



PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM
Water Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
Virtual Meeting – Microsoft Teams
October 27, 2020

Meeting Attendees

Water Advisory Committee (WAC)

State of Colorado

Jojo La – Member

Erik Skeie - Alternate

State of Wyoming

Bryan Clerkin – Member

Jeff Cowley - Alternate

State of Nebraska

Jessie Winter – Member

Jennifer Schellpeper – Alternate

Justin Ahern

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Tom Econopouly – Member

Jeff Runge – Alternate

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Brock Merrill – Member

Mahonri Williams – Alternate

Downstream Water Users

Cory Steinke – Chair

Jeff Shafer – Member

Brandi Flyr – Member

Tyler Thulin

Nolan Little

Randy Zach

Barb Cross

Colorado Water Users

Jon Altenhofen – Member

Jason Marks

Upper Platte Water Users

Dennis Strauch – Member

Water Advisory Committee (WAC)

Environmental Groups

Jacob Fritton - Member

Melissa Mosier - Member

Executive Director's Office (EDO)

Jason Farnsworth, ED

Justin Brei

Scott Griebeling

Malinda Henry

Tom Smrdel

Seth Turner

Kevin Werbylo

Contractors

**Welcome and Administrative:** *Cory Steinke, WAC Chair*

Attendees were identified from the Teams meeting participant list. There were no agenda modifications. There were no revisions to the August WAC meeting minutes. La made a motion to approve the August minutes, second by Econopouly. There were no objections, and Steinke declared the August WAC meeting minutes approved.

WAP Projects and Other Brief Water Updates**Leasing and Recharge Projects:** *Seth Turner, EDO*

Turner reported that all expected water was credited to the Lake McConaughy EA in early October; volumes from specific projects are reported in the memo that was provided to the WAC. There was no recharge in September due to an absence of excess flows, however there may be opportunities to divert for recharge after mid-November when target flows drop. There have been ongoing shortages, and the Cook recapture well has been pumping continuously since the beginning of September. Volumes of Pathfinder water credited to the Lake McConaughy EA are not yet available from Nebraska DNR.

Chokepoint Test Update: *Seth Turner, EDO*

Turner said the draft report on the July 2020 North Platte chokepoint test was simultaneously provided to the WAC and the Chokepoint Test Planning Workgroup for review. It was requested that any comments be provided by Friday November 13. The end of the report includes a list of potential next steps at the chokepoint. These range from revisiting infrastructure concepts that were previously considered during the First Increment to revising the Program Document to “letting science be the guide” through the Adaptive Management Plan update. La inquired about the path of review for the report. Turner said the EDO plans to have a meeting with the planning workgroup in late November or early December to review the next steps options. The path forward after that depends on the guidance from the planning workgroup, but Brei said any direction forward will likely pass through the WAC before the GC. La also asked if the EDO has any specific recommendations; Turner said right now we just have a range of options.

Platte Basin Hydrology Update: *Scott Griebing, EDO*

Griebing provided an update on Platte Basin hydrology through the streamflows at the Grand Island gage. Flows peaked in early June and then declined significantly. Except for a couple days, there have been almost continuous target flow shortages since early August. However, the annual flow volume as of October 23 still qualifies as a WET year overall, as flows were well above the median from January to mid-June. Average flow at Grand Island from August 15 to September 15 was less than 400 cfs and below the median. The peak flow for 2020 was also lower than the 10-year flow.

Adaptive Management Working Group Update: *Scott Griebing, EDO*

Griebing provided a brief update on the Adaptive Management Working Group progress. The working group focused primarily on terns and plovers in their first meeting and has not addressed any significant water related issues at this point.



Recapture Wells Pilot Project: Kevin Werbylo, EDO

Werbylo reported on the progress of the recapture wells pilot project. The plan is to install nine recapture wells (same concept as the Program's existing Cook well) near Cottonwood Ranch to recapture water recharged through the Phelps, Elwood, and broad-scale recharge projects. About half of the wells will be on PRRIP land at Cottonwood Ranch, with most of the rest downstream on private land (and possibly one upstream). The private landowners will be able to use the wells for dewatering in coordination with the Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (TBNRD).

