

**Bighorn River System Long-Term Issues Group  
Meeting Summary  
Lovell, Wyoming  
October 18, 2007**

**Welcome**

Participants introduced themselves. The agenda and ground rules were reviewed. Barb explained that the effort of the group is now starting to shift from an emphasis on raising participants' shared level of knowledge and understanding to more active participation and support of the technical activities.

**Review of Previous Meetings**

The long-term issues group has met four times prior to this meeting in Lovell, rotating between Wyoming and Montana. At the first meeting, participants identified issues and interests, and agreed that there would be benefits to continue meeting and discussing long-term issues. Getting a good factual knowledge of all of the issues was identified by participants as important to our success so subsequent meetings have been designed with educational presentations. Meeting notes from all of the previous meetings can be found on the Bureau of Reclamation's website. [www.usbr.gov/gp/mtao](http://www.usbr.gov/gp/mtao)

The group's organizing statements, problem statement and charter respectively, are as follows:

*"Local, state, tribal, and federal entities are concerned that the Bighorn River system is not being managed in a way that fully protects and utilizes the system's resources to address the multiple demands, needs, and expectations of the public."*

*"The Bighorn River System Long-Term Issues Group is formed to identify, explore, and recommend alternative courses of action to local, tribal, state, and federal entities responsible for managing the Bighorn River system resources for their consideration as part of a long-term management strategy. The challenge is to re-examine the uses and needs of the Bighorn River system to find an appropriate balance of public benefits, while recognizing the respective agencies' commitments to authorized project purposes, legal obligations, contemporary needs and public expectations."*

**Where are we going?**

Lenny Duberstein provided a short power point presentation addressing the questions: How did we get started? Who are we? Where are we now? Where are we going? When are we going to get there?

Reclamation is the convener of this group, but leading from behind and bringing resources, not directing things. At this point the group is working simultaneously on perceptions, problem definition, and alternatives. Some possible outcomes from the group's efforts could include; improved operations and flexibility, improved forecasting, improved sediment management, improved recreation opportunities, improved river habitat, improved economic opportunities, and others. Lenny talked about the importance of documenting the products of the effort with a report that can be developed as we progress, so Reclamation will get started on this report and participants can comment. Progress will be faster on some issues than others. For many of the larger issues it may be five years from implementation by the time studies are completed, recommendations are developed and evaluated, environmental compliance is completed, and funding is secured. The final product envisioned is a report to decision-makers.

The following points were made during discussion of this topic:

- The report sounds similar to a Resource Management Plan, but complicated by shared responsibilities,
- NEPA can be conducted by shared "leads" or lead federal agencies and NEPA documents could be tiered under one another,
- The products of this effort are likely to suggest the best approach to accomplishing NEPA when the time comes,
- The jurisdictional issues are complicated because of involvement at local, state, federal, and tribal levels in two states.
- Lenny and Mary need to have a conversation about how the jurisdictions might come together for planning and compliance purposes. Gary Hammond suggested looking at the Forest Service-MDFWP experience on the issue of vegetation management as a model.
- One of the technical activities is to look at river habitat below the dam, there is a need to also do this type of work on the river above the dam,
- Short-term decision making about releases from the lake is still polarized, a group similar to this one for short-term decisions could be helpful,
- What is the status of the road to Lovell through the NRA? (Answer: Reclamation is talking with the Crow Tribe across whose land the road would be located to see what their interest would be in this.)
- Since we will probably be meeting for several years on this, perhaps the meetings should be less frequent—emphasizing technical activity work in between the working group meetings.

### **Climate Change (Stephen Gray, Wyoming State Climatologist)**

Stephen gave a power point presentation that can be found on the project website. Gray encouraged the group to think about climate change in all of their planning efforts. Evidence that climate is changing at an unprecedented rate is overwhelming and incontrovertible. Drought is a part of life in the western United States. Natural systems in the western U.S. are highly vulnerable to all types of climate change (whether due to greenhouse gases or natural variations.)

## **Bighorn Lake Fisheries (Mark Smith, WYGF)**

Mark gave a power point presentation that can be found on the project website. Reservoir fishery management is very complex due to the number of variables. WYGF has a number of tools available including stocking, regulations and enforcement, habitat manipulation, input to reservoir operations, and the use of chemicals to remove certain species. Mark gave a history of department activities and results of the stocking. In general, reservoir fish production declines over time. No fish have been stocked in the reservoir since 2000. The department is managing primarily for forage fish now because that is the limiting factor. Current conditions in the lake, including turbidity and sediment are favoring native fish.

