

WOLF CREEK RESERVOIR
SITUATION ASSESSMENT &
RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Prepared for the
Bureau of Land Management
WHITE RIVER FIELD OFFICE
Meeker, Colorado
Final Report, 9/8/23

The Bureau of Land Management's Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution office, contracted with Kearns & West (K&W) to develop this report.¹

¹The Report was prepared by The Langdon Group under subcontract to K&W, collectively referred to as the "Project Team."

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2022, the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District (RBWCD) applied for a right-of-way (ROW) to use public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) White River Field Office (WRFO) to construct and operate a new water reservoir known as the Wolf Creek Reservoir. The WRFO administers more than one million BLM surface acres in northwest Colorado's Rio Blanco, Moffat, and Garfield Counties. The RBWCD serves the White River Basin in the western portion of Rio Blanco County. See APPENDIX A maps indicating WRFO boundaries, RBWCD boundaries, and the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir location.

The WRFO has determined that this project will be evaluated through an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that would also require amending the 1997 White River Resource Management Plan.

In September 2022, the WRFO held "project introduction" meetings with the potential Cooperating Agencies, the BLM's Northwest Resource Advisory Council, and Native American Indian Tribes.

Prior to beginning the EIS, the WRFO worked with the BLM Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution office to contract with the project team to conduct an impartial situation assessment (SA) that elicits input from a wide range of potentially affected interests; evaluates prospects for collaboration among Cooperating Agencies as well as collaboration with other potentially affected interests including Tribes; and proposes a Recommended Engagement Plan (REP) for meaningful involvement of the diverse group of potentially affected interests at different stages of the process.

The project team conducted confidential interviews with more than 73 individuals between March 13 and April 7, 2023. An additional 31 contacts were identified through the process that declined the request for participation or were unresponsive to the request after a minimum of three attempts at contact. Participants were identified with the BLM and from participant interviews. Interviews occurred in-person when possible, and by phone or via video conference if preferred and when in-person was unfeasible.

To solicit input that is valuable and constructive, the interview format was conversational with active listening, allowing the interested party to steer the discussion, while ensuring the WRFO objectives for the SA were met. **The findings capture the opinions, beliefs, and perceptions of the SA participants, categorized by themes, that emerged during interviews. The assessment does not aim to verify the accuracy of people's statements and conflicting understandings of the same phenomena are identified and articulated as best as possible. The assessment is intended to provide a snapshot in time of a cross section of the communities of interested parties. However, it is not a representative sample, nor a "vote" on how many people were in favor of or opposed to the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir.**

Key themes (listed alphabetically) that emerged from the interviews included:

- **Agriculture:** Interviewees expressed concern about impacts to grazing permittees from the reservoir footprint and associated recreation resources, as well as whether storage rights for agriculture were present and could be used for augmentation.
- **Alternatives:** Interviewees proposed several alternatives but specified these depended on the purpose of the project. Alternative suggestions include dredging or rehabbing Kenney Reservoir,

enlarging or repurposing current storage in Lake Avery, non-storage alternatives for Rangely, a smaller footprint reservoir, or alternate locations.

- Colorado River Basin: At a time when all in the Colorado River Basin are being asked to reduce water use, some felt a new reservoir was problematic, while others felt it created security. As the reservoir is part of the larger Colorado River Basin, local changes are likely to have ripple effects throughout the basin and therefore considerable scrutiny should be anticipated from within Colorado and other states that rely on the river.
- Communities and Context: Discussion about the reservoir takes place within communities and contexts that shape what information people receive and how they interpret that information. The regional context of the proposed reservoir in Western Colorado shows an interest in new water storage, concerns about the current state of water supplies and management, and destabilizing changes in the local, rural economy. Tensions within Rio Blanco County stemming from the removal of county commissioners, county funding allocated to RBWCD, and the perceived division among western and eastern county residents add to this.
- Cooperating Agency Engagement: Interviews were conducted with 15 members of cooperating agencies. Strategic participation through subcommittees and focusing committee involvement on their expertise were among the specific recommendations provided by interviewees.
- Cultural Resources: Cultural sites are likely to be present due to existing sites located nearby and the importance of the gap between Coal Ridge and Pinyon Ridge, where the proposed dam would be sited, for movement of people and animals, historically.
- Downstream Utah: The White River flows west from Colorado into Utah where it enters the Green River before joining the Colorado River. As the downstream, neighboring state, interviewees in Utah expressed high interest for understanding the justification for Colorado River Basin storage, the downstream impacts of impounding water, and clarifying the project purpose and need.
- Oil and Gas Interests: There is a considerable presence of oil and gas resources and companies in the area. Companies have a large portfolio of conditional water rights. Concern was raised about the storage of previously unused oil and gas water rights to the proposed reservoir location in the water court process and how that storage of previously unused water could impact other water users on the White and Colorado rivers.
- Purpose and Decree: Confusion exists related to the purpose, need, and size of the reservoir and if the key problem to be solved is improving flows in the White River for the Town of Rangely's municipal water intake and/or other needs such as hydroelectric power generation and recreation. Confusion also exists around what the water decree allows for releases and storage. Some believe there is dedicated water for endangered fish, while others say that is not the case.
- Recreation: Listed as a "need" for the reservoir, most locals believe that new recreational opportunities would be a considerable benefit to the region and economy. Questions exist about the extent of the economic impact.
- Site and Selection: Almost all interviewees discussed how the current reservoir site came to be selected and why. In addition, participants were curious how previous site selection work by the RBWCD would be incorporated into the NEPA process. Finally, interviewees had questions about evaporation, geology, soils, pumping and filling of the reservoir, and the cost.
- Tribal Interests: Tribal interviewees described ancestral relationships with the area of the proposed reservoir, which shaped their perceptions of the reservoir. Their key interests were the impact to Tribal water rights, the broader context of impacts to animals and plants, and cultural sites. Other interviewees commented that because of the winter range habitat for elk

and mule deer, there is a high likelihood that the Wolf Creek Drainage was used by indigenous communities for hunting.

- White River Habitat: Confusion exists related to whether the decree includes water specifically for endangered fish. Concerns relate to impacts to native fish as well as harm to the river itself.
- Wolf Creek Drainage Habitat: Interviewees had different conceptualizations of the area as under used or prime habitat. Concerns were expressed for the loss of key wintering ground for elk and mule deer, as well as interest in the presence of greater sage-grouse and black-footed ferret.

Broad public interest exists in exploring viable alternatives, beyond just the proposed Wolf Creek site, therefore the conditions are positive for collaborative and productive dialogue in an equitable public process with clear messaging that clears up any existing confusion.

Input gathered through the SA was used to inform development of the Recommended Engagement Plan (REP), included in this report. The REP provides a recommended process for public involvement and cooperating agency and Tribal coordination throughout the EIS process. In summary, the REP recommends:

- Messaging that is clear, concise, free of overly technical terms and acronyms, and available in Spanish, as some language may not always be understood by all community members including environmental justice (EJ) and limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations.
- Convening one facilitated Economic Strategies Workshop in Rangely during the *Scoping with a public notice of intent (NOI)* phase.
- Maintaining a project specific website as the clearinghouse for accurate and current project information, updated at each EIS milestone with an easy to follow, visual story-map feature.
- Utilizing a range of outreach methods to provide regular updates and direct the public to the website, including electronic newsletters, news releases, social media, hard copy posting throughout the community, door-to-door delivery in EJ populations, direct mailers, announcement at meetings of existing organized groups and committees, and school district and EJ resource agency (i.e., public health, housing authority, food bank) coordination.
- Convening presentation/open house hybrid public meetings at key milestones in multiple locations, dates and times, with the potential for town-hall style options and on-site meetings that meet the public where they already are.
- For Cooperating Agencies: establish a clear understanding of agency roles and the decision space that exists within each agency; define timeline, process, and milestones early in the project; develop working group subcommittees to expedite work, and clearly explain the process for selecting and joining; schedule one-on-one meetings at key milestones to elicit specific agency input; and streamline the process by tapping agency expertise and value at the appropriate time and regarding the appropriate subject matter.
- For tribes, communicate early and invite them to participate in field work and surveys. Tribal representatives indicated that coordinating with a single point of contact will streamline communication and allow them to connect with the broader community, including advisory groups and Tribal elders who can provide oral history of the project area. For formal government-to-government consultation, coordination with Tribal councils through letters is warranted.

2. BACKGROUND

The Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District (RBWCD) has applied for a right-of-way (ROW) to use public lands managed by the BLM's White River Field Office (WRFO) to construct and operate a new water reservoir known as the Wolf Creek Reservoir. The WRFO has determined that this project will be evaluated through an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that would also require amending the 1997 White River Resource Management Plan.

The WRFO administers more than one million BLM surface acres in northwest Colorado's Rio Blanco, Moffat, and Garfield Counties. The RBWCD serves the White River Basin in the western portion of Rio Blanco County. The proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir is located in the White River Basin, part of the larger Colorado River Basin that drains into the Green River, across the border in Utah. The White River Basin extends into portions of Moffat and Garfield Counties, and drains most of Rio Blanco County. See APPENDIX A maps indicating WRFO boundaries, RBWCD boundaries, and the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir location.

According to the RBWCD, the Wolf Creek Reservoir project, also referred to as the White River Storage Project, has been in discussion since the 1940s when it was first proposed.

In 2015, the RBWCD completed a *White River Storage Feasibility Study Final Report* (March 4, 2015) that analyzed 25 potential storage locations and in 2018 a *White River Storage Feasibility Study Phase 2A* (Sept. 30, 2023). The first study identified the Wolf Creek location as the best prospect for development. In 2014, the RBWCD filed two water rights applications with the State of Colorado, one for a main-stem dam/reservoir on the White River, and the second for a dam/reservoir at Wolf Creek, a tributary of the White River.

In 2021, RBWCD obtained a conditional storage water right of up to 66,720 acre-feet from the State of Colorado for one site only, either the White River or the Wolf Creek location. The decreed uses for water stored in the new proposed reservoir include municipal water for the Town of Rangely, augmentation or replacement water that can be released to offset future water uses within RBWCD's and the Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District's (YJWCD) boundaries, mitigation of environmental impacts associated with the reservoir, hydroelectric power generation (with restrictions), and in-reservoir uses for the recreation, fisheries, and wildlife habitat (District Court, Water Division No. 6, Case No. 2014CW3043, Applicant: Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District). According to the decreed water right, annual releases from the reservoir will be limited to 7,000 acre-feet (AF) for municipal and augmentation uses. Up to 20,720 AF is available for mitigation, but this amount will be reduced in the future once the amount deemed necessary for mitigation of reservoir impacts has been established. In June of 2022, RBWCD applied for a ROW with the WRFO for the Wolf Creek Reservoir site.

In September 2022, the WRFO held "project introduction" meetings with the potential Cooperating Agencies and the BLM's Northwest Resource Advisory Council. The WRFO sent consultation initiation letters to Native American Indian Tribes and made phone calls. The WRFO has initiated Memorandums of Understanding with the following Cooperating Agencies: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Colorado Department of Natural Resources (including CO Water Conservation Board, CO State Land Board, and CO Division of Water Resources), Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Colorado Department of Agriculture, UT Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office (including UT Division of Water Rights, UT Division of Water Resources, UT Division of Wildlife Resources, and Colorado River Authority of Utah), Rio Blanco County, Moffat County, Uintah County, Town of Rangely, Town of

Meeker, Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District, White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts, Western Rio Blanco County Recreation and Metropolitan District, Colorado River District, Yellow Jacket Water Conservation District, and Uintah Water Conservancy District.

Prior to beginning the EIS, the WRFO worked with the Department of Interior Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution office to contract with the project team for third-party neutral assistance to conduct a situation assessment (SA) that elicits input from a wide range of potentially affected interests; evaluates prospects for collaboration among Cooperating Agencies as well as collaboration with other potentially affected interests; and proposes a Recommended Engagement Plan (REP) to guide meaningful involvement of the diverse group of potentially affected interests at different stages of the NEPA process. The impartial position of the third-party neutral provides the opportunity for open dialogue without biases or preconceptions from the project team. SA interviews occurred in March and April 2023.

3. PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The project team conducted interviews with more than 73 individuals² between March 13 and April 7, 2023 (full list of participating organizations, affiliations, and interests in APPENDIX B). An additional 31 contacts were identified through the process that declined the request for participation or were unresponsive to the request after three attempts at contact. Participants were identified with BLM and from participant interviews. Interviews were confidential and about half occurred in-person with the other half by phone or via video conference if preferred and when in-person was unfeasible. For in-person interviews, the project team met with interviewees in various locations in Colorado, including: Rangely, Meeker, non-incorporated locations in Rio Blanco County, Craig, Steamboat Springs, Grand Junction, Denver, and Colorado Springs. In Utah, the project team conducted interviews in Duchesne, Vernal, and Logan.

Participants received an introduction of the process via a letter and email from the WRFO (APPENDIX C) followed by a request to schedule an interview by the project team.

Before the interview, participants were provided a full explanation of the purpose of the assessment and where it sits in the overall public engagement process prior to the EIS. They were informed about the final product: this summary report and recommendations for public engagement. They were told this report will be a public document and available for their review but also made generally available on the BLM's ePlanning project site. They were also informed that names will not be included, comments/input will not be attributed to individuals or organizations but rather grouped into common themes that emerge during the process, participating organizations will be listed, and the report will include the total number of people that participated in the interviews.

Participants were also told that the project team is making every attempt to capture all possible interests by reaching a cross section of the community. While it was not possible to meet with every person and group that had an interest in this project, the hope was that the sample of people interviewed would accurately represent the different perspectives that exist. However, the list of interviewees does not constitute a statistically representative sample. Suggested names and organizations provided by participants that the project team was unable to contact within the project schedule will be provided to BLM to include on the project mailing list.

