

WATER

Wolf Creek reservoir project to have additional public engagement

BLM overseeing process

by Heather Sackett September 20, 2022

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A view looking down the Wolf Creek valley toward the White River. The proposed off-channel dam would stretch between the dirt hillside on the right, across the flat mouth of the valley, to the hillside on the left. CREDIT: BRENT GARDNER-SMITH/ASPEN JOURNALISM

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GLENWOOD SPRINGS — U.S. Bureau of Land Management officials have decided to increase the opportunities for members of the public to weigh in on a controversial reservoir project in northwest Colorado with an additional round of public engagement.

Members of the BLM's Northwest Resource Advisory Council last week expressed support for early public engagement on the Wolf Creek reservoir project between Meeker and Rangely in Rio Blanco County. This will be an extra opportunity for interested people to get involved, in addition to the scoping, public comment and protest periods of the normal National Environmental Policy Act permitting process.

Some pointed out that the Wolf Creek project is sure to get lots of scrutiny and, perhaps, national attention, especially with the current spotlight on the declining reservoirs of the Colorado River system. RAC member Jeff Comstock, who represents the Moffat County Natural Resources Department, said he is very much in support of additional public sessions.

"Moffat, myself, most of your collaborators ... have always been requesting public involvement prior to Notice of Intent," Comstock told BLM staffers at the Thursday meeting in Glenwood Springs. "I am a big supporter of having those meetings."

The project applicant, the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District, is proposing an off-channel reservoir with a dam 110 feet tall and 3,800 feet long, with water that will be pumped from the White River. In January 2021, the district secured a water right for 66,720 acre-feet, which can be used for municipal purposes in the downstream town of Rangely, for mitigation of environmental impacts, for recreation, for fish and for wildlife habitat.

The BLM is overseeing the NEPA process because the federal agency would need to amend its resource management plan and grant a right of way to build Wolf Creek reservoir since the project site is on BLM land. The formal NEPA process is on a tight timeline, and once the BLM issues the Notice of Intent, it has two years to enter a Record of Decision on whether to allow the right of way. The additional public engagement may delay the start of this timeline, but it is unclear by how long.

CREDIT: LAURINE LASSALLE/ASPEN JOURNALISM

This map shows the location of the proposed Wolf Creek reservoir in northwest Colorado. The BLM is moving forward with an additional early public engagement process, prior to the NEPA permitting process, on the Wolf Creek Reservoir project.

Grave concerns

Three people who oppose and have concerns about the reservoir project spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting. Matt Rice, Southwest regional director at environmental group American Rivers, encouraged BLM staff to focus on as much public participation as possible.

"We have grave concerns about this project," Rice said. "As everybody is aware, the Colorado River is in crisis. ... This project is going to be extremely controversial."

Gary Wockner, whose organization Save the Colorado opposes any new dams and diversions on the Colorado River and its tributaries, agreed that the BLM should do as much public engagement as possible before beginning the permitting process.

Deirdre Macnab, whose 4M Ranch is adjacent to the reservoir site, also spoke and gave her reasons for opposing the project. She said a new reservoir in the proposed location would lead to water loss through evaporation.

"Now is not the time to facilitate new reservoirs in hot, dry, desert areas," she told RAC members. "Consider the ramifications of this proposal for future generations and just say no."

Securing the water right for the project took longer than the conservancy district expected because for five years, Colorado's top engineers at the Department of Water Resources argued the project was speculative because Rio Blanco could not prove a need for the water. The water right was eventually granted after years of back and forth in water court, and the decree came after an 11th-hour negotiation right before the case was scheduled to go to trial. The water right gave Rio Blanco the amount of water it was seeking, but it does not allow the district all the water uses that it initially wanted, including for irrigation or Colorado River Compact compliance.

The project has received \$330,000 from the Colorado River Water Conservation District and \$4 million from Rio Blanco County to fund the permitting phase.

What the additional public engagement will look like remains unclear. BLM staff will now refer the project to their Collaborative Action and Dispute Resolution Program to figure out the best strategy.

"One thing we want to avoid is just doing what we typically do for scoping twice," said Heather Sauls, BLM project manager and planning and environment coordinator. "Whether we would have public meetings or workshops to talk about focused topics, I don't know the answers to that yet."

Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District General Manager Alden Vanden Brink was unavailable for comment.

The BLM plans to create a webpage about the project. Those who want to join the mailing list and get alerts about future public-engagement opportunities can email BLM_CO_Reservoir@blm.gov.

This story ran in the Sept. 21 edition of *The Aspen Times* and the *Summit Daily*, the Sept. 22 edition of the *Steamboat Springs Pilot & Today*, the Sept. 27 edition of the *Craig Press* and *Grand Junction Sentinel* and the Sept. 30 edition of the *Rio Blanco Herald-Times*.

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