



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



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

50 Attendees were identified from the Teams meeting participant list. There were no agenda
51 modifications. There were no revisions to the August WAC meeting minutes. La made a motion
52 to approve the August minutes, second by Econopouly. There were no objections, and Steinke
53 declared the August WAC meeting minutes approved.
54

55 **WAP Projects and Other Brief Water Updates**

56
57 ***Leasing and Recharge Projects: Seth Turner, EDO***

58 Turner reported that all expected water was credited to the Lake McConaughy EA in early
59 October; volumes from specific projects are reported in the memo that was provided to the
60 WAC. There was no recharge in September due to an absence of excess flows, however there
61 may be opportunities to divert for recharge after mid-November when target flows drop. There
62 have been ongoing shortages, and the Cook recapture well has been pumping continuously since
63 the beginning of September. Volumes of Pathfinder water credited to the Lake McConaughy EA
64 are not yet available from Nebraska DNR.
65

66 ***Chokepoint Test Update: Seth Turner, EDO***

67 Turner said the draft report on the July 2020 North Platte chokepoint test was simultaneously
68 provided to the WAC and the Chokepoint Test Planning Workgroup for review. It was requested
69 that any comments be provided by Friday November 13. The end of the report includes a list of
70 potential next steps at the chokepoint. These range from revisiting infrastructure concepts that
71 were previously considered during the First Increment to revising the Program Document to
72 “letting science be the guide” through the Adaptive Management Plan update. La inquired about
73 the path of review for the report. Turner said the EDO plans to have a meeting with the planning
74 workgroup in late November or early December to review the next steps options. The path
75 forward after that depends on the guidance from the planning workgroup, but Brei said any
76 direction forward will likely pass through the WAC before the GC. La also asked if the EDO
77 has any specific recommendations; Turner said right now we just have a range of options.
78

79 ***Platte Basin Hydrology Update: Scott Griebing, EDO***

80 Griebing provided an update on Platte Basin hydrology through the streamflows at the Grand
81 Island gage. Flows peaked in early June and then declined significantly. Except for a couple
82 days, there have been almost continuous target flow shortages since early August. However, the
83 annual flow volume as of October 23 still qualifies as a WET year overall, as flows were well
84 above the median from January to mid-June. Average flow at Grand Island from August 15 to
85 September 15 was less than 400 cfs and below the median. The peak flow for 2020 was also
86 lower than the 10-year flow.
87

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

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



92 ***Recapture Wells Pilot Project: Kevin Werbylo, EDO***

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

99
100 A water service agreement for the project was approved by the GC in September and signed by
101 both the Program and TBNRD. Under the terms of the agreement, the Program will pay for
102 construction of the recapture wells and for annual operations costs. The Program hopes to pay
103 TBNRD before the end of the year to get the roughly \$1 million off the budget; if that does not
104 happen, we may need to amend the 2021 budget.

105
106 Little noted that TBNRD will be holding landowner meetings soon and that everyone seems
107 favorable. Werbylo said there is no specific construction schedule yet, but it is hoped that the
108 wells will be in place when Cottonwood Ranch is filled for the spring migration.

109
110 La asked whether the pilot project will be scored or wait until there is a full-scale project.
111 Werbylo said the pilot project will most likely be scored; the current estimate is about 150 AF
112 per well. The larger network could be scored if and when it exists. Turner noted that the Cook
113 well was scored by modeling it as an add on to the Phelps recharge project. The EDO has
114 developed a new model for scoring the current recapture wells project.

115
116 **Cottonwood Ranch BSR Project: Kevin Werbylo, EDO**

117 Werbylo reported on first fill activities for the Cottonwood Ranch broad-scale recharge project,
118 which occurred in three phases in July (152 AF into Cells 1, 2, and 4), August (110 AF into Cells
119 5 and 7), and September (98 AF into Cells 3, 6, and 8). The five cells filled in July and August
120 are located south of the Peterson Drain; the other three cells filled in September are north of the
121 drain and closer to the Platte River. Water from the Lake McConaughy EA (360 AF total in
122 deliveries) was used for these first fills, but the plan is to start diverting excess flows when
123 operations resume in the spring. Documentation is in progress.

124
125 Objectives of the first fill were to (1) test/learn about project infrastructure, (2) identify
126 improvements and maintenance items, and (3) identify long-term monitoring needs. Werbylo
127 spent considerable time at the project site during the July fill to make sure all was working
128 properly. He showed photos of the control gates and other infrastructure during fill operations.