To solicit input that is valuable and constructive, the interview format was conversational with active listening, allowing the participant to steer the discussion, while ensuring the following objectives as identified by the WRFO for the SA were met:

- Identify missing potentially interested parties/participants who may be affected by the project but are not currently included in the planning effort.
- Build and strengthen the WRFO relationships with external entities, especially regarding BLM's role to conduct an objective and transparent NEPA evaluation of the project.
- Learn about public values, interests, concerns, and ideas, and engage them directly in how they want to try and solve issues related to the proposed project (i.e., ideas for alternative solutions).
- Identify "blind spots" regarding issues of which WRFO may not currently be aware.
- Identify possible challenges and constraints to involvement of Cooperating Agencies, potentially impacted parties, and potential strategies the WRFO could use to overcome such challenges and constraints.

² Some interviews included several individuals.

- Gain an understanding of whether the participants believe there is a clear need for the project.
- Determine if the conditions for a collaborative public process during NEPA are present.
- Inform BLM upper management about the situation so that they understand the issues early in the project. Provide management an early flavor for what will be needed to engage the public and the preliminary views of various potentially impacted parties, Cooperating Agencies, and others.

The WRFO's objectives for the EP are to:

- Identify engagement recommendations based on findings and themes from the SA, including how to best convey complicated concepts to the various potentially impacted parties.
- Design a plan that addresses types of effective processes at various stages of the project while acknowledging that the type of feedback that the BLM is seeking from potentially impacted parties may vary at each project milestone.
- Inform the design and format of an economic strategies workshop and provide recommendations for how to make this process provide meaningful input for the WRFO's socioeconomics analysis.

Interviews varied by interviewee, as each individual, agency, interest group, and Native American Tribe are unique, having different interests and requiring different approaches. Question groupings by topic area were developed and designed to be customized and generate open dialogue while providing valuable insight (APPENDIX D).

4. FINDINGS

This section captures the opinions, beliefs, and perceptions of the SA participants, categorized by themes, that emerged during interviews. ***This assessment does not aim to verify the accuracy of people's statements. Where participants have conflicting understandings of the same phenomena, this discrepancy is identified and articulated as best as possible. It is important to understand different interpretations, regardless of their accuracy, because it reveals nuances in community understanding and helps identify potential information gaps in these communities/groups.***

This report is intended to provide a snapshot in time of a cross section of the communities of interested parties. However, it is not a representative sample, nor a “vote” on how many people were in favor of or opposed to the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir and should not be interpreted as such. However, this report uses specific terms associated with broad percentages to indicate the number of SA participants who shared a particular view, as determined by the project team as part of the SA. “A few” refers to more than one person, but less than 10% of participants; “some,” “several,” and “other” refers to between 11-50% of interviewees; “many” refers to 51-75% of interviewees, and “most” or “almost all” interviewees refer to 76-99%. Themes are organized below in alphabetical order.

4.1 Agriculture

Regarding agriculture and the reservoir, interviewees shared three key concerns. The first is related to the physical inundation of BLM lands with associated grazing rights. The second is related to storage rights for water and whether that includes water for agricultural uses, broadly defined, but including ranching, water for livestock, and growing crops. Third, relates to potential impacts to surrounding grazing land through increased recreational use in the area.

The title for the base property for one of the grazing permits potentially inundated by the proposed reservoir was sold while interviews were underway. The current ranch managers declined to participate, and the future owner was made aware of the situation assessment process. A few interviewees explained that there would likely be mitigation of any impacts to their grazing permits by swapping or shifting allotments.

“Agriculture,” defined broadly, was initially proposed as one of the key needs for the reservoir by the RBWCD and remains a topic of interest for many participants. Several interviewees believed that agriculture would be the biggest beneficiary of the reservoir. There were also some who believed that the reservoir could help enhance existing or expand agriculture in the lower part of the White River Basin, around Rangely. However, some interviewees explained, storage for agricultural rights was not included in the water right decree and at this time there is no irrigation water included for agriculture in the potential future pool. As one agricultural interviewee noted, speaking for several others, this makes the reservoir “harder to swallow.”

In general, the largest and oldest agricultural water rights in the White River Basin are located upstream and to the east of the proposed location for Wolf Creek Reservoir, including the largest three irrigation ditches. The proposed reservoir’s relatively junior water rights would not impact the majority of irrigation diversions. Some interviewees explained that this also meant the proposed reservoir’s water rights would not really be an asset for agricultural augmentation water or existing agricultural uses, while others felt that there would be benefits through augmentation of water and water exchanges.

People with grazing permits in the area of the reservoir predominantly graze sheep during the winter months, as sheep are able to sustain themselves on the natural vegetation. One interviewee expressed

concern for damage to the resources due to all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-road traffic that would potentially increase if recreational amenities were developed at a future reservoir. This would potentially degrade the resources his sheep would be able to utilize during winter months and possibly cause them to need supplemental feed at his expense.

4.2 Alternatives

An important part of the interview about the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir for many interviewees was the question of alternatives. As previously mentioned, interviewees were interested in how the current site – off the main White River channel, located in the Wolf Creek drainage, which is tributary to the White River – was selected and why. Part of that interest centered around the possible alternatives that exist and the BLM’s role in investigating those as part of the NEPA process.

Several participants asked about how the BLM would determine the alternatives to investigate as part of the NEPA process and what sideboards, or limits, they would put on what qualified as a “reasonable alternative.” A few suggested this depended on how the purpose and need for a reservoir was identified. Others want to know what is within the BLM’s jurisdiction to investigate. Finally, there was agreement among several participants that whatever alternatives were explored, they must include more than “Wolf Creek Reservoir” and “No Action.”

A few interviewees wanted to make it clear they did not have much faith in the investigation of alternatives as part of NEPA the process, as they did not believe it would make a difference. A few others shared a different view, explaining that it was important to have the interview nonetheless, as it helped everyone invested in the discussion to work through the process of investigating alternatives together and establish a common understanding.

Below is a list of the alternatives interviewees mentioned during interviews.

4.2.1 *Dredging or Draining Kenney Reservoir*

Dredging Kenney Reservoir, an in-channel reservoir on the White River east of Rangely, was the most common alternative mentioned by almost all participants when asked about alternatives. Some participants also mentioned fully removing Taylor Draw Dam and draining Kenney Reservoir. The reservoir is upstream of Rangely and owned by RBWCD. Taylor Draw Dam, which contains Kenney, generates hydropower. The reservoir was originally built to protect the town of Rangely from ice dams, which caused flooding throughout downtown. Ice dams, according to interviewees, are a unique phenomenon of the White River, resulting from a buildup of slushy ice that impedes the free flow of water during winter months. Kenney Reservoir has, since being completed in 1983, silted in, reducing capacity. However, the reservoir is a “run of river” reservoir and not currently a storage reservoir, meaning that the same amount must flow out as flows in, according to interviewees. Investigating this option would likely include re-visiting the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) permit for the reservoir and possibly change-of-use, explained a few interviewees. Investigation of this alternative centered around the possibility of Kenney being dredged to remove sediment and long-term management and maintenance, while others suggested removing the dam entirely.

Questions from participants included:

- What would dredging cost?
- How would the process of dredging Kenney impact habitat created by Kenney?
- Could a dredged Kenney Reservoir be utilized to meet the needs of Rangely?
- How long until the reservoir would need to be dredged again?
- Is continual dredging a viable or unrealistic option?

- Is it possible to revisit the FERC permit?
- Can draining Kenney Reservoir and removing Taylor Draw Dam be considered as an option?

4.2.2 *Lake Avery Expansion or “Paper Fill”*

Lake Avery lies further up the White River Basin, east of the town of Meeker. It is owned and managed by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). Expanding Lake Avery for water storage was the second most mentioned alternative by interviewees. Some believed that because it is located higher up in the basin, evaporation rates would not be as high as a reservoir located in the lower elevation part of the basin. Also, stored water would be more flexible in terms of its benefits, as it would be available for direct augmentation or exchange. Currently, the Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District (YJWCD) is exploring the possibility of expanding Lake Avery by increasing the height of the dam by three feet to store water rights for added uses and augmentation. It is estimated that this would increase storage capacity by 3,000-acre feet (AF), which some interviewees believe is not enough. Extensive expansion of Lake Avery is likely not possible due to nearby private landowners.

One interviewee suggested RBWCD investigate the possibility of working with CPW to let RBWCD store water in Lake Avery in lieu of some of CPW’s rights. This is called a “paper fill” or “book exchange” where CPW would give up some of their own storage space, allowing RBWCD to “fill” that space with water that belongs to RBWCD. This would not require any change to the existing reservoir.

Regarding Lake Avery, interviewees asked:

- Would it be possible for the RBWCD to arrange water storage in Lake Avery?
- Would the evaporative savings in Lake Avery compared to Wolf Creek be significant?
- Is there enough storage space to satisfy the essential needs downstream?
- Is the YJWCD willing to pursue expansion of Lake Avery?
- Does the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) RBWCD made with YJWCD allow RBWCD to utilize potential future YJWCD storage space?
- Would CPW be willing to work with RBWCD on a “paper fill”?

4.2.3 *Non-storage Alternatives for the Town of Rangely*

Non-storage measures to promote Rangely water supply was mentioned by some participants as worthwhile to investigate, especially if the clear purpose and need for Wolf Creek Reservoir is to support water supplies for Rangely. One interviewee specifically said that this was an important part of the investigation of alternatives simply because it demonstrated that the applicant had “their house in order” and that in today’s political climate, that was essential to move a reservoir project forward.

Interviewees who proposed non-storage alternatives asked about several different possibilities:

- Does the town of Rangely have a municipal water supply plan? How could one be utilized to examine the alternatives for the town, including things like water conservation?
- Would a water infiltration system, like the one in Steamboat Springs, be feasible?
- Is there a possibility for adding groundwater wells to Rangely’s water supply portfolio?
- Have any other options to meet Rangely’s needs, besides a new reservoir, been fully explored and to what extent?

4.2.4 *Smaller Reservoir*

Mentioned by about the same number of interviewees as non-storage alternatives, some suggested investigating a smaller footprint reservoir for Wolf Creek. This was primarily heard among the interviewees that believe the key need for water is for the Town of Rangely and not augmentation. Some believe a smaller footprint reservoir would have lower evaporation rates, require less pumping,

and have potentially fewer impacts to the habitat and flows of the White River.

Participants asked:

- Should a smaller reservoir be located at the proposed Wolf Creek site or a different location?
- Would this eliminate the possibility of augmentation water being stored in the reservoir?

4.2.5 *Alternative Locations*

Interviewees also requested information on other possible locations for reservoir sites. Some participants mentioned that the Purpose and Need Statement and alternatives should include options beyond a new reservoir, to meet local water needs. Many interviewees requested more specific information.

A few explained that there would be more private landowner pushback higher up in the basin, while a few others shared that certain sites were not feasible due to geologic or hydrologic conditions. In particular, a few interviewees asked about the possibility of Kellog Gulch and Little Beaver Basin sites. Kellog Gulch, located just above Rio Blanco Reservoir along Highway 64 east of the proposed reservoir site, was described by these interviewees as more “feasible” than the Wolf Creek site. They believed this was because the reservoir could be gravity fed, it would still be off the main channel of the White River, it is higher up and therefore would have less evaporation, and it is located on a combination of state, private, and BLM land. Little Beaver Basin lies to the east of Meeker and is higher up in the White River Basin than Kellog Gulch. Interviewees suggested that a site at Little Beaver Basin could hold 4,000-5,000 AF of water, but that private landowners likely would not be on board.

Questions included:

- Were Kellog Gulch and Little Beaver Basin evaluated by RBWCD during their investigation for possible sites?
- If so, why were they eliminated?
- Would private landowners be open to discussions of either site?
- What other alternative locations did RBWCD investigate, and why were they eliminated?
- Can the Purpose and Need Statement be expanded to consider options besides a new reservoir?

4.3 Colorado River Basin

“Water is felt locally,” said one interviewee, “but the impacts of its use and storage are regional and system wide.” This sentiment reflected the general sentiments of many interviewees. The White River Basin is located on Colorado’s “Western Slope,” which covers just under half of the state, west of the Continental Divide. Colorado’s Western Slope is part of the larger Colorado River Basin and the White River drains into the Green River, across the border in Utah, which then reaches the Colorado River. Of the interviewees who live on the West Slope of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, most of them emphasized the security having more storage would provide the local region. “Without water, we don’t have a community,” said one. Some interviewees believed the proposed reservoir could be used to assure compact compliance and protect users in the basin who are junior to the Colorado River Compact and allow them to continue using their local water source. Protection of additional storage in case of a compact call seemed like a prudent investment to these interviewees. Some interviewees mentioned the importance of exploring how to use more of Colorado’s entitlement under the Colorado Compact. “Unmet needs are unmet needs and are worth exploring,” offered a participant.

However, other interviewees disagreed. These interviewees spoke about how the larger Colorado River Basin is facing unprecedented challenges, including climate change causing decreasing water supplies,

and increasing pressure for the water that is available. A few mentioned the role of aridification in the basin. With water levels dropping at lakes Powell and Mead, these interviewees brought up the mandate from the Bureau of Reclamation to reduce use throughout the basin by two-to-four million AF, even though Colorado has yet to fully utilize its Colorado River entitlement. To these interviewees, talk about building a new reservoir at a “time where everyone is being asked to tighten their belts” feels problematic.

