

Agreement puts Colorado River on road to recovery

Colorado Trout Unlimited website

December 4, 2012

By David Nickum, Executive Director, Colorado Trout Unlimited

The Colorado River received an early Christmas present this year, as an agreement was reached today that will help offset impacts from the proposed Windy Gap Firming Project (WGFP) and put the Upper Colorado River on the road to recovery. Trout Unlimited today praised the multiparty agreement reached with the Municipal Subdistrict of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District (Municipal Subdistrict), which will provide significant protections for the Upper Colorado River and result in major investments in restoring the river's health. The package of river conservation measures —negotiated among the Municipal Subdistrict, Grand County staff, Trout Unlimited and the Upper Colorado River Alliance (UCRA)—was approved today by the Grand County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) as part of a permit issued for the Windy Gap firming project.

Several years ago, TU (along with the Colorado Environmental Coalition and Western Resource Advocates) issued a report – Facing Our Future – on meeting Colorado's water supply needs in an environmentally sound way. A more recent follow-up report, "Filling the Gap," further developed recommendations for river-friendly water supply strategies. In both reports, WGFP was identified as a potentially smart supply project — IF its west-slope impacts were responsibly addressed. In light of commitments secured from the Municipal Subdistrict, the project's sponsor, TU believes that those impacts are now being addressed and we have voiced our support for the WGFP moving forward in light of the river protection measures that would be included.

Background: The original Windy Gap project – which pumps water from the Colorado River below its confluence with the Fraser up to Lake Granby and then through the Colorado-Big Thompson Project facilities to the Northern Front Range – was expected to have only very modest effects on the Colorado River. Unfortunately, those projections proved badly wrong and the fishery has been in significant decline, though it still does meet "gold medal" standards. Elevated stream temperatures have led the river to be listed as an "impaired" water by the Water Quality Control Commission. Required flushing flows (only 450 cfs every three years) aren't adequate, and sedimentation has created an embedded channel that was not adequately scoured even with the epic high flows of two years ago. The reservoir itself has created a barrier, disconnecting habitat above and below and leading "good" bedload materials – gravels and other larger material – to be captured while fine silts are passed down – creating the embedded conditions downstream. Stoneflies and sculpin have been lost from the reach below Windy Gap, and trout populations have declined dramatically.

Into this setting came the proposed Windy Gap Firming Project, to increase the diversions from the Colorado (in spring/early summer higher flow periods, as the project has quite junior water rights). In our review of the project and its Environmental Impact Statement, TU has consistently raised several issues: (1) the need to discontinue diversions into Windy Gap's pumps at times of high water temperatures; (2) the need to ensure flushing flows; (3) the need to address degraded habitat in the Colorado River; (4) the need to reconnect the river with a "bypass channel" through or around Windy Gap; and (5) the need for adaptive management to deal with changing conditions and future challenges.

Agreements: Agreements have been reached with Northern to address these and other key issues. Among the most notable features are:

- 1041 permit requirements that would ensure that pumping at Windy Gap was discontinued when temperatures were too high (all pumping discontinued if reaching “acute” standards that could lead to fish kills, new project pumping discontinued if approaching “chronic” standards that create longer-term impact), and that would require higher flushing flows (600 cfs every 3 years, 1200 cfs every five years)
- An agreement to fund construction of the Windy Gap bypass with \$2 million from Northern, plus another \$2 million from the state (approved by CWCB, pending legislative approval), and commitment to work with us to raise additional funds if needed to complete the project
- Agreement to forego future development in Grand County except in cooperation with the west slope, and to honor the outage protocol for the Shoshone hydro plant – which helps ensure year-round flows in the Colorado River watershed above Glenwood Canyon
- Ability for Grand County to obtain up to 5000 AF (when available) for use in addressing summer streamflow needs
- Protections for water quality/clarity in Grand Lake

In addition, previous commitments with the Wildlife Commission would provide \$4 million (plus unspecified in-kind help) for river restoration work on the Colorado. A parallel effort also will provide over 5000 AF of water for releases down the Colorado River to address downstream endangered fish needs – but in the process help improve flows for the Upper Colorado. (Currently water is released from Williams Fork Reservoir). Northern also is agreeing to participate in the “Learning by Doing” adaptive management program that was established under the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement between Denver and the West Slope.

In brief – the proposed agreements address each of the 5 needs we identified for making Windy Gap a “smart supply” project – temperature, flushing flow, habitat improvement, Windy Gap bypass, and adaptive management. Collectively, they provide the protections and resources needed to put the Colorado River on the road to recovery.

Reaching this point in our campaign for protecting the Upper Colorado was a team effort with key contributions from the Colorado Headwaters Chapter, assistance and public outreach by Colorado TU, and leadership and technical work by NTU’s skilled professional staff. With the Municipal Subdistrict’s willingness to go the extra mile to address our concerns, combined with dedicated local landowners and Grand County’s strong commitment to protecting its rivers and watersheds, we can now look to a future in which the Upper Colorado experiences a river renaissance instead of continuing decline.

Significant threats remain, however – most notably, Denver Water has proposed major diversions from the Fraser watershed. Like WGFP, Denver’s Moffat project has the potential to be a “smart supply” project that is environmentally sound – but so far, Denver has not agreed to the kinds of mitigation that are needed to address its project impacts. The 1041 permit protections and agreements with the Municipal Subdistrict offer a solid road map for how a similar success could be reached for the Fraser – and we urge Denver to step up to that challenge.