## **Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area: Recreation Resources (John Keck, NPS)**

John gave a power point presentation that can be found on the project website. John talked about the variety of recreation resources in the NRA and downward visitation trends across the National Parks in Montana and Wyoming. Visitation at the NRA peaked in 2002. Lake level affects the visitor experience and the NPS believes that 3617 is the safe launching level at Horseshoe Bend. The park is working to incorporate current information for visitors planning a trip to the park on its website. The website ([www.nps.gov/bica](http://www.nps.gov/bica)) has the capability to provide links to other entities. Please contact John or Darrell if you'd like to have your agency/organization referenced on their site.

## **Technical Activities**

- River Degradation (Jeanie Godaire)

Jeanie works for Reclamation in Denver. She has prepared a draft study proposal to investigate the side channels downstream from the dam and afterbay. The study will focus on side channel formation and loss. Side channel loss is continuing. The hydrology is very different since construction of the dam specifically with respect to peak flows. The objectives of the study will be to investigate loss of side channels and provide solutions for this using geomorphic analysis. The study is estimated to cost \$300,000 and would take three years. Jeanie's power point presentation is available on the project website.

- Recreation Planning (Darrell Cook)

Darrel explained that starting in November, John Keck, will be spending one week a month working on identifying recreation opportunities for Bighorn Canyon. John will be meeting with stakeholders and the public to gather ideas. The ideas will be prioritized and scheduled and serve as the basis for funding requests. Darrell expects a product in approximately six months.

- Sedimentation (Stephanie Hellekson)

Stephanie reported that Reclamation is looking at operational scenarios with the Corp of Engineers. They will be modeling how sediment is deposited under different operating scenarios. The results of the sediment study conducted this year by Reclamation's Technical Services group will be available by next spring.

- Flood Pool Modifications (Gordon Aycock)

Gordon reviewed the purpose of this group's work—to look at re-allocating flood control space in the reservoir. The group is working with the Corp of Engineers (who has responsibility for flood control) to see if it would be feasible to raise the level of the joint use pool to 3645 feet. This would add the capability for more storage, and would also result in additional power generation. Reclamation is working on an agreement with the Corp to do technical evaluation on flood impacts.

- River Basin Changes (Gordon Aycock)

Gordon suggested that forecasting could be improved by looking at how inflows may have been affected since construction of the dam. Many things have occurred since the dam was constructed—such as construction of Greybull Reservoir, raising Buffalo Bill by 25 feet, bringing additional lands under irrigation, and additional well construction. Given recent inflows of 50% of average, it is important to know that assumptions used in modeling and decision making are based on accurate information.

- Others (Lenny Duberstein)

Lenny has asked Jeremy Giovando (Reclamation) to begin looking at how to improve run-off forecasting.

Lenny plans to follow-up with Stephen Gray about ways in which to incorporate climate change into the planning effort.

Lenny will be talking with the Crow Tribe and Bureau of Indian Affairs about water conservation on their irrigation project below the dam.

Lenny introduced Tara Kinsey and Dan Gallagher, economists with the regional office of Reclamation in Billings. These individuals will be available to analyze alternatives or recommendations developed by this group.

## **Wrap-up**

Discussion in response to the question “Are we going in the right direction?” generally affirmed the work to date. The group suggested that proceeding actively with the work of the technical groups was appropriate and scheduling meetings of the whole working groups at longer intervals would be desirable.

Participants would like to have meeting dates, locations, and agendas finalized with more lead time so that they can be in attendance.

Participants were encouraged to sign up on the wall chart indicating what they were willing to do in order to make this effort a success. The chart will be available at each subsequent meeting. Reclamation and the National Park Service are both contributing resources (dollars, staff time, technical expertise, etc.) to the effort and others need to decide how they can support this effort.

The next meeting was tentatively scheduled for Thursday, January 10, 2008. The location is to be determined in Montana. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks will present information about the river fishery below Yellowtail, Elaine will contact the western drought specialist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to invite him to speak, and Lenny will see if the expert on conflict resolution processes from Oregon State University could speak about collaborative efforts elsewhere. The agenda will also contain updates and discussion on the technical activities underway to support the group.

Meeting notes will be posted on Reclamation website.