The current conversation happening amongst state and federal leaders in the Colorado River Basin, said several interviewees, is about the need to cut back on water use. Which to those interviewees means, any new proposed reservoir project will be closely scrutinized by not only the other Upper Basin states (Wyoming, New Mexico, and Utah, which is further discussed in the section on Utah), but also by the Lower Basin states (Arizona, California, and Nevada). This makes a new reservoir a particularly hard sell, especially when the focus is on water conservation.

Not only will other Colorado River Basin states be watching, but a few participants mentioned that other communities in Western Colorado, outside of the White River Basin, will be watching closely. While many theoretically support new storage, explained a few interviewees, if evaporation of water that otherwise would have gone downstream speeds up a compact call with direct impacts to their water use, they may oppose a new storage project in the White River Basin.

A few participants in the local region were concerned that opposition to the reservoir stemmed from Colorado’s urban Front Range hoping to get ahold of the water.

A couple of interviewees questioned the jurisdiction of the BLM in deciding about land use that could potentially have significant implications for water use and policy not only in Colorado, but also in the Colorado River Basin. Similarly, another interviewee stressed the need for the BLM to examine the reservoir in the context of the entire basin and that to not do so would be to miss the cumulative impacts.

Questions that emerged in the interviews included:

- How will the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir impact Tribal water rights?
- Will this proposed reservoir impact Flaming Gorge Reservoir (WY/UT) operations and flow targets?
- Will this proposed reservoir alleviate some of the use of Blue Mesa Reservoir (CO)?
- Can this proposed reservoir be used for compact compliance? What would that mean in terms of ownership and operations of the reservoir?
- Could evaporation from the proposed reservoir, through decreasing the amount of water sent downstream from the White River Basin, increase the likelihood of a compact call for water by Lower Basin states?

4.4 Communities and Context of the White River Basin

The historical conditions, geographic location, and recent events in Rio Blanco County shaped the context in which interviews about the proposed reservoir took place. Many interviewees described how understanding the broader context of communities along the White River helps to clarify interviewees’ perspectives of the proposed reservoir in interviews.

4.4.1 Regional Context of the Wolf Creek Reservoir

The proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir is located in the White River Basin in northwest Colorado. As mentioned, the White River Basin is located on Colorado’s “Western Slope,” west of the Continental Divide. Colorado’s Western Slope is part of the larger Colorado River Basin and the White River drains

into the Green River, across the border in Utah, which then reaches the Colorado River. The White River Basin extends into portions of Moffat and Garfield Counties, and drains most of Rio Blanco County. The reservoir itself, if built, would be located roughly midway between the towns of Rangely and Rio Blanco County seat, Meeker. The reservoir would extend north into Moffat County and be sandwiched between Highway 64 to the south and Highway 40 on the north side. Other communities located nearby, as identified by participants, include Dinosaur, Craig, Maybell, and Piceance Creek in Colorado, and Vernal, Utah.

Native American tribes, predominantly Utes, lived in the area “since time immemorial,” according to interviewees. The Utes were forcibly removed from the region in the late 1800s and the largely white settlers moved in.

A key issue identified by participants for the larger basin and region is the need for additional water storage within the White River Basin. The White River has relatively junior or younger water rights when compared to other basins on the Western Slope.

Some participants described how, until recently, the White River Basin had been relatively “left alone” or “ignored” by state water officials, as the river was not considered over-appropriated (i.e., there was enough water to go around for all human uses). The lack of usage and abundance of water likely contributed to the lack of water storage built in the White River Basin. However, more recently conditions in the White River Basin and the larger Colorado River Basin have changed, most likely due to climate change, according to a few interviewees. Less water plus more use have led to decreased flows, with a section upstream of the proposed reservoir almost to Meeker running close to dry during the hottest months of July and August. Declining flows have led to increased attention from state water officials, including multiple visits from the State Water Engineer, in recent years. This newfound attention is good news for some, who welcome the close scrutiny of water use and management. Meanwhile it is disconcerting for others, who fear loss of water, stricter measurement of water use, and the disruption of informal water management arrangements. Regardless, multiple participants described how water supports their way of life and the continuation and health of their communities.

This region of Colorado – and particularly Rangely, which was built to support the local oil and gas industry – is largely dependent on the fossil fuel industry in a boom-and-bust cycle of expansion of jobs and amenities, followed by a collapse, harming these communities. Many interviewees also spoke about a major shift they saw occurring in the region as political influence encourages a shift away from fossil fuels towards other energy sources. One example of this, provided by interviewees, is the decommissioning of a coal fired powerplant, located near Craig in Moffat County.

The destabilization of the local economy makes living in some of these communities tenuous as they search for other ways to compensate for the loss of income and identity. Several participants spoke about Colorado’s “Office of Just Transition,” which assists workers and communities impacted by closing coal mines and coal-fired power plants to transition to new opportunities that will replace lost revenues. Finding a new identity and income for residents means looking at all possibilities, and roughly half of participants suggested that the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir would be a way to provide some of that support to shift towards a more recreation-based economy.

The agricultural community provides another key source of income for this region. Agriculture in the region is predominantly forage crops (e.g., hay) as well as cattle and sheep ranching. Some interviewees believe that the future for agriculture is dire, especially considering climate change, diminishing flows in White River, increased pressure on the overall Colorado River Basin, and the relatively junior water rights along the White River. Knowing there was another pool for storing water adds to a sense of security for some of these interviewees.

The desert conditions and aridification of the region, according to some interviewees, should be a key concern as well. A few suggested that many people should not be living in this region because of the aridness, or that water use needed to be curbed.

4.4.2 Tensions within Rio Blanco County

Some interviewees shared that conversations around the proposed reservoir have been hampered by misinformation. Confusion is explicitly related to what the storage water right decree states (Case No. 2014CW3043) and what people believe is or should be in the decree. As interviewees noted previously, the decree, as currently written, only allows for up to 7,000 AF/year of releases for municipal and augmentation water. Up to 20,720 AF is available to mitigate the impacts of the reservoir, but this amount will likely be reduced once the impacts of the reservoir to the White River are accurately measured. Confusion exists around whether there is a pool of water for the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, compact compliance, and if there is water specifically for agriculture in the proposed reservoir. Some interviewees believed these were being touted as benefits of the proposed reservoir, when in fact, none are part of the decree as currently written. Some interviewees believed that unclear information was simply a lack of information, rather than overt attempts at misinformation, while others sensed that the line between what people wished and wanted to be true was blurred.

Historically there has been tension between the towns of Rangely and Meeker. Meeker, the county seat, is larger, has more amenities and access, and has been the preferred location for most important events. Rangely, according to some interviewees across Rio Blanco County, has felt like the “stepchild” or “left behind.” While some of the tension is good-natured, such as school sports rivalries, interviewees suggested that some of the tension can have real implications for well-being. One example a participant gave was explaining that Meeker has a good municipal water supply, using wells. This participant believed that Meeker residents “should want us to have a good water supply, too.”

One of the key events that has increased tension within the county is the \$4 million dollars that was granted to RBWCD for supporting the proposed reservoir project development. In the early 1980s, Rio Blanco County received funds from the Oil Shale Trust Fund for the County Capital Improvement Trust Fund (CCITF). The county had invested the funds and generally only utilized the interest in grant-making. Interviewees described the granting of the money in very different ways. In one version of events, this grant was at worst an illegal act of cronyism or at best gross malpractice with public funds. In another version of events, the funds were granted in legal proceedings by the county commissioners to the RBWCD. Soon after the transfer of money, one county commissioner resigned, and another was recalled. Several interviewees described the lingering effects of the grant decision as “divisive.” One interviewee explained that they saw increased tensions between two groups: the Meeker residents and those with more liberal leanings, and the agriculture and conservative community members on the other side. Since then, suspicion, distrust, and various rumors have increased according to some interviewees.

Part of the reason for the increase in rumors is the fact that part of the \$4 million was stolen in an alleged wire fraud in January 2023. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is currently investigating the fraud and the parties involved are unable to comment due to the ongoing investigation. A few participants believed that this has fueled rumors and suspicion, with one saying, “it’s unfortunate timing because fraud can happen to anyone.”

Several interviewees also identified the call put on the river by RBWCD for their hydropower water right at Taylor Draw Dam as suspicious. Again, interviewees shared two very different versions of events. According to some, the timing of this first call on the river feels suspect, and they believe it is a ploy to

force people to support the proposed reservoir by making water feel scarce. Meanwhile, others explain that the call was a long time in coming and done thoughtfully. RBWCD's hydropower plant had been losing money partly because it could not operate in low water conditions. The RBWCD had resisted putting a call on the river for years according to some interviewees. Those interviewees explained that RBWCD, in full consultation with the Colorado Division of Water Resources (CDWR) Division 6 Engineer, put a call on the river at a time that would impact the fewest users even if they could not get their full 620 cubic feet per second (cfs) right.

4.5 Cooperating Agency Engagement

As part of the SA, the project team held interviews with 15 representatives of cooperating agencies, many of which are also members of the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. However, as cooperating agency representatives, they "wear the hat" of their respective agencies.

At the time of the interviews cooperating agency participation was underway with communication and meetings occurring and scheduled. Participants provided the following feedback about the process to date and recommendations for future engagement:

- Consider Tribal Historic Preservation Offices among cooperating agencies
- Establish a clear understanding of agency roles and the decision space that exist within each agency. This will prevent participants from looking to an agency for input they are not qualified to weigh in on.
- Clearly define timeline, process, and milestones early in the project.
- Provide regular, monthly updates. Not every agency will engage in every meeting, but all will appreciate regular, timely information. Be cognizant of over-informing and the risk of important information getting lost in email traffic.
- Provide early review of draft alternatives before going to the public to ensure they are consistent with agency understanding.
- Provide easy file access on a platform agreed to by all cooperating agencies. SharePoint can be challenging for some agencies.
- Schedule one-on-ones meetings with the BLM lead at key milestones to elicit specific agency input. Not all agencies will voice their feedback in a forum with other agencies. This provides an opportunity to bring issues and concerns of the quieter agency representatives to the table.
- Be considerate of busy schedules and provide adequate time for returning feedback.
- There is value in holding in-person meetings at key milestones; however, provide virtual option for most meeting to reduce travel.
- Develop working group subcommittees to expedite work, and clearly explain the process for selecting and joining. One example mentioned is a Water Quality Subcommittee that can help withstand and prepare for appeals and review analysis from previous 401 certifications. Suggested participants are Colorado Parks & Wildlife, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Channel communication through one representative at each agency who can then redistribute and elicit input from colleagues.
- Streamline the process by tapping agency expertise and value at the appropriate time and regarding the appropriate subject matter, i.e., the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment when water quality analysis is being conducted. Limit participation when specific agency input is not warranted.
- Create a BLM communication tree that identifies subject matter experts and maintains a single point of contact for all correspondence with BLM.

4.6 Cultural Resources

When asked about potential sites of significant cultural and historical interest, most interviewees were unfamiliar with the presence of these sites in the area of the proposed Wolf Creek reservoir. Many interviewees suggested speaking with the Ute Tribes, as the area is their ancestral land.

A few interviewees mentioned that they believed there were sites of cultural significance in the area based on personal knowledge, knowledge of nearby sites, or the fact that the location, as wintering grounds for elk herds, would certainly be important to nomadic peoples. One individual explained that they had heard there were Ute trails passing through the gap in Coal Ridge, near the proposed dam site for Wolf Creek Reservoir. Other interviewees, when looking at maps of the location of the proposed reservoir, described how, based on the geological feature of the gap, this would have been a key passage for both animals and humans prior to the expulsion of the Utes. They also stated that sites of significance had been identified in association with the transmission line being built that will follow Highway 40 to the north. A few other interviewees described knowledge of significant sites to the east of the proposed reservoir location. One interviewee described the presence of Fremont Culture rock art nearby. Another interviewee described sites in the region that pre-date Basket Maker 1 (7000–1500 BCE) and 2 (1500 BCE- 750 CE) eras and locations in, around, and to the west of Dinosaur National Monument.

Interviewees with knowledge of the traditional importance of the region to the Utes and other peoples described how the land was valued for more than sites of cultural significance. The land, one interviewee described, is where the language, cultural practices, and traditions emerged from. So, while it might appear “barren” to others, its importance lies in the fact that their ancestors have lived and died there, meaning that the land and the water that flows through it is part of who they are. These kinds of connections – that go beyond the physical presence of cultural artifacts – inform these interviewees’ perceptions of the proposed reservoir, but as expressed by the interviewee can be challenging to capture in NEPA processes.

4.7 Downstream Impacts in Utah

Four interviews were conducted with seven Utah specific interests, while others in Colorado expressed opinions about where Utah interests might be. All Utah interviewees offered that anything in the Colorado River Basin has the potential to be controversial in Utah. They all mentioned that agricultural consumptive use is increasing throughout the Upper Basin, and one said, “We’re talking about systems conservation and fallowing at the same time we’re building new impoundments.” Others observed storage projects, in Utah and elsewhere in the West, generally make sense in the face of climate change. Additional storage is water security for Utah, especially lower elevation storage, according to two interviewees.

Another Utah-based interviewee said this new project is “a big deal to Utah if the water is impaired.” This interviewee provided the following reflection: To date, the Lower Basin states have been unsuccessful in curbing their demand, so every drop in the Upper Basin should be accounted for in all new and existing projects. Project managers should be able to show that any new storage will not impair downstream delivery. On this point, it is possible the state of Utah could ultimately oppose this new project, depending on demonstrated impacts. Any project that impacts water security will excite people, so all the tradeoffs need to be examined concerning the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir project.

Specifically, some Utah based interviewees mentioned that everyone in the Upper Colorado River Basin is suffering from the need to get water down to Lake Powell. People in Utah may have concerns over anything that might impact their ability to meet the demands from Flaming Gorge to Lake Powell. One

interviewee stated, “We’d hate to see anything happen where, because of holding water somewhere else, we have to release more out of Flaming Gorge.” It is an unresolved question whether the additional storage at the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir might exacerbate those problems. Interviewees expressed a need to learn more about possible impacts the proposed reservoir may have on downstream States.