129
130 Werbylo also showed examples of the types of data collected during the first fill operations. The
131 gates record water surface elevation, which is translated into infiltration rates. The infiltration
132 rates and other characteristics vary from cell to cell. Daily infiltration rates ranged from < 0.05
133 ft/day up to nearly 0.4 ft/day. Monitoring wells south of the Peterson Drain showed a clear spike
134 during fill periods. When the north cells were filled, the same wells showed an increase of only



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

137
138 In general, the first fill operations went well, but it will probably take a few years to figure out
139 how to best operate the project and maximize the operational efficiency. There were some
140 cavitation issues with the delivery pipeline that need to be addressed, but that is not expected to
141 be a major problem. Werbylo said the automated gates and SCADA system were well worth the
142 money spent. It is very helpful to be able access project info from a cell phone. The gates
143 collect data that would otherwise require the installation and maintenance of additional surface
144 water monitoring equipment and data loggers. Preliminary data was generally as expected, and
145 the plan is to move towards a site-wide accounting approach rather than individual cells.

146
147 For future operations, the Program will prioritize filling Cottonwood Ranch during the spring
148 and fall migrations to have water for cranes. There will be other maintenance activities in 2021,
149 including repair of some gates and fences that were taken down during construction. Grazing
150 and/or burning are not likely next year, but the site might be mowed or hayed.

151
152 Econopouly asked if there are alarms if things go wrong, such as a breach in one of the berms.
153 Werbylo said CNPPID gets notifications if there is an issue with the pipeline; he and Brei get the
154 same notifications in certain instances, for example if the power goes off. The Rubicon gates
155 also have alarms that still need to be set up.

156
157 Shafer asked if enough data is being collected to do the necessary water budget analysis and if
158 so, when will that be available. Werbylo said yes, the data is being collected and that analysis is
159 anticipated to be completed by the end of the year. Turner suggested sending that out to the
160 WAC as soon as it is available rather than waiting until the February meeting. That will allow
161 extra time to resolve any issues prior to re-filling the project for the spring migration.

162
163 **FY 2021 Draft Water Work Plan and Budget:** *Seth Turner, Kevin Werbylo, Scott Griebeling,*
164 *and Justin Brei, EDO*

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

170
171 The terms of the Nebraska “grand water bargain” are still being negotiated, so it was assumed
172 that the CPNRD and NPPD pilot exchange projects will operate for another year. For budget
173 purposes, the terms of the 2020 leasing agreements were assumed to apply. CNPPID storage
174 water leasing is not anticipated in 2021. The Pathfinder Municipal Account lease will continue
175 with a unit cost of \$65/AF for up to 9,600 AF. For the CNPPID irrigator lease, the GC approved
176 a Pricing Addendum in September that reduced the unit cost from \$220/acre to \$100/acre



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

179
180 Budgets for Cottonwood Ranch broad-scale recharge (\$75,000) and the recapture wells project
181 (\$80,000) are based primarily on maintenance costs and electricity. As those projects will still
182 be in a buy-back phase, there are no anticipated costs for water. There are no anticipated slurry
183 wall gravel pit activities.

184
185 Additional costs include the following:

- 186
- 187 • \$38,400 for maintenance activities and property taxes at lands acquired for future water
188 projects.
- 189 • \$41,000 for surface water, groundwater, and weather monitoring in support of Program
190 water operations.
- 191 • \$10,000 for maintenance of the State Channel Berm and other activities to improve
192 capacity at the North Platte chokepoint.
- 193 • \$5,000 for as-needed support for COHYST model updates.
- 194 • \$60,000 for water Special Advisors, including \$40,000 for hydrogeology/groundwater
195 (Bill Hahn) and \$20,000 for civil infrastructure (Brad Anderson/Mike Applegate).
- 196

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

200
201 Econopouly inquired about the proposed Pathfinder Irrigation Account lease. Farnsworth said it
202 is not included in the Nebraska grand water bargain. There are political issues to resolve in
203 Wyoming, and the project is considered to be inactive at this time.

204
205 Shafer asked why the unit costs for the CPNRD and NPPD surface water leases are not assumed
206 to escalate, as is done with the recharge project costs. Farnsworth said the \$90/AF is just used as
207 a placeholder for general budget purposes. Possible adjustments will depend on the progress of
208 Nebraska grand water bargain negotiations. At present, the Program does not have long-term
209 leasing agreements with CPNRD and NPPD that have built-in escalators. If needed, the Program
210 will negotiate specific lease terms for 2021.

211
212 **Sediment Augmentation Project:** *Tom Smrdel, EDO*

213 Smrdel provided an update the full-scale sediment augmentation project activities. The design
214 approach for 2020 was to increase the amount of sediment moved into the river channel to about
215 75,000 tons (49,300 cubic yards), move back upstream from the 2018-2019 work locations and
216 widen into the high terrace, and arrest incision and knock down the energy. Cook Construction
217 in Kearney was selected with a bid of \$138,320 that included the actual earthmoving plus
218 mobilization and tree removal. Work began on September 2. A preliminary survey indicates the



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

221
222 **Additional Business:** *Cory Steinke, WAC Chair*
223 WAC meetings for 2021 are scheduled for February 2, May 4, August 3, and October 26.

224
225 **Action Items**

226
227 **General WAC**
228 • Provide comments on the draft chokepoint test report to the EDO (Turner) by Friday
229 November 13.

230
231 **ED Office**
232 • Post PDF of the WAC meeting presentations to the website.