at the Hutchinson Ranch. Information on these events can be reached at 719-539-7700.

4. Julie Mach, of ScSEED, introduced Tess Beneduce, an Americorps/Vista volunteer working with her this summer who can be available for assisting Roundtable activities. ScSEED is involved with the Crestone Sustainability Fair and still works on Kerber Creek restoration. Julie has recently become the Southern Colorado representative of the Colorado Mountain Club and she's encouraging their involvement in water issues.

5. Mikela Tarlow continues to pursue grants for several projects, principally ones involving students.

6. Suzanne Ewy was unable to attend but reports her engagement in a project involving students at Moffat School and Chokurei Ranch.

7. Corrina Hanson, USFWS, reported the Refuge's continuing preparation of their EPA-mandated Comprehensive Conservation Plan. There also seem prospects that construction of their office on the Refuge proper may begin. This is part of a larger project to restore or simulate existing historic ranch structures.

8. Jenny Nehring was unable to attend but sent a report on the Gunnison sage grouse of Poncha Pass. The USFWS listing decision for the species was postponed from 3/31 until 5/12/2014. Of the 17 sage grouse transplanted to Poncha from Gunnison in 10/2013, 9 are still able to be monitored and these will be augmented with 10 more this April.

9. Peggy Godfrey, newly appointed to the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Board, was accompanied by two other local ranchers, Ed Nielsen and Tom McCracken. Each spoke passionately of the need for change in our usage of water in our area (Division 3). Our area is the only one in the state not currently following the Doctrine of Prior Authorization (the hierarchical entitlement to water based on temporal priority of application). It was argued that the consequences of the Closed Basin Project (see below) are as severe as could be imagined if aquifer water had been sold to Denver by the Stockmen's or AWDI schemes.

10. Bea Ferrigno prompted the announcement of the opportunity to learn about and contribute to the developing Rio Grande Basin Plan, facilitated by Judy Lopez, education liaison for the project. The meeting will be on 4/16 at 6PM at the Crestone Charter School.

After a break for refreshments provided by the Crestone Baca Land Trust, the event moved to the featured program:

District 25 Water Resources: Issues and Challenges

1. Craig Cotten, CO Division of Water Resources, reviewed basics of Water Administration. In Colorado, as in much of the interior West, water is separated from the land, rights to it can be bought and sold. In most of the states east of the Mississippi rights to water accrue to those owning the land adjacent to streams (Riparian Doctrine).
2. Jim Swanson, also of the Division of Water Resources. In his role as the Water Commissioner for Districts 25, 26, and 27 he helped make apparent why his job has as much art as science to it. District 26 (Saguache Creek) and District 27 (La Garita and Carnero Creeks) flow into the Rio Grande, so are ruled by the Rio Grande Compact (an agreement for water sharing among Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico). District 25 (San Luis Creek and its tributary, Kerber Creek) does not have surface flow to the Rio Grande, so is governed differently. In addition to seasonal differences in stream flow, flows vary during the day such that water rights holders farther downstream may not even see water at a time when those farther up do. But what if the higher priority resides with those downstream? Dilemmas such as this are common.
3. Rich Roberts, hydrologist with the US Bureau of Reclamation presented fascinating graphs. Stream flow has been monitored for many decades. Compared with the average daily flow of over 75 years and since 2000, we are in a drought, with flows below average, as we are all too well aware. Moreover, the peak flows are occurring two weeks earlier (now 5/26) and are not lasting as long. Besides surface water, the ground water of the unconfined aquifer is being studied by scores of monitoring wells. These have shown that since 2000 there have been significant drops in water levels in areas that were previously being recharged. The largest draw-down is in the area west (outside) of the Closed Basin Project, and is mostly due to agricultural pumping, the speaker said. These interesting data can be accessed at "dwr.state.co.us" and "rgwcd.org".
4. Corrina Hanson and Megan Estep, of USFWS spoke of water and the Baca NWR. Most (90+%) of the water flowing from the snows of the Sangres and passing through the Baca Grande has been adjudicated to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Some of it now being leased can be sold to the BG Water and Sanitation District, as stipulated by the

Congressional act enabling the acquisition of Refuge property. Adjudicated water must be put to “beneficial use” and while the Refuge is no longer a working ranch (some cattle are selectively grazed for the conservation benefit) it has been considered that water for wildlife is a beneficial use. For years now the Refuge has received much less water than its adjudicated allotment (615 cfs). In later questions about stream flows in Cottonwood and Spanish Creeks a critical point that has been operative is the assignment of which branch of the creek represents the original bed. Ms. Hanson and Mr. Swanson correctly pointed out that this can be extremely difficult to ascertain and the present flows are based on available expert opinion. Water administration also piqued the concern of a hunter, Wendell Winger, who urged that hunters be included among stakeholders.

5. Greg Gillaspie of the US Bureau of Reclamation provided a nice overview of the operation of the Closed Basin Project. Insofar as water from the Rio Grande River, which originates in the upper San Luis Valley, must be shared with those downstream, a scheme was developed to salvage groundwater from agriculturally desolate areas in the central San Luis Valley to transfer via a 42 mile canal to the Rio Grande and thereby spare other water for our purposes. The effect of this pumping out is monitored by many wells with the idea of limiting the pumping to an amount which causes no more than a two foot drop in nearby land outside the project area. This monitoring has been controversial and is surely made more problematic both by the drought and the effects of agricultural pumping in the Valley. The expected water output of the project has almost never been attained. A further problem, still unsolved, has been the occurrence of “iron bacteria” which ruinously clog the pumps.

6. Noah Baen of the Crestone Baca Watershed Council and the Committee for Natural Surroundings of the Baca Grande Property Owners Association (POA) spoke of the role the Baca Refuge could play in supporting and maintaining the health of riparian areas in the Baca Grande. He argued for dialog and the development of “work-arounds” because ecosystems don’t respect the boundary lines drawn by humans. The Board of Directors of the POA has crafted a Resolution urging the Refuge to consider effects of its water planning on its neighbor. Mr. Baen urged the restitution of in-stream flows to adequate levels. Of course, the drought has some say in this; also, the Colorado Water Conservation Board is the regulatory body for in-stream flow issues. Others in the audience while mindful of the rules and regulations which encase water, spoke to the aesthetic values of maintaining a balance of the Commons.

7. Hildreth”Coop” Cooper of the US Army Corps of Engineers spoke briefly to the effect that their role mainly had to do with situations where it was desired to fill in or obstruct waterways. Navigable waterways, that is, a topic which is at least under some controversy for the small creeks we have here.

Meeting Notes Prepared by Bill Sutherland
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