Most Utah-based interviewees mentioned the need for more water storage in the region, and that there have been plans for additional storage even on the White River in Utah. Multiple studies have been conducted for different sites in Utah but, to date, none have been approved. Generally, interviewees stated that Utah state government, local municipalities, and water districts are in favor of additional storage, but in a way that does not impact current users. Multiple interviewees said there is no desire to arbitrarily hinder a process in Colorado when Utah has many of the same needs. Nonetheless, concern remains about potential impacts of the proposed reservoir on Utah’s water rights. If there are no impacts on Utah’s ability to deliver water to its residents, or downstream to Lake Powell, there will likely be no concern from the state of Utah, or the Vernal area, about a new storage facility on the White River in Colorado. Utah’s Division of Water Resources will perform the technical evaluation on potential impacts.

Two interviewees in the Utah area are concerned that “BLM hasn’t really shown a need for the water,” and the project is “too speculative” and “not the best use of resources,” expressing surprise that the State of Colorado granted the water right. These interviewees are also apprehensive that the new proposed reservoir may lose more water to evaporation than it provides. While there is little concern about impacts to recreation generally, or to the sport fishery specifically, on the White or Green Rivers, they expressed concern about impacts downstream for endangered fish such as the Colorado pikeminnow, chubs, and the razorback sucker, especially during spring flows.

Additionally, some interviewees expressed concerns about any potential changes to the hydrograph and what that might mean downstream and into Utah. These interviewees remain “concerned” but not outright opposed to the project at this point, although that may change as the process progresses. Remaining questions include: *How much more efficient would this proposed new reservoir make water use in the area? Would there be any savings in canal seepage, or any help with demand management?* If additional storage isn’t warranted by these kinds of costs analyses, then the project is probably not worth the resources.

Overall, interviewees expressed conditional support for the Wolf Creek project, but with concerns over potential impacts to Utah’s ability to deliver water where obligated to do so. All interviewees have many unanswered questions and unresolved concerns. They expressed that outreach and educational efforts will be beneficial early in the EIS process. Public meetings in Vernal and continued engagement with state agencies and Utah water interests, including the Utah Colorado River Authority, would be appropriate.

4.8 Oil and Gas Interests

Though the region is a large producer of oil and gas, and oil and gas companies have a strong presence, the proposed reservoir does not currently include storage for oil and gas company water rights. Water is necessary in the production of oil shale.

However, the largest owners of conditional (not yet used) water rights in the area are oil and gas companies, according to several interviewees. Many of these water rights date back to the mid-20th century and are therefore very valuable in terms of their priority date, but for various reasons, they have not been perfected or made absolute through use. In Colorado water law, owners of a conditional water

right must appear before water court every six years to request the continuation of their right by showing their due diligence in eventually perfecting that right. If these rights were to be perfected, or put to use, they would pre-date many other existing rights in the basin and exacerbate a shortage of water for the junior users. A few interviewees described how conditional water rights like this have been retired by entities that own them.

Several interviewees expressed concerns about oil and gas company water rights in the basin in relation to the Wolf Creek Reservoir. Their concerns stemmed primarily from a filing (District Court, Water Division No. 6, Case No. 2017CW3045, Applicant: Mahogany Energy Resources, LLC) currently working its way through Colorado Water Court that concerns a change of place storage right for Mahogany Energy Resources, LLC (“Mahogany”). Mahogany has applied to shift their storage rights to the same location as the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir. This is concerning to these interviewees because it could mean that, if the reservoir is built, they would be able to perfect, or put to use, their rights, drawing additional water out of the White River. Several interviewees believed this could have profound implications for the basin in terms of future water use, while another interviewee disagreed, stating that they did not believe Wolf Creek was a realistic location for oil and gas interests to store water.

Interviewees who raised this topic asked:

- What is the relationship between the Mahogany case and the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir?
- What does the proposed reservoir mean for the future of other conditional water rights owned by oil and gas companies?
- Are there implications for water policy and law in general in Colorado? What are those implications?

4.9 Purpose and Decree of Wolf Creek Reservoir

Most participants were concerned with understanding and clarifying the purpose and need for the project, confusion and clarity around the water right decree, and the possibility of hydropower generation.

Most interviewees expressed that reservoirs in general are necessary in today’s world, while a few disagreed. Many interviewees also stated that they were generally supportive of storage in Western Colorado, and in particular for the Yampa, White, and Green River basins. Some interviewees were quick to point out that their support for a reservoir in general did not mean they were sure that the Wolf Creek site was the right location or that a reservoir was necessary. Several interviewees described how, in today’s world, reservoirs quickly become politicized, and some stated that because of the history of the Colorado River Basin and perceived harms related to the era of dam building, new reservoirs must and will be closely scrutinized.

One of the most repeated questions posed by interviewees during the Situation Assessment process was about the purpose and need for the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir. This question came from residents on both the western and eastern sides of Rio Blanco County, as well as from outside non-government organizations (NGO) and state and federal agencies. The reasons people asked this question ranged from “I don’t have enough information” to a sense that the project purpose and need had not been adequately established to justify it. In general, people wanted to know: *What is the specific need for water, and how much water is needed?* They wished to separate that from the secondary benefits and water uses and anticipated benefits of the proposed reservoir.

The RBWCD's publicly stated main purpose for the proposed reservoir is to augment flows to the White River during the low water period (late July through August) to improve quality by increasing the quantity of water that reaches the Town of Rangely's intakes. Issues some interviewees described include algae blooms frequently clogging Rangely's main municipal intake. According to interviewees, continually fixing this problem is expensive and time-consuming for the town. Of Rangely residents interviewed, a few mentioned that during the river's low flow period, poor quality "cow water" is expensive to treat and can still have an unpleasant taste and smell, others were unaware of this issue. By increasing the flows of the White River below the dam, the hydrograph would be smoothed out, theoretically preventing the amassing of considerable algae blooms, and improving poor water quality.

Most interviewees understood that Rangely had some sort of water issue, but only some were able to provide further detail while others requested further independent analysis. Most also agreed that people have a right to have clean water to drink but were divided as to whether Wolf Creek reservoir was the answer.

Many interviewees were curious if the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir was to replace storage in Kenney Reservoir, held back by Taylor Draw Dam and located just to the east and upstream of Rangely. Kenney, completed in 1983, has since silted in, of which almost all interviewees were aware. However, interviewees were unclear if the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir was a direct response to this (more on this topic in the "Alternatives" section). According to a few interviewees, Kenney Reservoir's loss of storage capacity is not relevant because it has never been a storage reservoir. While reservoir capacity has decreased, Kenney's sole purpose is to provide hydropower, and it is a "run of the river" reservoir, meaning it must let out what comes in. While there are conditional municipal water rights associated with the reservoir, they have never been perfected, meaning put to use.

In their original application to Colorado water court for a storage water right, the RBWCD also included requests for the following additional unmet needs: environmental flows for endangered fish, flatwater recreation, agricultural water supply, Colorado River Compact curtailment, and hydropower. Some interviewees described RBWCD's list of needs as "a field of dreams" or an attempt at "win-win" that missed the mark because almost all those needs were denied permitting in the water court process.

In general, there was a sense of confusion and lack of clarity around what the proposed reservoir's storage right decree allowed as uses for released water. Some interviewees believed that this confusion was intentional, with different sources providing conflicting information. Many interviewees expressed questions about various aspects of the water right associated with the proposed reservoir. These questions included:

- Is there water for releases to support native fish (and the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program) in the White River included in the decree?
- Is the full 66,720 AF necessary relative to the current and future needs of Rangely?
- Is compact compliance included in the water right decree?
- What does water for "mitigation" mean, and what happens if/when it is not needed?
- Is "mitigation" water only during the construction phase, or is it perpetual?
- What kind of augmentation is possible with this reservoir location?
- Does the potential exist for water to be used for agriculture and irrigation?

Several interviewees explained that the water storage right decree (District Court, Water Division No. 6, Case No. 2014CW3043, Applicant: Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District) permits storage rights for either the Wolf Creek Reservoir or an in-channel reservoir on the White River and does not allow for releases to support the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. According to several interviewees, the only uses for fish are for mitigating impacts of the dam and reservoir and in-reservoir

uses. These interviewees also wished to clarify that compact compliance – originally included by RBWCD in their request for storage rights – is not part of the water right decree as it was considered speculative by the state. Nor is any water for irrigation or agricultural purposes included in the water right at this time.

Participants talked about the things they wished to see in the proposed reservoir, and according to RBWCD documents and local residents, extensive public outreach occurred during the initial stages of project development. Of these participants, several believed that RBWCD worked to create a proposed reservoir that would meet as many needs as possible. This perspective is reflected in the preliminary stages of the application for a storage water right by the RBWCD, where many needs and desires for the reservoir were listed including agriculture, recreation, compact compliance, and the Fish Recovery Program.

Many interviewees expressed a desire to see multi-purpose, mixed use reservoirs that meet a variety of diverse needs for the most people possible, rather than a “boutique” or single-purpose need. Some interviewees believe this idea of a multi-purpose reservoir is not possible with the decree (District Court, Water Division No. 6, Case No. 2014CW3043, Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District) issued by the State for the proposed reservoir. This also came up in conversations around hydroelectric power generation, which is not currently included in the plans for the dam, but which many interviewees expressed interest in seeing if the project were to move forward.

4.10 Recreation

RBWCD has publicly stated that one of the main needs for the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir is for flatwater recreation. Likewise, this was a key theme amongst interviewees. Recreational access, activities, and amenities were viewed positively by many interviewees, especially as economic drivers for Rio Blanco County and nearby Moffat County. A few interviewees spoke about how they believed a reservoir with recreational opportunities puts “unused” land to “good use,” and they were happy to see more opportunities for locals. Interviewees also had concerns and questions related to the perceived impacts of recreation and access as well as questions about who would benefit from the opportunities.

Recreational opportunities from the proposed reservoir identified by interviewees included: boating, fishing, waterfowl hunting, birdwatching, swimming, scuba diving, stand-up paddle boarding, and other flatwater activities. Interviewees also spoke about the recreational opportunities associated with a reservoir, such as campgrounds, trails for hiking, mountain biking, and ATVs. A few interviewees identified potential downstream recreational opportunities created by potentially increased flows in the White River during municipal and augmentation releases. The Town of Rangely received a grant to improve river access in town, and improved flows would potentially support river recreation, including rafting, canoeing, kayaking, and stand-up paddle boarding, as well as fishing.

Along with these benefits, came the perception amongst many interviewees that recreational opportunities will also create more jobs and businesses related to the reservoir or additional flows in the river. Interviewees identified water-related outfitters, food-based businesses, and shuttle services. Some interviewees recognized that while these would not replace coal or oil and gas jobs in terms of income, they could at least provide some economic support and diversification of the local economy. One group of interviewees that touted the positive economic impacts of recreation identified Moffat County, specifically the Town of Dinosaur, as the primary recipient of those benefits, not Rio Blanco County and Rangely. This perception was driven from the assumption that reservoir access would come primarily from Highway 40, and that the majority of recreators would be arriving from Utah, where closer reservoirs are overused.

Other interviewees did not see the proposed reservoir as a viable recreation opportunity due to skepticism that fluctuating water levels will be adequate to sustain a healthy game fish population or that a relatively shallow reservoir will provide the same quality of boating opportunities as a deeper reservoir.

At least some concerns and questions were raised by most interviewees. Particularly, interviewees were concerned about or wanted to more information on:

- Access. Where will roads and bridges be located? Will they impact local landowners? Will there be access from Highway 64 near Rangely, or will the town be passed by and miss the recreational traffic?
- Management. Will the reservoir, like so many others in Colorado, become a state park and managed by CPW? If not, who will manage it? CPW will likely need to detox boats from mussels and manage stocked fish populations. What will the relationship with CPW and whoever manages the reservoir's recreational amenities be?
- Amenities. How will campgrounds, trails, and other amenities be selected and sited? How will the impacts to grazing permittees and local landowners be mitigated?
- Use. Will people travel to recreate here? Some cited the lack of use at Kenney Reservoir as evidence that a reservoir at Wolf Creek was not likely to be heavily used, while others believed that Wolf Creek Reservoir would be a significant draw. Where do people from the local communities currently recreate?
- Wildlife impact. What are the impacts to wildlife from increased recreation in the area?
- Law Enforcement. Who will be responsible for fire and police protection?
- General Public Interest. Neighboring communities have closer, more accessible reservoirs. Why would they come to this one?

4.11 Site and Selection of Wolf Creek Reservoir

Almost all interviewees were interested in discussing the site and selection process for the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir. Participants mostly had questions about various aspects of how the Wolf Creek Reservoir site came to be selected as the preferred location and why. From there, participants ranged from trusting that RBWCD did their due diligence to outright suspicion of the process. Participants also wanted to know how the BLM would incorporate RBWCD's background work on site selection into the NEPA process. Additionally, interviewees asked questions about evaporation, geology, soils, pumping and filling the reservoir, and cost and funding.

According to the RBWCD, the final selection for the proposed Wolf Creek location outranked the other identified sites. Examining the extent of their analysis is not within the scope of this report. The RBWCD contends the Wolf Creek site is the preferred location because:

- A site located off the main channel of the White River deters the accumulation of sediment, unlike an on-channel reservoir such as Kenney, upstream from Rangely. Three ephemeral drainages make up the Wolf Creek drainage, which contribute minimal sedimentation when compared to the river.
- A site located off the channel of the White River reduces impacts to the relatively natural flows that still exist on the White River, as the reservoir would not impede a flowing river.
- When compared with other locations, particularly higher up in the basin, fewer private landowners would be impacted. Only land that belongs to the BLM and the Colorado State Land Board would be inundated. There are a few private landowners in the vicinity who would be impacted by a pumping station, viewshed change, and potentially by access roads. The final arrangement of the pumping station and access roads is not currently known.

