

Secretary's Committee, Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative
February 29, 2012, 1:30 p.m.
Bureau of Reclamation Albuquerque Area Office

Committee Members in Attendance: Mike Hamman, Janet Bair (for Michelle Shaughnessy), Derrick Lente, Oscar Simpson, Kelly Gossett, Paul Mauermann (for Charlie Walter), Amalia Kenward, Matt Schmader

Others in Attendance: Tanya Trujillo (DOI, Office of the Asst. Secretary; by phone), Andrew Hautzinger (FWS), Joaquín Baca (FWS), Mary Carlson (BOR), Ali Saenz (BOR), Cynthia Abeyta (FWS), Gina DelloRusso (FWS), Maceo Martinet (FWS), Julie Alcon (Army Corps of Engineers), Michelle Meaders (Sierra Club), Christine Mallo (kayak/paddle sports representative), Dave Simon (Eco Think)

Mike Hamman did a general welcome to the BOR office.

Attendees introduced themselves.

Mike Hamman began by stating that the Committee has a daunting task, but we are starting to get the word out and get participation in early phase of getting goals/objectives for a broader conservation initiative for the MRG system. FWS has contracted with Dave Simon for subcommittee process and public outreach, and to help put together draft plan by May 1 with a final draft by June 1 to circulate through hierarchy of DOI. So, when we have a return visit by Secretary Salazar we will have a document as to how we want to proceed and hopefully that will launch an effort to build on efforts in the Middle Valley and leverage, and hopefully get new resources.

Dave Simon explained his role and responsibilities, the most important of which is to provide support to agencies and citizens in the process.

Janet Bair handed out "guidance for the subcommittees" document as a reminder to the Committee on the tasks of the subcommittees during the month of March.

Mike Hamman explained that the BOR met with Coalition of Six MRG Pueblos on February 23. Mike gave an overview of effort and how it got started, and encouraged the Coalition and the individual pueblos to engage in the process. There will be a follow-up Coalition meeting on Thursday, March 1 and we should hear something from that as to the preferences of the pueblos on how they wish to provide input. We have also heard from some other local government entities, such as Village of Corrales. The City of Albuquerque may be a close participant—even more than just with Matt Schmader's role on the Committee—due to the Mayor's plans to promote efforts along the river.

Andrew Hautzinger explained that a letter from FWS and BOR to the four counties in the MRG went out this week and we have another, general letter to stakeholders. A primary task for Simon is to generate a list of key, critical contacts.

Janet Bair commented that we have three main topics to cover (conservation, recreation, education) and particular entities to contact within each of those. Committee members can assist with identifying stakeholders/contacts and encouraging participation in the process.

Tanya Trujillo suggested contacting Paula Garcia, of the New Mexico Acequia Association to provide representation of this important local water user and agricultural constituency.

Oscar Simpson commented that he would like to see interconnection among all three committees; we need regular email communication. Oscar has outreached to a dozen people with expertise that he would like to see plugged into the committees.

Janet Bair agreed that people should be able to access whatever committees interested them and that a key need is to develop a master schedule.

A discussion ensued regarding the definition of the project area. Is the project area the “historic floodplain” or the “non-existent floodplain that we have now?” Or is it the watershed?

Oscar Simpson stated that he would prefer the Plan look at the entire watershed; that would be the best long-term approach and would tie-in more conservation and more partners, but maybe for the interim it would be the floodplain that includes what is irrigated (as it often provides a lot of wildlife habitat).

Mike Hamman remarked that the river corridor area has often been referred to as the “greenbelt”.....which goes to the limits of the historic floodplain before getting into the uplands/highlands.

Matt Schmader commented that the conservation of traditional lifeways as it overlaps with conservation and recreation has entirely to do with the MRGCD’s ditch system. A good project area is the “benefitted lands” of the district.

Oscar Simpson commented that in order to keep the river wet, you have to look at the irrigation and land use practices in the watershed. His feeling was that a lot of people want to see the ephemeral and perennial streams included.

Janet Bair agreed that we should be looking at the whole system, but we might get input from stakeholders with respect to the scope of the Plan, and that the Committee should be careful about not attempting too much in the initial stages of the plan.

Kelly Gossett commented that he thought this issue was already settled...the area is basically levee to levee.

Cyndie Abeyta asked what the difference is between this Plan and the Bosque Initiative (aside from recreation, perhaps), and suggested that the Committee not forsake existing and past efforts in the currently planning effort.

Janet Bair stated, and Mike Hamman agreed that this effort was taking place in response to Secretary Salazar's request; the Committee should not re-invent, but should dig down to find and reference existing plans and efforts.

Matt Schmader stated that he thought the intent of this effort was to bring the Bosque Biological Management Plan to 2012. Also, that some of the effort is being driven by the Price's Dairy project and the America's Great Outdoors initiative, which are new. Matt stated that this new chapter was trying to bridge the gap of the past couple years—with a little more explicitness to the recreation and economic development elements. Making sure we haven't lost track of the Bosque Initiative and several dozen studies, but just bring them forward and bring the Secretary something new.

Andrew Hautzinger stated that it was important to mobilize great things that have happened before, but that part of this project has gone from a 570-acre refuge to a 180-mile river stretch. He stated that if we're going to do a credible job, let's stick with what the Secretary has told us is the boundary... We have enough to do rather than delve into the entire watershed.

Matt Schmader said that we can state that these efforts should expand to the broader watershed...let's make sure that what happens in MRG goes all the way to the top of the watershed.

Amalia Kenward suggested that we add a question to the public comment form—what is the public's vision? (What is the extent of the river?)