A water service agreement for the project was approved by the GC in September and signed by both the Program and TBNRD. Under the terms of the agreement, the Program will pay for construction of the recapture wells and for annual operations costs. The Program hopes to pay TBNRD before the end of the year to get the roughly \$1 million off the budget; if that does not happen, we may need to amend the 2021 budget.

Little noted that TBNRD will be holding landowner meetings soon and that everyone seems favorable. Werbylo said there is no specific construction schedule yet, but it is hoped that the wells will be in place when Cottonwood Ranch is filled for the spring migration.

La asked whether the pilot project will be scored or wait until there is a full-scale project. Werbylo said the pilot project will most likely be scored; the current estimate is about 150 AF per well. The larger network could be scored if and when it exists. Turner noted that the Cook well was scored by modeling it as an add on to the Phelps recharge project. The EDO has developed a new model for scoring the current recapture wells project.

Cottonwood Ranch BSR Project: Kevin Werbylo, EDO

Werbylo reported on first fill activities for the Cottonwood Ranch broad-scale recharge project, which occurred in three phases in July (152 AF into Cells 1, 2, and 4), August (110 AF into Cells 5 and 7), and September (98 AF into Cells 3, 6, and 8). The five cells filled in July and August are located south of the Peterson Drain; the other three cells filled in September are north of the drain and closer to the Platte River. Water from the Lake McConaughy EA (360 AF total in deliveries) was used for these first fills, but the plan is to start diverting excess flows when operations resume in the spring. Documentation is in progress.

Objectives of the first fill were to (1) test/learn about project infrastructure, (2) identify improvements and maintenance items, and (3) identify long-term monitoring needs. Werbylo spent considerable time at the project site during the July fill to make sure all was working properly. He showed photos of the control gates and other infrastructure during fill operations.

Werbylo also showed examples of the types of data collected during the first fill operations. The gates record water surface elevation, which is translated into infiltration rates. The infiltration rates and other characteristics vary from cell to cell. Daily infiltration rates ranged from < 0.05 ft/day up to nearly 0.4 ft/day. Monitoring wells south of the Peterson Drain showed a clear spike during fill periods. When the north cells were filled, the same wells showed an increase of only



a couple inches, suggesting that recharge at Cottonwood Ranch will not have a significant impact on regional groundwater levels.

In general, the first fill operations went well, but it will probably take a few years to figure out how to best operate the project and maximize the operational efficiency. There were some cavitation issues with the delivery pipeline that need to be addressed, but that is not expected to be a major problem. Werbylo said the automated gates and SCADA system were well worth the money spent. It is very helpful to be able access project info from a cell phone. The gates collect data that would otherwise require the installation and maintenance of additional surface water monitoring equipment and data loggers. Preliminary data was generally as expected, and the plan is to move towards a site-wide accounting approach rather than individual cells.

For future operations, the Program will prioritize filling Cottonwood Ranch during the spring and fall migrations to have water for cranes. There will be other maintenance activities in 2021, including repair of some gates and fences that were taken down during construction. Grazing and/or burning are not likely next year, but the site might be mowed or hayed.

Econopouly asked if there are alarms if things go wrong, such as a breach in one of the berms. Werbylo said CNPPID gets notifications if there is an issue with the pipeline; he and Brei get the same notifications in certain instances, for example if the power goes off. The Rubicon gates also have alarms that still need to be set up.

Shafer asked if enough data is being collected to do the necessary water budget analysis and if so, when will that be available. Werbylo said yes, the data is being collected and that analysis is anticipated to be completed by the end of the year. Turner suggested sending that out to the WAC as soon as it is available rather than waiting until the February meeting. That will allow extra time to resolve any issues prior to re-filling the project for the spring migration.