- RBWCD considered this location the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA).
- The location of construction materials nearby would reduce construction costs.
- When compared with other sites examined by the RBWCD, this site did not appear to have any issues related to fault lines or geological features that would make a reservoir problematic.

However, many interviewees expressed concerns about this specific site's location. First, several noted that locally this area is referred to as "Winter Valley" and pointed out that it is prime wintering habitat for the local elk populations. While some believed this area was "underutilized" and "barren" and that it would be nice to "put it to use," others believed that it was important as relatively un-disrupted, natural habitat, even if "people can't see that and it looks barren to them." (Discussed further in "Habitat" section). A few mentioned the importance of preserving the BLM-identified lands with wilderness characteristics in the Lower Wolf Creek and Coal Ridge areas, that overlap with the proposed project area. Tribal consultations revealed the area is important ancestrally, as part of the traditional homelands for the Ute peoples and other tribes. (Discussed further in "Cultural" section).

Many interviewees mentioned wanting more information about evaporation rates from a reservoir in a high-altitude, dry, arid desert. While some acknowledged that evaporation rates would not be as high as lakes Powell or Mead, the concern some expressed was that they would be higher than if the reservoir were located further up the basin (more discussion on this in the Colorado River Basin Section). Additionally, the location of the proposed reservoir towards the lower end of the basin and closer to the Colorado-Utah border meant there were fewer opportunities for augmentation and less flexibility to meet multiple needs once water was released, even with an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with YJWCD located upstream and to the east of the reservoir. Additionally, the reservoir's site is below the Colorado Water Conservation Board's (CWCB) in-stream water right section, which benefits native and endangered fish. This section is consistently underwatered in key irrigating months, and interviewees stated this proposed reservoir was unlikely to provide any support for that section of the White River.

Despite the location off the main channel of the White River, many interviewees expressed concerns related to the pumping and filling of Wolf Creek Reservoir. These concerns related to the timing of diverting flows off the White River, which would likely happen at peak flows. Diverting these peak flows, some said, would diminish the still relatively natural flows in the White and could impact the flushing flow "cues" that fish receive and impact spawning. Also, concern over how long it will take to fill the reservoir was a key point for some interviewees. If drought conditions continue to prevail, some felt filling the reservoir would become a "joke," and it would remain a muddy hole or, conversely, irrevocably harm the White River by pumping out water at a time when the ecosystems dependent on the water need all they can get.

Additional questions from interviewees included a desire for more information about the soils, the permeability of the ground (will water leak into the ground?), seepage, geotechnical, groundwater impacts, hydro-geomorphology, and the possibility of leeching naturally occurring contaminants into water that would then be transferred downstream.

Concerns related to the cost and funding of the project were raised by just over half of interviewees. Some held the strong view that the RBWCD needed to update their estimates in current dollars from the 2018 estimate and that even that estimate was low. Funding, some surmised, was likely to come from grants, loans, local water project funding through the Colorado River District, and potentially a local tax or mill levy. However, those interviewees were torn as to whether a mill levy or tax would pass. Some interviewees mentioned suspicions that the oil and gas industry would supply funds if they were to

benefit from the project. Speculation about where the funding would come from was fueled by the fact that RBWCD are the alleged victims of a wire fraud scheme, currently under investigation (more in the Context section). In response, other interviewees felt that the RBWCD had shown good faith in how they managed and paid for Kenney Reservoir.

A few interviewees with experience in reservoir permitting or constructing emphasized that even if the cost is high and the return-on-investment low, sometimes creating better and cleaner access to water for people was the “right” thing to do.

Some interviewees mentioned the expense of pumping water from the White River into a location off the main channel of the White River as potentially “cost prohibitive” and problematic considering future climate predictions of reduced flows and the high sediment load of the White River.

4.12 Tribal Interests

All tribes interviewed expressed interest in learning more about the proposed reservoir project and participating in the NEPA process. Tribal interests and concerns are incorporated throughout other sections of this report but are highlighted here.

Native American tribes, predominantly Utes, lived in the area “since time immemorial,” according to interviewees. The Utes were forcibly removed from the region in the late 1800s and the largely white settlers moved in. Tribal interviewees’ relationship with the land and region are different from the rest of interviewees. Tribal interviewees described the land as the emerging place of their language, culture, and traditions. Though removed from the land they previously inhabited, they expressed a strong sense of kinship with it.

Several interviewees highlighted that sites of cultural importance are believed to exist in the area of the proposed reservoir (see more in the “Cultural Resources” section).

In general, interviewees expressed that it was important to value sharing water resources and respect the limits of those resources. Tribal interviewees were concerned about the potential impacts to Tribal water rights, downstream impacts to the Colorado River, impacts to the land that would be inundated, and impacts beyond the immediate area to the wildlife displaced and ecosystem. Mitigating the impacts of the reservoir was best done, stated one interviewee, by not diverting water to fill the reservoir in the first place. The proposed reservoir should be considered, suggested interviewees, in the broader context, specifically considering that while 2023 might be a record water year, with climate change, that is unlikely to be the norm.

Questions asked by Tribal interviewees included:

- How will this impact Tribal water rights downstream?
- How will climate change impact the river and filling the proposed reservoir?
- How will the proposed reservoir benefit tribes?
- How will plants, animals, and the ecosystem downstream be impacted by the proposed reservoir?

4.13 White River Habitat

When it came to the habitat and ecosystems of the White River itself, interviewees either believed that fish would benefit from increased flows, or they were concerned about potential negative impacts. Concerns about the proposed reservoir related to native fish species, potential degradation and damage to the river’s banks and wetlands, and the introduction of invasive species. Other interviewees maintained that because of increased flows in the White River, especially at low flow periods, the fish

and habitat will be direct beneficiaries. Currently, the water right decree (District Court, Water Division No. 6, Case No. 2014CW3043, Applicant: Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District) does not provide for water to support the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. It does include mitigation water to alleviate the impacts of the proposed reservoir on the river.

The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program is comprised of 22 organizations and government entities including the CWCB, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, the Colorado River Water Conservation District (known hereafter as the “Colorado River District”), The Nature Conservancy, and Western Resource Advocates. Its mission, as one interviewee put it, can be summed up by one interviewee who said, “well if those fish are endangered, let’s make them not endangered.”

The White River Management Plan process is currently under review by the USFWS and the Recovery Program, but a final decision to issue a Programmatic Biological Opinion (PBO) has not been made. A PBO is also known as a Section 7 consultation under the ESA. The PBO, though advocated for by some participants, has not been initiated. Currently, diverging opinions exist about the value of initiating a PBO. The Yampa, Gunnison, and Colorado rivers all have a PBO, but the White River does not. According to some interviewees, the White River is also the only river in the region that does not have dedicated reservoirs whose purpose is to augment depletions to the river or low flows. A PBO is a management plan for the native species present and draws from future projections of depletions. Eventually, it is possible that a PBO will be approved by principal government parties in Colorado and at the federal level. The proposed reservoir, explained a few interviewees, would not initially be covered by the PBO. Interviewees believed that during the EIS process a Biological Opinion for the reservoir will be created that would then be combined with a PBO depending on the final decision in the EIS.

Specifically, interviewees were concerned that native fish species would be adversely affected through the in-stream impact of the proposed reservoir. River management, particularly for native fisheries, is challenging, according to a few interviewees. Trying to time water releases to support fish as well as meet the needs of Rangely would be difficult. Plus, the proposed reservoir is located downstream of CWCB’s in-stream flow reach, where targets for flows during the hottest months are rarely met.

The White River, according to several participants, still has relatively natural flows, and those flows would be disrupted downstream of the proposed reservoir pumping station. These participants also believed that the amount of water the RBWCD would divert into the reservoir would constitute a considerable portion of the river. Though the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir would be located off the main channel of the White River, diverting flows, even a small amount, could cause impacts to native fish such as disrupting the flushing flows that help to trigger spawning events. Additionally, the temperature of releases could be critically important to native fish species. Other interviewees disputed that view, stating that the potential diversion to fill the reservoir would not be significant, and that Kenney Reservoir already prevents the easy movement of native fish upstream, dismissing others’ concerns.

Interviewees also expressed concerns related to the White River’s banks, channelization of the White River, and potential for establishment of invasive plant species. Anytime there is disturbance to the soil from something like the construction of a dam and pumping station, according to a few interviewees, it opens the door for invasive plant species, like tamarisk, to become established. According to one estimate, approximately 60% of the river is degraded, leading this interviewee to ask: *How would the health of the river be better off with this reservoir?* According to another interviewee, the concern for invasive plant species matters because it can lead to armoring of the banks by tamarisk roots, which

outcompete native species, and are able to cover a larger territory than native plant species and still draw from the river through deep tap roots, which in turn, increases the evapotranspiration of water.

Still, other interviewees contend that the benefits of a large storage pool of water outweigh some of the costs of construction, because of the benefits to the hydrograph and fish.

In general, several interviewees expressed a desire for more science related to the native fish and habitat of the White River. Other questions posed by participants include:

- What is the hydrograph going to look like with a reservoir in place?
- How will climate change impact projected flows and the amount of water available?
- Can we look at water use in the basin in conjunction with flow targets?
- How will the health of the fish and river be better with this reservoir?
- How will releases from Wolf Creek be managed for fish needs?
- How will Wolf Creek be managed in conjunction with Kenney Reservoir?
- How are different fish species and age classes of fish impacted by stream temperature and discharge as well as duration of releases from the reservoir?
- How will the stocked fish be prevented from entering the White River?

4.14 Wolf Creek Drainage Habitat & Wildlife

Interviewees viewed the land that would be inundated by the proposed reservoir differently. Some viewed it as an unused drainage, that could provide multiple benefits to people. Any impacts to wildlife could be mitigated through enhancing habitat elsewhere. Others saw the area as prime habitat for the species that depend on it, connected with a larger ecosystem. A few mentioned the importance of preserving the BLM-identified lands with wilderness characteristics, specifically the Lower Wolf Creek and Coal Ridge areas, that overlap with the proposed project site. Some of these interviewees expressed concern that it was not just the precise location of the proposed reservoir that concerned them, but how the whole ecosystem would be affected. The impacts, though local, could reverberate out from the proposed reservoir and have lasting effects that would be difficult to identify by just looking at the proposed reservoir site.

Many interviewees identified the habitat and specific area, known locally as “Winter Valley”, as prime wintering ground for elk and mule deer, and has been, likely for hundreds if not thousands of years. The specific area was also identified by many interviewees as potential habitat for the endangered black-footed ferret and greater sage-grouse. These concerns were viewed as worth investigating further. One interview stated that the elk would likely “just find a new location to graze in the winter,” while a few others agreed but cautioned that this could be part of “death by 1,000 small cuts” for elk habitat. One participant expressed that, due to the topography of the region and elevation of the Wolf Creek Drainage, if the proposed reservoir is constructed, elk will continue to come to the area and may suffer losses in the winter by falling through the ice. This is something that occurs regularly at Blue Mesa Reservoir, the interviewee explained.

Some interviewees were interested as to whether the endangered black-footed ferret still lived in the area. Previously thought to be extinct, black-footed ferrets were released in the drainage between 2001 and 2006. Interviewees were uncertain as to whether any still were living in the drainage as none had been sighted in the last 10 years and were thought to have been wiped out by disease. The key point, one interviewee noted, was that the reason they were introduced here was because it met the qualifications for prime, relatively undisturbed habitat for reintroduction with an abundance of their food source (i.e., prairie dogs).

A few participants also wanted more information on whether the greater sage-grouse was present.

While there are currently no known leks, it is historic greater sage-grouse habitat.

More information and studies on the presence of black-footed ferret and greater sage-grouse was requested by some interviewees.

4.15 Prospects for Collaboration

Most SA participants expressed a desire to explore all potential alternatives, while a few believed that the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir is the only solution to the Rangely municipal water supply system. Almost all participants believe that a town should have access to enough clean water to supply its needs, but disagreement existed as to whether that need was firmly established in Rangely.

All Cooperating Agencies and Tribal representatives that participated in the SA indicated a willingness and desire to actively participate in the EIS. Few had preconceived preferences for the Wolf Creek Reservoir or any other potential alternative at this stage in the process. Many Cooperating Agency representatives had positive feedback for BLM about the engagement and communication to-date as fair, thorough, and timely.

This open-mindedness coupled with near consensus among local community members that there is a problem that needs to be fixed, are the key ingredients for successful collaborative problem solving. The Recommended Engagement Plan chapter of this report details specific recommendations for public processes that will foster collaborative engagement and equitable public participation. Clear, straight-forward, and easily understood messaging that addresses the questions that exist on these issues, will help build a foundation of mutual understanding for which collaboration can build.

Despite the positive environment for collaboration, some limitations do exist that could hamper the prospect of participation among some parties:

- The RBWCD's conditional storage water right of 66,720 acre-feet is limited to either the main stem of the White River or the location off the main channel of the White River into the tributary Wolf Creek drainage. Knowing this, alternatives that do not meet that criterion, may be ineligible for the water right. This factor might limit some parties' willingness to truly consider the potential viability of all alternatives, and many participants expressed interest in seeing outside analysis of water demands drive the conversation, not just the conditional water right.
- Many interviewees expressed a general lack of interest with public processes in Rio Blanco County, particularly in Rangely. Despite BLM's best effort to put forward an inclusive, collaborative public process, participation may remain low and underrepresent the population.
- The likelihood of collaboration among parties that oppose all reservoirs and diversions in the Colorado River Basin is low.

