

DRAFT
YAMPA RIVER INTEGRATED WATER MANAGEMENT PLAN
PHASE I – STAKEHOLDER ASSESSMENT AND CONVENING

INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT

May 18, 2018

Context & Overview

To set the stage for convening stakeholders to determine whether and how to proceed with a Yampa Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP), CBI conducted interviews with about 40 individuals in the basin representing agricultural, environmental, municipal/industrial, and recreational interests. Interviewees for this Assessment also spanned the geographic scope of the basin, from the very upper reaches in south Routt County, to the lower end of the basin in Moffat County.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify the various interests, needs and goals regarding an IWMP, along with a potential scope and sideboards for an IWMP effort. This Assessment will help inform the Basin Roundtable in deciding whether and how to proceed in developing a scope and budget for a Yampa IWMP through a collaborative stakeholder process.

The interviews garnered information on three primary topics:

1. What the interviewees see as the major, pressing water issues or needs they are facing or they see facing the basin.
2. To explain the concept of an integrated water management plan and get input on:
 - Whether and how an integrated plan could or should help address water needs;
 - The geographic scope of a plan – the entire basin, a single tributary or anything in between;
 - The goals, sideboard and range of issues that could or should be undertaken if the plan goes forward.
3. Interest of the interviewee in participating in a stakeholder meeting in June to determine whether to go forward with an IWMP. The interviewees were asked whether they would be willing to participate in developing a detailed scope of work for the plan this summer and early fall, and actual development of the IWMP throughout 2019-2020 if such a planning effort is undertaken.

CBI conducted interviews in Craig, Hayden, and Steamboat Springs in two sets of interviews on April 23-25 and May 9, as well as a half dozen interviews by phone.

Major Takeaways

1. Going Forward with IWMP: There was broad support for going forward with an IWMP effort, as qualified and discussed further below. There was also broad interest in participating in a stakeholder group.

2. Clarification of Purpose and Goals: Stakeholders would like to develop more clarity and common understanding about the purpose of the effort and what need it would be addressing. Many people see a YIWMP as not necessarily another ‘plan’, but implementation of the BIP itself through a **collaborative stakeholder process**. Some individuals envision the YIWMP as a forum for identifying and studying opportunities in the BIP for aligned interests and potential mutual gain among the various consumptive and non-consumptive uses, addressing potential conflicts between users and approaches, and moving the BIP into the next phase of implementation through an inclusive, system-wide approach to consumptive and environmental and recreational needs and demands.
3. IWMP Undertaken by Basin Roundtable: There was broad support for the BRT undertaking the IWMP. Two main reasons given were that the BRT broadly represents interests in the basin and is an organized and functioning entity. At the same time, there were questions about the ability of the BRT to manage the day-to-day activities of an IWMP, which would include managing technical consultants and facilitating stakeholder discussions. There were suggestions that a watershed group may be useful to provide staff and funding to undertake watershed planning and projects.
4. Scope of IWMP: Views on the scope varied considerably. Some felt the scope should be the basin as a whole; others felt the plan could be broad but would need to be broken down into segments. Another view was that the Plan should start small and expand if the initial effort proved successful. Although the range of views were broad, views were not hard and fast.
5. Alignment and willingness: While we heard some significant points of difference, the interviews left a strong sense of a willingness to “hang together” and to collaborate to meet mutual benefit and interest. On a number of occasions we also heard sympathetic expressions of other uses, e.g., an agricultural user recognizing the importance of recreation use, a governmental entity valuing and prioritizing looking at agricultural uses, a municipal user helping to meet agricultural needs in time of drought, and a conservationist recognizing the ecological importance of irrigated agriculture in the basin. We were left with the distinct impression that the time could be ripe for a collaborative effort.
6. Needs: We did not hear about widespread, chronic and pervasive shortages. A central theme that emerged from the interviews across all categories was about ‘protecting what we have’, especially with respect to compact matters and pressures to reduce agricultural uses, climate change, and a possible new transmountain diversion. A number of interviews highlighted the need and opportunity for more education and a better understanding of needs and priorities among regulators and users, both consumptive and non-consumptive.
7. Support rather than duplicate existing efforts: The IWMP should not duplicate or hold up projects that are already underway, but could support them as useful. Being part of the IWMP should not be a prerequisite for implementing a project. Likewise, where models or studies exist, the YIWMP should refer to but not duplicate these.
8. Maximize opportunities for specific mutual gains without being prescriptive: The effort should be mindful of unforeseen or unanticipated consequences. (E.g., if the plan were to prescribe water efficiency goals, these could unintentionally gain a life of their own.)
9. Terminology: The term ecosystem services has been used by integrated planning efforts to understand and study the benefits and values that a river provides for the various uses in the system. While the concept was well received, there was concern expressed that the term may be esoteric or off-putting, and could be substituted by, e.g., ‘system’ services or values.

