

WATER

# Confusion persists about Wolf Creek reservoir in Rio Blanco County

Sparse public meeting attendance

by Heather Sackett  
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The White River flows west from Meeker to Rangely in northwest Colorado. The Rangely-based Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District is proposing to build an off-channel reservoir that draws water from White River, in part to provide municipal water to the town.

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RANGELY — People in northwest Colorado are confused about the purpose, need and size of the Wolf Creek Reservoir. That's according to a [situation assessment report](#) prepared by The Langdon Group as part of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's plan for additional public engagement about the project.

"There's a lot of conflicting information and a lot of conflicting understandings, and it was our job to capture that so the BLM knows where do we need to provide clarity as we go into the process of evaluating this application on public land," said Kelsea MacIlroy, a project manager with The Langdon Group. "I hope the word that you took away from this is 'confusion.'"

The report is based on interviews with more than 73 people this past spring and captures the opinions, beliefs and perceptions of the participants. It provides a snapshot in time of interested parties' views on the project. The BLM will now use the results to guide its National Environmental Policy Act permitting process, a two-year scoping, public comment and protest period, which will culminate in a decision on whether to grant a right-of-way and amend its resource management plan to allow for the reservoir.

The Rangely-based Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District is proposing to build a reservoir between Rangely and Meeker, in part to increase flows in the White River and improve municipal water quality for the roughly 2,300 downstream residents of Rangely during dry conditions in late summer.

Those interviewed for the situation assessment had questions about the cost of the reservoir, the location and how it was chosen, and whether dredging Kenney Reservoir, located just upstream of Rangely, could be an alternative to building a new reservoir. According to the report, two of the most repeated questions from those interviewed was: What is the specific need for water and how much water is needed?

"In general, there was a sense of confusion and lack of clarity around what the proposed reservoir storage right decree allowed as uses for released water," [the report reads](#). "Some interviewees believed that this confusion was intentional, with different sources providing conflicting information."

In 2021, the conservancy district [secured a water right](#) for a 66,720-acre-foot, off-channel reservoir with a dam 110 feet tall and 3,800 feet long. Water would be pumped into the reservoir from the White River.

The decree allows water to be used for municipal purposes for Rangely; augmentation water within the district's boundaries; mitigation of environmental impacts associated with the reservoir; recreation; and fish and wildlife habitat. Annual releases for municipal and augmentation use would be capped at 7,000 acre-feet a year.

The decree does not allow water to be used for agriculture, for compliance with the 1922 Colorado River Compact or for the four species of endangered fish in the Colorado River basin.

The conditional water-storage rights were granted after five years of back-and-forth in water court between the conservancy district and Colorado's top engineers at the Department of Water Resources, who argued that the project was speculative because the conservancy district could not prove a need for the water.

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From left, Heather Sauls, project manager with the BLM, Bryant Kuechle and Kelsea MacIlroy with The Langdon Group and Bill Mills, White River field manager with the BLM presented a situation assessment report about the Wolf Creek Reservoir in Meeker on Sept. 12. The BLM commissioned the report as part of additional public engagement on the reservoir project.

## Sparse public meeting attendance

Last fall, the project was referred to the BLM's Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution Program, and the staff decided that [additional public engagement](#) and the situation assessment by The Langdon Group were needed.

But it may prove difficult for the BLM to get all the additional public engagement it would like. In addition to the 73 interviews, some of which had more than one person, 31 contacts declined participation or were unresponsive to requests. Three public meetings this week — one in Rangely, one in Meeker and one held remotely on Zoom — were not well attended, with nine members of the public at the Rangely meeting, 17 at Meeker and 17 online.

[According to the report](#), "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."

Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District Manager Alden Vanden Brink said that he was glad the situation assessment report was conducted and that he was not surprised with most of the responses.

"Nothing is shocking," he said. "It's part of the public process, and the district is prepared for that. I'm ready to move on to the next step."

Heather Sauls, a project manager with BLM, said despite the sparse meeting attendance, the situation assessment report is incredibly valuable for the agency.

"I think sometimes people feel more comfortable speaking freely when it's confidential, when it's a third-party neutral facilitator rather than the government or in a public meeting format," she said. "I think we got a lot of really good, detailed feedback from that method."

In addition to painting a picture of public perception about the project, the report also offered a recommended engagement plan for public involvement as the NEPA process goes forward. That includes the following recommendations: messaging should be clear, concise and free of jargon; additional open-house-style public meetings should be held at project milestones — such as before the BLM issues its Notice of Intent (NOI) and when the draft Environmental Impact Statement comes out — and BLM should engage with other local agencies and tribes.

The report also recommends holding an [economic-strategies workshop](#) in Rangely to get input on economic and social goals for the community and potential impacts — positive and negative — from the reservoir.

"We rely on the public's input to make sound decisions on public land," Bill Mills, field manager for the White River Field Office in Meeker, told the audience in Rangely.

After the BLM issues its NOI, it starts a 24-month clock to complete a Record of Decision that will either grant permission for a right of way to build the reservoir or not. Currently, Sauls said the agency is waiting on a revised plan of development from the conservancy district, and Mills said he estimates they will issue the NOI in early 2024.

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