5. RECOMMENDED ENGAGEMENT PLAN

5.1 Introduction

This Recommended Engagement Plan (REP) provides a recommended process for public involvement and cooperating agency and Tribal coordination outside of government-to-government consultation throughout the EIS process. Recommendations are directly informed by SA participant feedback and the professional experience and expertise of the project team.

A successful public involvement and education process is characterized by communication with the public that is early, continuous, meaningful, and inclusive during the life of the project. It is recommended that this REP be considered a “living document” that will be used for quality assurance by the BLM and modified and updated to meet current and emerging public interest.

5.2 Messaging

For a complex environmental process, it is recommended that messaging be clear, concise, and free of overly technical terms and acronyms, accessible to wide audiences beyond water policy experts and engineers. Project details should be available for those interested, community-level messaging that is simplified, focused, and demonstrates agency transparency will reach the widest sector of the community. This will also help the project team determine affected parties’ level of interest in the project and anticipate the type of feedback they will provide.

More specifically, public communication from BLM should:

- Describe BLM’s role, jurisdiction, interest and goals, and how those align or differ from that of the RBWCD. Clearly defining the role of all agencies, specifically BLM and RBWCD, up-front and early will help minimize concerns about conflicts of interest or bias in the analysis.
- Define the decision the BLM will ultimately make and describe the other agencies that are party to the decision.
- Use plain English, free of jargon.
- Define the situation and public decision space.
- State what is and is not included in the decreed uses of the water.
- Describe this project’s relationship with the Colorado River Compact.
- Include all cost estimates for all alternatives, including construction and annual maintenance.
- Include a straight-forward timeline for NEPA and beyond, with public engagement opportunities clearly identified. This includes continued communication on schedule changes and updates.
- Identify all agency regulatory requirements.
- Address the role and relationship of the oil and gas industry.

5.3 Economic Strategies Workshop

Economic Strategies Workshops are designed to solicit input from local government officials, community leaders, business owners, and citizens on economic and social goals for the local community, and to discuss regional economic conditions, trends, and strategies with the BLM that may be impacted positively or negatively by the proposed reservoir.

Considering that an area of interest amongst many interviewees is the economic impact of the reservoir on the region and municipal water for Rangely, convening one economic strategies workshop in Rangely will provide the opportunity for the Rangely community to share their thoughts on the community’s economic goals, opportunities, and growth trends. This input will give BLM a deeper understanding of

the community's socioeconomic status and future for consideration in the EIS.

The project team provides the following recommendations:

- Hold the meeting in the *Scoping with a public notice of intent (NOI)* phase, after the Pre-NOI broader public meetings (described below) have occurred. This will help keep the focus of the conversation on economics rather than the broader project. Ideally participants in this workshop will have participated in the public meetings and therefore will come with the basic project understanding.
- Advertise the meeting locally in Rangely through outlets outlined in the following section with direct invitations to the City of Rangely, RBWCD, Rangely Chamber of Commerce, Western Rio Blanco County Recreation and Metropolitan District, and White River and Douglas Creek Water Conservation District. Early coordination with the Chamber of Commerce will assist with notification to area businesses and employers.
- Hold the meeting at Rangely Recreation Center.
- Provide third-party neutral professional facilitation support to manage the interview, solicit participation among attendees, keep meetings focused on an economics agenda with key discussion items, and capture meeting notes.
- Provide locally specific socioeconomic data to help inform and steer the discussion.
- Discussion items for consideration include:
 - o Social and economic conditions in the past, present, and future
 - o Economic opportunities and trends
 - o Role of public lands, minerals, and resources
 - o Outreach ideas and support for future EIS public engagement
- Define a clear objective of gathering public insight from the discussion items listed above that will educate the BLM about the potential impacts of the proposed reservoir to the local economy. The facilitator can lead discussion towards gathering input that informs the BLM's stated objective.

5.4 Outreach and Notifications

To aid in the dissemination of consistent, accurate, and timely information, all outreach and notification outlets should redirect the public to the central, project-specific, BLM managed website as the trusted source for current information (<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2021544/510>). Website content should be reviewed and updated monthly, clearly identifying where the EIS process is at in the NEPA timeline, with specific attention to the public comment opportunities: Scoping, public review of the draft EIS, public protest of the proposed RMPA/final EIS, Record of Decision, and, if approved, commencement of construction activities.

Include a story-map feature on the website that tells the story of the process that led to the EIS and the EIS process with easy-to-understand maps and photos of the proposed reservoir location and likely access points. The story map can be updated with draft alternatives and associated graphics at the appropriate stage.

Timed with content updates to the website, distributing updates through a diversity of information outlets will help ensure communication is reaching the maximum number of the interested and impacted public, at all socioeconomic levels:

- Electronic newsletters to the project contact list/database.

- This should include all regional grazing, angler, off-highway-vehicle, sportsman and outfitter groups; and Colorado based non-government/conservation organizations.
- Piggyback on or request forwarding messages through existing distribution lists, specifically the White River & Douglas Creek Conservation Districts, regional Chambers of Commerce, Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District, Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District, and the Yampa/White/Green Basin Roundtable, Colorado Department of Water Resources, and Colorado Water Conservation Board.
- News releases to the following media outlets:
 - BasinNow.com
 - Craig Pilot
 - The Daily Sentinel, Grand Junction
 - Rangely Review
 - Rio Blanco Herald Times
 - Steamboat Pilot
 - Vernal Express
 - Aspen Journalism
 - Colorado Public Radio
 - Denver Post
 - Colorado Sun
 - Fresh Water News (Water Education Colorado)
- Social media posting through BLM managed platforms (Twitter and Facebook) and shared with the following local, regional outlets:
 - Regional Chambers of Commerce
 - “Two Girls in Rangely” podcast
 - Colorado Northwest Community College (CNCC) Marketing Department
 - Community Facebook groups: Town of Rangely, Colorado; The Rangely Bulletin Board; Meeker Colorado, Message Board; Dinosaur Community Connections; Vernal Utah Community Information and Questions Page; Vernal Events; Craig Community Chat.
- Post hard copy flyers at the following locations:
 - Rangely Recreation Center
 - Freeman Fairfield Center, Meeker
 - Regional post offices
 - Piceance Creek Rock School
 - Buford School House
 - Rangely and Meeker coffee shops and restaurants
 - Rangely and Meeker grocery stores
 - Rangely Kum-n-go
 - Vernal Wal-Mart
 - Regional schools
 - Pioneer Medical Center, Meeker
 - Rangely District Hospital
 - Government offices:
 - Courthouse (Rio Blanco and Moffit)
 - BLM (Meeker, Craig, Vernal)
 - Colorado Parks and Wildlife (Meeker)
 - City Halls (Rangely, Meeker, Craig, Dinosaur, Vernal)
 - Post Offices

In addition to the above outlets, the following are recommended prior to public meetings:

- Door-to-door delivery in Rangely neighborhoods with EJ considerations
- Direct mailer to all Rangely residents or Moon Lake Electric utility bill inserts
- Announcement at existing group meetings:
 - o Conservation districts
 - o Check “Rangely Review” for list of upcoming events
 - o Resource Advisory Councils
 - o Large employers such as Pioneer Medical Center and Rangely District Hospital staff
 - o Yampa/White/Green Basin Roundtable
 - o Colorado Cattleman’s Association
 - o Colorado Sheep Industry
 - o State of the River Meetings by Colorado River District
- Send information home with students to help connect with families at all socioeconomic levels.
- Outreach and notice to appropriate parties in all seven Colorado River states, through coordination with appropriate BLM state office communication departments.

5.5 Public Meetings

Public meetings are a foundational element of public engagement and support project transparency and community dialogue. Many interviewees indicated a general lack of interest in Rio Blanco County, particularly Rangely, with participating in public meetings and taking interest in community issues. The project team recommends two rounds of public meetings, each round with a diversity of locations and formats. This is likely the maximum amount of time residents will be willing to give. More than two rounds could result in reduced interest and participation. The following project milestones are recommended for public meetings:

1. *Pre-NOI* to introduce the project, process, agency roles and receive comment about resource values and alternative considerations that will help inform the public interest and development of potential alternatives. Pre-NOI input also provide flexibility before the NEPA clock begins to help shape the schedule and define the Purpose and Need statement for BLM and the cooperating agencies.
2. *Draft EIS and public comment period* to receive comment about alternatives.

At each milestone, meetings should feature both in-person and virtual options as stand-alone meetings (no hybrid) at different locations and different times of the day to ensure that anybody who wants to attend can. Weekday and weekend options also help provide options for different schedules.

To further increase the potential for participation among all socioeconomic levels in the community, providing some meeting options with food (coffee and donuts in the morning; pizza and soda in the evening) allows members of the public to better manage their time, without having to sacrifice a mealtime to attend. Refreshments and activities for kids (coloring and activity table) may also incentivize broader participation among traditionally underrepresented parties.

The virtual-only meeting platform (Zoom recommended for optimal host control and breakout room feature) will be linked to the central website prior to the meeting. Those who wish to access public meetings virtually will be provided with easy navigation instructions via the website, rather than be expected to download virtual meeting applications from the Internet. The addition of a Zoom registration provides the opportunity to capture a virtual sign-in sheet and adequately staff the meeting.

The recommended meeting format is a combination presentation/open house. In this format, meetings are advertised for the public to attend anytime between a 2-3 hour block of time. Beginning at 15 minutes after the meeting start, BLM provides a 15-minute orientation and informational presentation introducing the project (scoping with a public NOI) and the alternatives (Draft EIS and public comment period) in an audience/stage format in half of the room. Presentations are repeated every 20-40 minutes, driven by attendance.

Following each presentation, attendees are directed to an open house space in the other half of the room where BLM subject matter experts are present to answer questions and discuss the project at respective stations: recreation, fisheries, wildlife, botany, cultural resources, and each alternative during the DRAFT EIS and public comment period meetings. In the virtual format, “stations” occur in topic specific breakout rooms. The public can enter in and out of at their leisure with subject matter experts and facilitation support present in each room.

Many SA participants indicated a preference for town-hall style public meetings over open houses, because they provide the opportunity to hear different perspectives and questions addressed. BLM should consider this format as an alternate option in Rangely and/or Meeker, in addition to the presentation/open house format with professional third-party neutral facilitation support and BLM subject matter experts available to manage the discussion and address questions that are offered. Soliciting questions from the public in advance of the meeting and having the facilitator ask them of a subject matter expert panel is a strategy that can help reduce the potential for grandstanding.

Materials in support of these meetings include sign-in sheets, comment forms, Frequently Asked Question handouts, slide presentations, maps, and informational display boards focused on introducing the project and resource areas (scoping with a public NOI) and alternatives (Draft EIS and public comment period). Having versions available in Spanish is advised.

To meet the needs and capabilities of all potential participants, opportunity to provide comment should include hand-written, mail-in, electronic and verbal recording formats, ideally with an extended commenting period beyond the typical 30 days.

To reach the broad public interest, in-person meeting location recommendations are:

- Rangely: Recreation Center or CNCC
- Meeker: Freeman Fairfield Center, White River Electric, Library or Fire District
- Piceance Creek: Rock School House
- Buford: Buford School House
- Craig: It was suggested by one group of SA participants that Dinosaur is the preferred location due to agriculture/grazing interests and being the closest proximity to the likely access road to the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir location, however due to its relatively close proximity to public meetings in Rangely and Craig being the population center of Moffat County, this will geographically distribute meeting locations more evenly.
- Vernal, Utah: Coordinate with Ute Tribe and Vernal community to determine if Vernal is the best location to reach Tribal members and regional interest or if an alternative location is preferred.

5.6 Additional Considerations

Following are additional considerations that support equal opportunity, accessibility, and good practice:

- Coordinate public information dissemination with the resource agencies and organizations that interface with EJ populations, such as school districts, public housing authorities, Rangely District Hospital, and the Western Rio Blanco Metropolitan Recreation and Park District.
- Do not hold public meetings or comment periods during hunting season or Christmas holidays.
- Review the White River & Douglas Creek Conservation Districts *Land and Natural Resource Use Plan and Policies* as an example of successful public involvement in the region.
- SA participants did not indicate a high presence of limited English proficiency (LEP) populations in Rio Blanco County; however, Spanish-speaking populations do exist, and providing targeted outreach and information translated in Spanish will help create opportunities for participation for those community members. Further evaluation utilizing tools such as the Environmental Protection Agency’s EJ Screen (<https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen>) will better help identify demographical data and potential LEP communities.
- Consider holding a public meeting at each phase in coordination with pre-existing events. Meeting the public where they are provides the opportunity for engagement with those who may not have availability to attend a scheduled meeting due to work and home commitments and are less engaged with social and traditional media outlets. This also engages the population with a casual interest and that may not otherwise take the time to participate. SA participants suggested the following:
 - o September Fest, Rangely: Labor Day weekend, vendors in the park on Saturday “Fun Day in the Park.”
 - o Range Call Celebration, Meeker (July)
 - o Coordinated with shift changes at the Deserado Mine
 - o Grand Old West Days, Craig (May)
 - o Rangely and Meeker Rodeos
 - o Moffat County Hot Air Balloon Fest
 - o Whittle the Wood, Craig (June)
 - o High School sports events
 - o Continually check “Rangely Review” for a list of seasonal events

5.7 Cooperating Agency Engagement

As part of the SA, the project team conducted interviews with 15 representatives of cooperating agencies, many of which are also members of the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. However, as cooperating agency representatives, they “wear the hat” of their respective agencies.