Substantive Interests and Perspectives Regarding a YIWMP

Points Common to More Than One Category of Use

- The Yampa is in great shape relative to other basins. It functions naturally, it accesses its floodplain and sustains the riparian area. As a result, it is also very dynamic. Channel stability and movement can be problematic, especially with respect to fixed improvements like diversion structures.
- There is concern that baseflows will be significantly and adversely impacted because of a warming climate and as growth in consumptive uses occurs. There was some expression that increasing base flows in the Lower Yampa should be considered in the IWMP.
- Whether it is for providing flows for the Colorado basin as a whole for compact purposes or the environmental values and benefits of having a largely unmodified river system, recognition and benefit should accrue as the result of those contributions. The Yampa plays a critically important role providing flows and sediment to the Green River and Colorado River.
- The IWMP may be an opportunity to build trust with other stakeholders. For instance, the Park Service may be looking for ways to collaborate and cooperate with other interests and stakeholders, seeing ‘use and enjoyment’ as a critical part of their mission along with ‘preserve and protect’. Dinosaur is seen by some stakeholders as an important part of the local economy with 315,000 visitors generating \$18.4M annually and 230 jobs to local economies.
- The Recovery Program is required to submit a plan to Congress in federal fiscal year 2021 addressing how recovery activities will continue past 2023 when the Recovery Program ends. The 2021 Plan is seen by many interviewees as being closely linked to a potential IWMP and each will need to inform the other.
- There are opportunities for projects that achieve multiple objectives, e.g., an agricultural diversion project that has environmental and recreational benefits.

Agriculture

- Agriculture is particularly vulnerable to external forces: potential compact shortages, the pressure to convert water to municipal use, and climate change.
- Agriculture has great needs for infrastructure upgrades to its diversion and delivery systems. Practically all are over 100-years old. One agricultural user mentioned the opportunity of an improvement to his diversion that could also have a recreational component as well.
- There are different levels of concern in the agricultural community regarding whether there could be a mainstem call on the Yampa.
- A warming climate is affecting agricultural demands. One rancher spoke about notes spanning over 60 years recording the date each spring when snow left a particular field. That record shows it trending earlier – now March instead of April – and it shows a trend toward more extreme events as well (e.g., May, 2011).
- There may be misperceptions about flood irrigation and a need for science to document the benefits, especially with respect to riparian ecosystems, i.e., ecosystem services.
- We also heard about the need for science on the benefits and impacts of improved agricultural efficiency. In certain instances it is appropriate to be more efficient and reduce waste. Could the IWMP develop a technical framework for how that could be examined on a case-by-case basis?
- There is a concern that one conservation goal may be to dry up agriculture to keep water in river. This would be an important concern to address.

Environmental

- Interviewees expressed a belief that it is possible to preserve the natural qualities of Yampa while meeting reasonable current and future consumptive needs.
- The threat of a potential new transmountain diversion was identified as something the IWMP should address. There was also a concern expressed that the IWMP should not address a TMD because its likelihood is so remote and it could distract from other issues.
- New storage is seen as one tool to help manage river, but other approaches should be considered as well, e.g., use of existing storage supplies and short-term leases of agricultural water.
- Interviewees see great links between environmental health of the river system and recreation and economic viability.
- Temperature and low-flows are closely related issues, affecting the river above and through Steamboat Springs. Measures are being undertaken and explored, e.g., releases from Stagecoach Reservoir and looking at a bottom-release at Catamount Dam.
- The spread of leafy spurge downriver is a great concern.

Municipal/Industrial

- By and large, M&I users indicated adequate supplies to meet anticipated needs. At least one user has pressing needs within its distribution system as well as a need for spillway and outlet improvements to its main storage reservoir.
- Watershed protection from forest fire impacts was mentioned as an important need, as well as the need for greater attention and help from the Forest Service. There may be an opportunity for municipal users to band their voices so they can be better heard.
- Water quality concerns were mentioned, mostly in terms of possible degradation of lower basin conditions as the upper basin develops, and also in terms of potential future water quality regulation, e.g. nutrients.

Recreation

- The City of Craig's envisioned water park could be an important step toward economic diversification.
- Other recreation development is needed to link recreational opportunities along the length of the Yampa.
- In-river fishing in the Yampa is good above Hayden and not so good below in large part because of Recovery Program efforts at non-native removal.

Next Steps

This summary of stakeholder interests and perspectives will form the basis for a stakeholder meeting next month to decide whether to proceed with a YIWMP, and if so what parameters and principles would be important to an productive and inclusive effort. The meeting will take place on June 20 in Hayden, exact location TBA, from 9-1pm (working lunch included). Details on the meeting will be sent out next week.

As described in the original Scope of Work approved by the Basin Roundtable for this Assessment, if the group decides to proceed, this would lead to the consensus-based development of a detailed scope of work and budget for an IWMP in the summer and fall.