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Stream Management Planning MEMBER UPDATE

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By Lane Wyatt

Stream Management Planning (SMP) is a relatively new concept, but one being embraced in the NWCCOG region. Generally, a SMP is an assessment of the environmental and recreational water needs of a specific stream segment. These plans use scientific approaches to evaluate the ecological health of a particular stretch of water with a focus on stream flows. This information can then be used by communities to determine where and how their waterways are impaired so they can develop strategies to preserve or improve their environmental and recreational assets. A more traditional approach to evaluating streams has been in the context of providing for current and future municipal water needs. More recently groups are starting to combine these planning efforts to consider stream flows necessary for agriculture, municipal, environmental, and recreational needs. These are called Integrated Water Management Plans (IWMP)

NWCCOG was a pioneer in promoting the IWMP concept. In 1998, NWCCOG initiated the Upper Colorado River Basin Study (UPCO), in partnership with QQ members and transmountain diverters, to develop the information and analytical tools necessary to understand existing hydrology and water quality conditions in the counties and how increased water diversions may impact those conditions. This information was meant to support discussions and negotiations between the stakeholders as they seek solutions to current and future water supply, reservoir level, instream flow needs, and water quality issues. Many believe that the

discussions and relationships that came from UPCO merged into the development of the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement (CRCA, a significant negotiated agreement between the West Slope and Denver Water, finalized in 2014).

NWCCOG was also instrumental in the development of the Grand County Stream Management Plan, particularly in the early stages. This is truly the “Grand Daddy” of SMPs in its detailed evaluation of the flow needs in the Upper Colorado River watershed. By about 2010 the science behind the Grand County SMP had formed the underpinnings of the “Learning By Doing” adaptive management process that water users in Grand County rely on to develop solutions to issues associated with depleted stream flows.

In addition, NWCCOG managed a project by the Colorado River Basin Roundtable to develop a “Watershed Flow Evaluation Tool” (WFET) for the entire Colorado River Basin in Colorado. This 2012 SMP study provided a regional framework for understanding ecological risk to certain environmental attributes and established recreational flow needs for the Basin. The key assumption for the WFET is that the stream flow regime is a primary determinant of the function of aquatic and riparian ecosystems. The study was undertaken by CWCB staff and consultants, the Nature Conservancy and CSU. Following up on the results of the WFET, Colorado Mesa University in conjunction with Lotic Hydrological developed a process for implementing IWMPs for more localized areas.

Most importantly, QQ worked hard to have the SMP/IWMP concept included as a critical component of Colorado’s first Water Plan. The Colorado Water Plan was released in 2015. This document now calls for local communities to develop plans that are specific to their streams, intending for 80 percent of the state’s locally prioritized rivers to be covered by stream management plans by 2030. As a result, Colorado set aside \$5 million in grants for projects and plans that protect or restore watershed health and stream functions and another \$2 million was allocated in the CWCB’s 2018 Projects Bill.

In the headwaters Region IWMPs or SMPs are in place or underway in the Crystal, Roaring Fork, Gunnison, Middle Colorado, Yampa, San Miguel, Eagle, and now Blue River basins. Efforts in the Blue River were initiated by Colorado Parks and Wildlife after the Wildlife Commission removed portions of this segments Gold Medal Fishery status. It is an attempt to understand why the aquatic life between Dillon and Green Mountain Reservoirs is so meager. This initiative has garnered lots of local support, most recently in the form of an IWMP grant application to the CWCB by Trout Unlimited and the Blue River Watershed Group.

According to the River Network's Nicole Seltzer, a key factor for stream management planning is that they are crafted by locals who have a stake in their community's water future. "You can hire consultants, but at the end of the day, it takes a trusted community member that sees planning's opportunity and has the time and energy to be the point person and motivator," says Seltzer. A good role for QQ!