At the time of the interviews (March and April 2023), cooperating agency participation was underway with communication, a field tour, and meetings occurring and scheduled. Participants provided the following feedback about the process to date and recommendations for future engagement:

- Consider Tribal Historic Preservation Offices among cooperating agencies
- Establish a clear understanding of agency roles and the decision space that exist within each agency. This will prevent participants from looking to an agency for input they are not qualified to weigh in on.
- Clearly define timeline, process, and milestones early in the project.
- Provide regular, monthly updates. Not every agency will engage in every meeting, but all will appreciate regular, timely information. Be cognizant of over-informing and the risk of important information getting lost in email traffic.
- Provide early review of draft alternatives before going to the public to ensure they are consistent with agency understanding.

- Provide easy file access on a platform agreed to by all cooperating agencies. SharePoint can be challenging for some agencies.
- Schedule one-on-ones meetings with the BLM lead at key milestones to elicit specific agency input. Not all agencies will voice their feedback in a forum with other agencies. This provides an opportunity to bring issues and concerns of the quieter agency representatives to the table.
- Be considerate of busy schedules and provide adequate time for returning feedback.
- There is value in holding in-person meetings at key milestones; however, provide virtual option for most meeting to reduce travel.
- Develop working group subcommittees to expedite work, and clearly explain the process for selecting and joining. One example mentioned is a Water Quality Subcommittee that can help withstand and prepare for appeals and review analysis from previous 401 certifications. Suggested participants are Colorado Parks & Wildlife, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Channel communication through one representative at each agency who can then redistribute and elicit input from colleagues.
- Streamline the process by tapping agency expertise and value at the appropriate time and regarding the appropriate subject matter, i.e., the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment when water quality analysis is being conducted. Limit participation when specific agency input is not warranted.
- Create a BLM communication tree that identifies subject matter experts and maintains a single point of contact for all correspondence with BLM.

5.8 Tribal Engagement

The project team facilitated interviews with representatives from the Historic Preservation Offices of the following Tribal nations:

- Northern Arapaho
- Pueblo of Acoma
- Pueblo of Zia
- Ute Indian
- Ute Mountain Ute
- Southern Ute

All tribes indicated an interest and desire for invitation to participate in field work and surveys during the NEPA process. They will send monitors from respective Tribal Historic Preservation Offices to help identify potential resources in the project area.

Early communication and coordination are appreciated to plan appropriate travel from neighboring states (Wyoming, New Mexico, Utah). At each milestone where updates are provided to the public and Cooperating Agencies, individual outreach to the interested Tribes is also recommended. Historic Preservation Offices at each tribe are a recommended point-of-contact for redistribution to Tribal members.

Tribal representatives indicated that coordinating with a single point of contact will streamline communication and allow them to connect with the broader community, including advisory groups and Tribal elders who can provide oral history of the project area. For formal government-to-government consultation, coordination with Tribal councils through letters is warranted.

According to one Tribal representative, the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, administered jointly through direct Tribal resources and a federal program within the National Park Service, provides Tribal cultural resource offices the authority to provide input reflective of the community as a whole.