Mike Hamman stated that the Secretary wants to use this effort to reinvigorate prior/existing efforts and to leverage resources. The MRG ESA Collaborative Program is an example of how 16 different entities have come together to focus on species and habitat. This is a cornerstone of leveraging efforts, along with programs like Army Corps of Engineers' restoration program.

The Committee continued to discuss the "scope" issue for a few more minutes and agreed to move forward on the premise that the Plan would mainly encompass the "greenbelt" and/or area encompassed within the irrigated lands of the MRG, up to the beginning of the mesas/highlands. The Plan could, however, reference the importance of the watershed approach. While there wasn't great clarity on this point, the committee discussion on this topic concluded with recognizing that a watershed approach is ideal and will be called out for in the MRG Plan in that aspirational context (while the current plan needs to be constrained to the "greenbelt" 180-mile reach between Cochiti Dam and Elephant Butte Reservoir).

The discussion then moved to an update on subcommittee work and consideration of a proposed plan for public input. A draft Public Comment Form and a draft conceptual design of a public input process were distributed.

Re: subcommittees: The Education Committee met on February 29 at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science. About 15 people attended with some excellent representation from educational organizations and programs. The discussion lasted about 70 minutes; a second meeting will be scheduled soon. The Recreation Subcommittee co-chairs met on February 28 to

discuss organization and invitations for their first meeting. The Conservation Subcommittee has not met yet. There was discussion about the importance of getting all subcommittees underway, disseminating meeting schedules to allow stakeholders to engage in subcommittees of their choice, and the need to expedite subcommittee work in March and early April.

Next the Secretary's Committee discussed the conceptual plan for public input prepared by Dave Simon. Simon presented options to the Committee, such as utilizing the subcommittee process and other supplemental and/or "special" outreach efforts (e.g. to Pueblos), plus on-line comments to generate public involvement. The option of conducting a public meeting in each of the four MRG counties—either to shape the draft Plan and/or to provide a forum for commenting on the draft Plan—was also raised. There was discussion about the distinction between expert input (technical and planning information from individuals and organizations that have led or participated in programs and projects) versus public feedback and comment, and how much of our efforts should be focus on outreach to the general public. Simon explained that BOR had agreed to set up a project web page off the main ESA Collaborative website and that would hopefully be "live" by March 5. There followed an extended discussion of how to collect input....with a key question being whether to do public meetings (e.g. at county level) before or after the preparation of a draft plan.

Derrick Lente commented that he would rather see subcommittees use the limited time available to focus on development of the plan, rather than on county-by-county meetings.

Janet Bair stated that the Committee needed to focus their efforts on quickly gathering input, crafting a plan, and then presenting it to the Secretary as a draft on June 1,--with the final plan done by July 1. Given the time constraints the Plan has to be "high level" rather than detailed. She felt the idea of a public comment period was disconcerting, as there is little time available for one.

Andrew Hautzinger remarked that the Plan was trying to develop grassroots feedback, not a government "action" per se. Data collection at the county level could be useful in trying to reflect what local communities think.

Derrick Lente asked what the Secretary will bring back on his return visit. The Committee needs to determine what the end project will be and focus our efforts accordingly.

Matt Schmader stated that the Committee's task was to "hand him the vision."

Tanya Trujillo stated that she thought the Committee should err on the side of getting something on paper and out on the street. This is a report for us, as much as it is for the Secretary. We should be able to put it to use in all of our respective programs. The Secretary wants to see if he can bring people together for collaboration. We're looking for ways to strengthen existing efforts. The work by BOR, FWS, ACOE is a great foundation to move forward, but we also know that that there is other great work going on by the City, MRGCD.

The discussion turned to the topic of comments from the July 2010 AGO listening session and whether they would be incorporated. Several Committee members expressed interest in reviewing a compilation of comments from the 2010 AGO meeting.

Returning to the question of public review for the current effort, Andrew Hautzinger stated that it might be possible to get a “straw man” of central concepts down and give the public something to react to within 2-3 weeks. While the committee discussion acknowledged the merits of giving the public something to respond to, our time frames are so short it is expected the time won’t be ripe for broader public review before the draft is ready in May. The opinion was expressed that the subcommittee structure should allow for substantive input and review during the next several months.

Mike Hamman emphasized the importance of getting most of the preliminary work (input, idea gathering) done in March. He asked Simon whether meetings in each county could be organized by the end of March. Simon replied that he thought that could be done, though it might have to extend into the first two weeks of April, depending on what schedule conflicts there were at the county level.

Derrick Lente commented that he felt that county meetings would be a significant commitment of time for all the Committee members.

There was continuing discussion about the public input process, including the pros and cons of having most of the Committee and Subcommittee meetings in the Albuquerque-area. The Committee decided that it was most important to get the subcommittee work/meeting underway and that it did not want to pursue county-by-county meetings in each of the four MRG counties in March, but that in addition to the subcommittee meetings it would be a good idea to hold at least two “supplemental” meetings of some kind outside of the Albuquerque area, such as in Bernalillo and Socorro.

The Committee requested that the agencies use the media to promote public comments. Simon suggested that BOR and FWS issue a press release to formally “announce” the project/process and that could help direct people to the project web page to get information and fill out the comment form.

Subcommittee co-chairs for Recreation and Conservation selected March 9 as the date for their first full subcommittee meetings. This information will be disseminated to stakeholders, along with the next Education Subcommittee meeting date when that is known.

The next Secretary’s Committee meeting will be March 21, 1:30 p.m., at BOR.

Attendees & Contact Information

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