FY 2021 Draft Water Work Plan and Budget: *Seth Turner, Kevin Werbylo, Scott Griebing, and Justin Brei, EDO*

EDO staff reviewed the individual line items in the water plan budget for 2021. Unit costs for canal and reservoir recharge projects were increased by 3%; estimated volumes for budget purposes were based on limits specified in the water service agreements or on 2015-2019 averages (2020 recharge diversions were much lower than recent years due to high groundwater in the winter and spring followed by a lack of excess flows in the fall).

The terms of the Nebraska “grand water bargain” are still being negotiated, so it was assumed that the CPNRD and NPPD pilot exchange projects will operate for another year. For budget purposes, the terms of the 2020 leasing agreements were assumed to apply. CNPPID storage water leasing is not anticipated in 2021. The Pathfinder Municipal Account lease will continue with a unit cost of \$65/AF for up to 9,600 AF. For the CNPPID irrigator lease, the GC approved a Pricing Addendum in September that reduced the unit cost from \$220/acre to \$100/acre



(effectively \$133.00/AF). The annual enrollment cap remains 3,000 acres, and the Program pays a \$10,000 administration fee to CNPPID to run the irrigator lease.

Budgets for Cottonwood Ranch broad-scale recharge (\$75,000) and the recapture wells project (\$80,000) are based primarily on maintenance costs and electricity. As those projects will still be in a buy-back phase, there are no anticipated costs for water. There are no anticipated slurry wall gravel pit activities.

Additional costs include the following:

- \$38,400 for maintenance activities and property taxes at lands acquired for future water projects.
- \$41,000 for surface water, groundwater, and weather monitoring in support of Program water operations.
- \$10,000 for maintenance of the State Channel Berm and other activities to improve capacity at the North Platte chokepoint.
- \$5,000 for as-needed support for COHYST model updates.
- \$60,000 for water Special Advisors, including \$40,000 for hydrogeology/groundwater (Bill Hahn) and \$20,000 for civil infrastructure (Brad Anderson/Mike Applegate).

The total water plan budget for 2021 is estimated to be about \$4.13 million. Nearly all of that (nearly \$3.82 million or 93%) is dedicated to the continuation of existing groundwater recharge and surface water leasing projects.

Econopouly inquired about the proposed Pathfinder Irrigation Account lease. Farnsworth said it is not included in the Nebraska grand water bargain. There are political issues to resolve in Wyoming, and the project is considered to be inactive at this time.

Shafer asked why the unit costs for the CPNRD and NPPD surface water leases are not assumed to escalate, as is done with the recharge project costs. Farnsworth said the \$90/AF is just used as a placeholder for general budget purposes. Possible adjustments will depend on the progress of Nebraska grand water bargain negotiations. At present, the Program does not have long-term leasing agreements with CPNRD and NPPD that have built-in escalators. If needed, the Program will negotiate specific lease terms for 2021.

Sediment Augmentation Project: *Tom Smrdel, EDO*

Smrdel provided an update the full-scale sediment augmentation project activities. The design approach for 2020 was to increase the amount of sediment moved into the river channel to about 75,000 tons (49,300 cubic yards), move back upstream from the 2018-2019 work locations and widen into the high terrace, and arrest incision and knock down the energy. Cook Construction in Kearney was selected with a bid of \$138,320 that included the actual earthmoving plus mobilization and tree removal. Work began on September 2. A preliminary survey indicates the



amount of sand moved is about 59,000 cubic yards, but actual measurements will be based on spring/fall LiDAR.

Additional Business: *Cory Steinke, WAC Chair*

WAC meetings for 2021 are scheduled for February 2, May 4, August 3, and October 26.

Action Items

General WAC

- Provide comments on the draft chokepoint test report to the EDO (Turner) by Friday November 13.

ED Office

- Post PDF of the WAC meeting presentations to the website.