6. Appendix

A: Project Area Maps

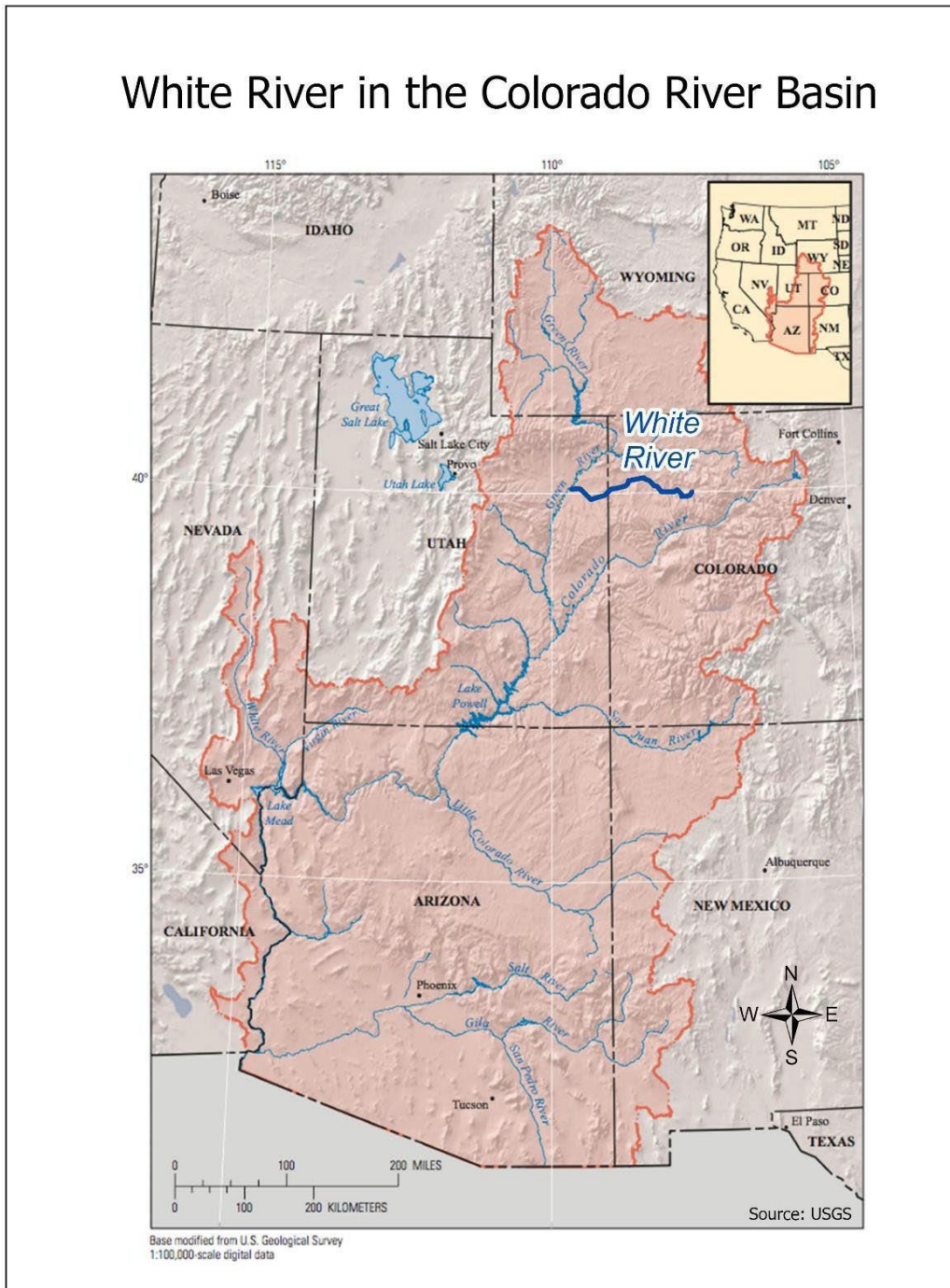


Figure 1. White River in the Colorado River Basin

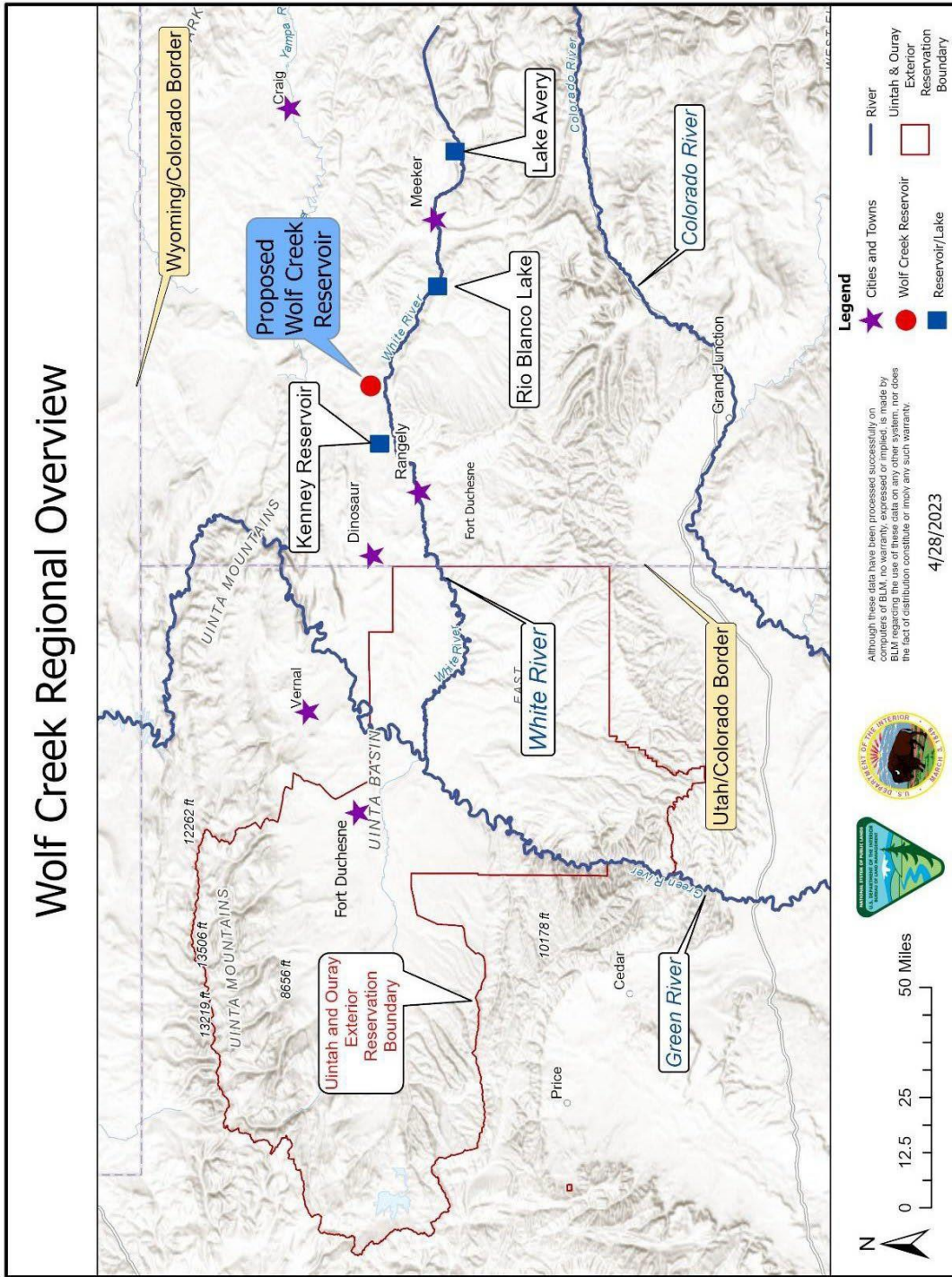


Figure 2. Wolf Creek Regional Overview

Wolf Creek Reservoir Project Area - Administrative Boundaries

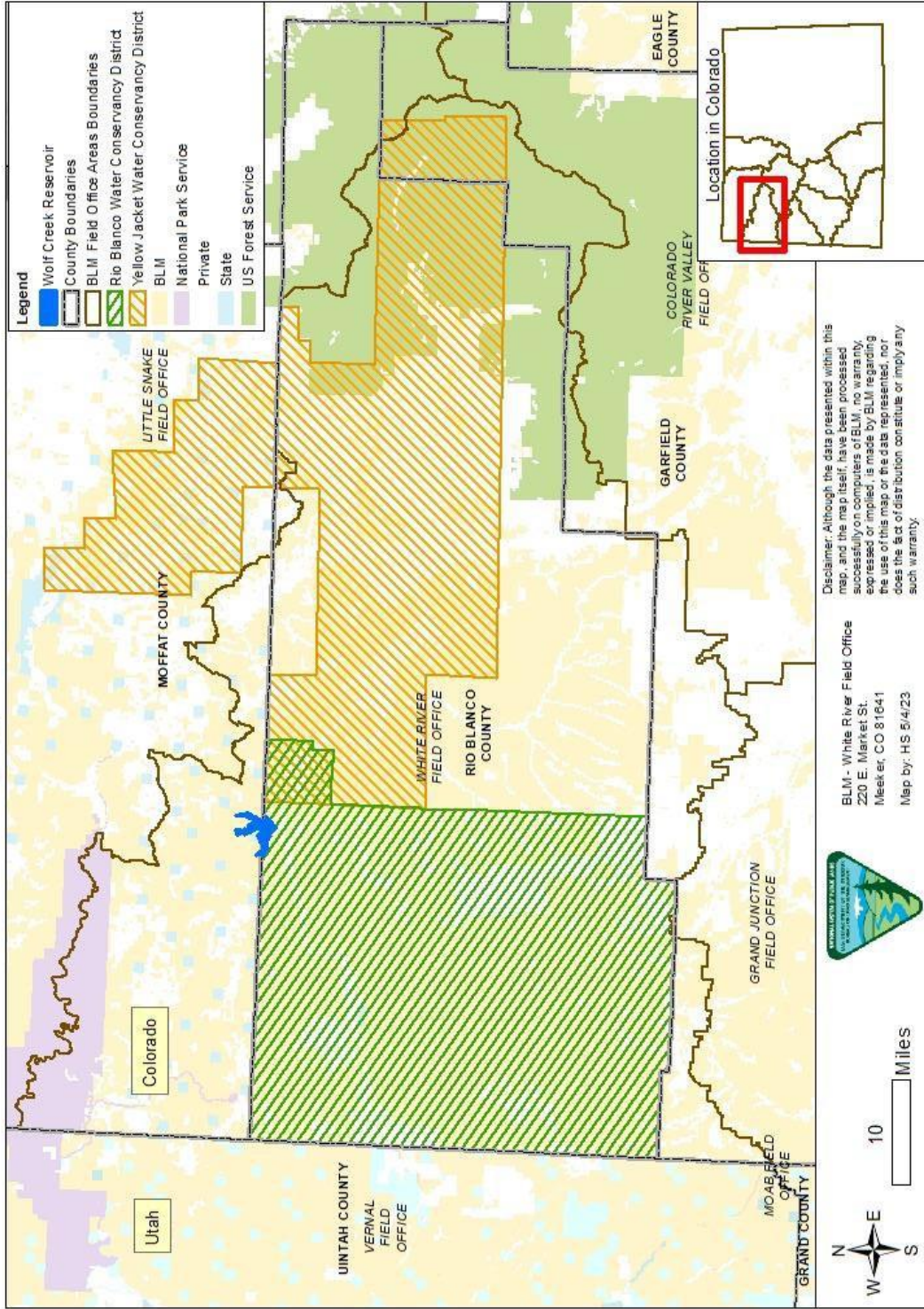


Figure 3. Wolf Creek Reservoir Project Area – Administrative Boundaries

Wolf Creek Project Overview

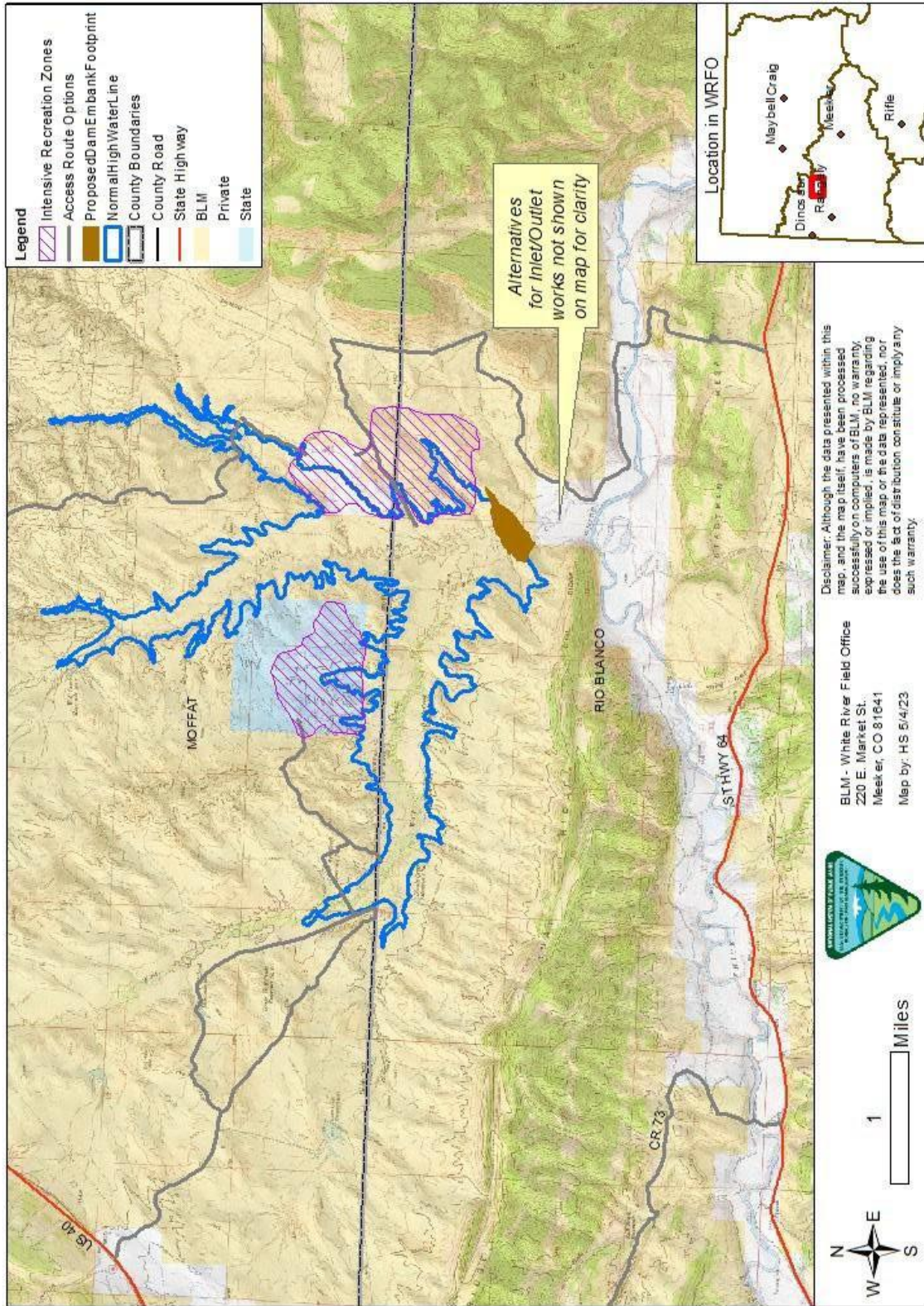


Figure 4. Wolf Creek Project Overview

B: Participant List

Some interviews occurred in small groups with multiple representatives of the same organization and some interviewees wore “multiple hats.” Efforts were made to capture the multiple organizations, entities, and agencies people represented.

American Rivers
BLM Grazing Permittees
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Club20
Colorado Cattleman’s Association
Colorado Department of Agriculture
Colorado Department of Natural Resources

- Division of Water Resources
- Colorado Water Conservation Board
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado State Land Board

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
Colorado River Water Conservation District
Colorado Wildlands Project
Colorado Water Congress
Colorado Northwestern Community College
Meeker residents and business owners
Town of Meeker employees
Moffat County representatives, residents, and business owners
Moon Lake Electric Association
Native American Tribe Historic Preservation Offices:

- Northern Arapaho
- Southern Ute Tribe
- Pueblo of Acoma
- Pueblo of Zia
- Ute Indian Tribe
- Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

The Nature Conservancy
Big game outfitters
Private property owners near proposed reservoir site
Ranchers
Rangely Chamber of Commerce
Rangely residents and business owners
Town of Rangely employees
RiversEdge West
Rio Blanco County Commissioners
Rio Blanco County residents
Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District
Rocky Mountain Audubon

Save the Colorado
Trout Unlimited
Uintah Water Conservancy District
Unaffiliated knowledgeable individuals in Colorado
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program
Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office
Utah Institute of Land and Air, Utah State University
Western Resource Advocates
Western Rio Blanco County Recreation and Metropolitan District
White River Alliance
White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts
Xcel Energy
Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District

C: WRFO Letter

Participants received an invitation to participate via a letter and email from the WRFO followed by a request to schedule an interview by the project team. The following letter was sent to all potential participants initially identified by the BLM as interested parties.

In Reply Refer To: Wolf Creek Reservoir
2064 (COC-80751)

Name

Address Line 1

Address Line 2

Dear Name:

As you may be aware, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), White River Field Office (WRFO) has received an application from the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District (RBWCD) to construct and operate a new water reservoir known as the Wolf Creek Reservoir.

To better understand the perspectives of a diversity of interests and identify the best methods for future engagement, the BLM's Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution (CADR) program has hired an impartial third-party neutral consultant (The Langdon Group) to engage in conversations with a wide range of interests connected to this proposal. Input received will be summarized in a Situation Assessment report. The Situation Assessment report will be provided to conversation participants and also posted online on BLM's ePlanning project site.

If you would like to participate in a conversation, please contact Andy Rasmussen/Bryant Kuechle/Kelsea MacIlroy from The Langdon Group to schedule conversations individually or in small groups, as appropriate. Feel free to reach out to Andy/Bryant/Kelsea at (email address) or (phone number). Conversations can occur in-person, phone, or online – whatever is most appropriate and convenient for you.

Although The Langdon Group won't have the capacity to meet with every stakeholder with interest about this topic, the goal is for them to reach a cross section that can help paint a picture of the issues, concerns, opportunities for effective participation and potential collaborative solutions. This is the first step in the public involvement process prior to publishing the Notice of Intent for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

A few key points regarding the Situation Assessment, include:

- The BLM will not receive any documentation from the neutral consultant that attributes interview responses to specific individuals or organizations.
- Names will not be included in the Situation Assessment report; comments/input will not be attributed to individuals or organizations, but rather grouped into common themes that emerge during the process.

- Organizations will be listed as participants and the report will include the total number of people that participated in the interviews.
- Participation in the situation assessment does not qualify as public involvement for the EIS.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the BLM's project manager for this effort: Heather Sauls, Planning and Environmental Coordinator, at either hsauls@blm.gov or 970-878-3855. Additional information about the Wolf Creek Reservoir project is available on the BLM's ePlanning project site at: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2021544/510>

Thank

D: SA Interview Questions

A list of interview questions was developed by the Project Team. Questions were grouped by topic area and were developed and designed to be customized to each interviewee. Not all questions were asked of each interviewee, as each individual, agency, interest group, and Native American Tribe are unique, having different interests and relevant topics.

Introductory (asked of everyone)

- Tell me about you and your story: How are you connected to the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir?
- What is your personal connection to this region, and the proposed location? Why is it important? Or not important?
- How did you come to be engaged in this situation?
- What was your reaction to the proposed Wolf Creek Reservoir?
- Do you think it's a good idea?
 - o Is it needed? Why or why not?
 - o If not – Do you believe water supply in this region is a concern and how should it be addressed?
 - o Who doesn't agree with you? Why not? What's their position?
 - o Anyone else?
 - o Is there common ground?

Water (likely asked of everyone)

- Are you concerned about the region's water supply? If so, for what use? Potable, agriculture?
- Is water scarcity an issue in this region?
 - o If no, why not?
 - o If yes, is this a solution?
 - o Are there alternative solutions?
 - o Are there other variations of this alternative?
- What is the potential impact to the White River? Positive and/or negative?
- What is the potential impact to the Colorado River Compact? Positive and/or negative?
- Are there other needs for the water (that will fill the reservoir) that have not been mentioned? Are any of the needs identified now irrelevant or less important?
- Should hydroelectricity be a consideration in the decision-making process? Why or why not?

Economy and Environment (deployed for relevant stakeholders and as appropriate within the flow of the conversation)

- Tell me about the local communities, where they've been, where they are now, where they are headed?
- How does water play a role in the local community economy? Regionally?
- How will this proposed reservoir impact recreation? Will it create opportunities, and economic return to the region? Will it take away opportunities, and economic opportunity?
- What is the impact to grazing and/or agriculture? Positive and/or negative.
- What is the impact to oil and gas interests? Positive and/or negative.

- What is the potential impact to fisheries? Positive and/or negative, considering recreational fishing and endangered species.
- What do you know about the prehistory and human history of the area? Would this project potentially have an impact? If so, is there room for mitigation?

Interests and understanding (deployed for relevant stakeholders and as appropriate within the flow of the conversation)

- What is the local community temperature on the proposed reservoir? Have they been tracking it?
- What is the wider interest? On the west slope? On the Front Range? Utah?
- For the public in Utah – Do they know? Do they care?
- What don't you understand? What don't people get?
- Have you been tracking the process that led to this proposal and the location of the reservoir? What was your reaction? Do you have thoughts about any of the options that had previously been looked at by the RBWCD?
- What issues may have conflicting interests and will benefit from identifying common ground to advance collaboration? Is common ground possible?
- Who else should we be talking to? Locally and outside interests?

Engagement (likely asked of everyone at some level)

- How do you prefer to engage in this process moving forward?
- How do others with an interest in this prefer to engage?
- What challenges might we encounter in trying to bring stakeholders together for discussion on this topic?
- Have you participated in an NEPA public involvement process before? What went well, what didn't?
- What is your past and current relationship with BLM? Specifically, the WRFO?
- Have you participated in a BLM public process in the past? How did it go?
- Describe a public engagement process you have participated in or are aware of that was successful.
 - o Do you have an unsuccessful example?
 - o How have people felt let down by this process and what are their expectations for it?
 - o What are they hoping to see come out of it?
- Are there interests or voices you are aware of that may be difficult to reach? ...or haven't had the opportunity to participate in these types of processes, but should have?
 - o How have efforts to reach/connect with them in the past been successful?
 - o Are there specific stakeholder groups or local resource agencies that may have their finger on the pulse of reaching underserved members of the community?
- How does your community, or interest group prefer to engage?
 - o If you believe interest level is low - What would bring people to the conversation? What values exist that this decision might affect, but aren't being realized?
- What is your community's capacity for engagement? How much and when?
- For NGO's, specific stakeholder interest groups – How do you prefer to stay engaged?

For Cooperating Agencies

- Who needs to be at the table? Who doesn't?
- What are the critical issues for your agency that need to be discussed/addressed in the process?
- Outside of your agency, what issues will be critical to other agencies?
- Are there aspects of this where agencies aren't on the same page? Is there space for finding shared solutions? What might those be?

E: Acronym Glossary

AF – Acre-feet, *water volume measurement*

BLM – Bureau of Land Management

CCITF – County Capital Improvement Trust Fund

CDWR – Colorado Division of Water Resources

cfs – cubic feet per second

CPW – Colorado Parks and Wildlife

CWCB – Colorado Water Conservation Board

EIS – Environmental Impact Statement

EJ – Environmental Justice

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

FERC – Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

IGA – Intergovernmental Agreement

LEDPA - Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative

LEP – Limited English Proficiency

NEPA – National Environmental Policy Act

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

NOI – Notice of Intent

PBO – Programmatic Biological Opinion

RBWCD – Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District

REP – Recommended Engagement Plan

ROW – Right-of-way

SA – Situation Assessment

USFWS – US Fish and Wildlife Service

WRFO – White River Field Office, BLM, Meeker, CO

YJWCD – Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District