

Water Conservancy District in pre-permitting phase for Wolf Creek Dam

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RANGELY | The Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District (RBWCD) is as busy as ever with many projects in the works that affect residents on both ends of Rio Blanco County. District Manager Alden Vanden Brink explained that the board is in the pre-permitting process for the White River Storage Project.

“They are getting organized enough so that they can go into permitting. Their goal is to be in the permitting process at this time next year in 2020,” Vanden Brink said.

According to the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy’s website, the Northwest Colorado Water and Storage Project, also known as “Wolf Creek” has been in water resource planners’ sights since the 1940s when it was first proposed. Since then it seems every 10 years or so interest in the project is renewed and a feasibility study is completed. After reviewing all the pieces involved in reservoir construction the Wolf Creek project appears to make perfect sense for a White River reservoir. This is due, in part, to the potential for a significant portion of water to be stored off of the main channel, even with the main-stem White River dam. The geology of Wolf Creek and the surrounding area allows the inundation areas for the main-stem versus off-channel dam to be very similar. The Wolf Creek area also has the advantage of having all necessary raw materials available on site for the construction of the dam.

Estimates of the reservoir’s potential capacity are still in the development stages, but all indications point to a minimum reservoir capacity of 20,000–30,000 acre-feet (AF) to 90,000 AF of storage with a maximum build capacity of stored water up to 1.2 million AF.

This is the only basin or main tributary to the Colorado River in the state that does not currently have drought resiliency. This project is a response to a developing water crisis for the lower White River including the Town of Rangely. No private lands will be inundated by this project as the location sits on federal, state and private land. That private land belongs to the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District.

Not only will this project help the water storage crisis on the White River, Vanden Brink asserts “the local and regional economy will be enormously impacted and stimulated by the construction of this project.” The public can look forward to updates on the project as they develop.

The popular annual Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District Fishing Derby is set for June 1-2 this year. This event coincides with Colorado Parks and Wildlife’s free fishing weekend. The conservancy district offers free camping at Kenney Reservoir that begins Friday, May 31 and is honored on a first-come, first-serve basis. The weekend is also a free boating weekend at the reservoir.

“The Rangely Area Chamber of Commerce will be executing a Visit Rangely promotion during this time as well,” Vanden Brink said.

The White River Management Plan is a plan being developed for the endangered species within the White River. The lower White River system, which includes Kenney Reservoir, is a unique Colorado fishery. The Colorado Pike Minnow and the Razorback Sucker are the two endangered species that this plan is targeting for aid. The White River Management Plan puts the state in compliance with the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The RBWCD is a cooperating agency along with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Colorado, the Colorado Water Users Association, The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, and the Nature Conservancy. Vanden Brink said “his board has been very active with this plan” to ensure that it gets completed.”

The investigation into the problematic algae bloom in the White River is ongoing. A group of concerned citizens and agencies have convened to address the excessive amount of algae in the White River from the headwaters to the Utah state line. The Technical Advisory Group includes the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado River Water Conservation District, Rio Blanco County, Town of Meeker, Town of Rangely, Meeker Sanitation District, White River Conservation District, Douglas Creek Conservation District, Natural Resource Conservation Service, US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Geological Survey, and Trout Unlimited.

According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, in 2016 the visible filamentous alga was identified as *Cladophora glomerata*. All water users on the White River are impacted by this algae growth. It has especially caused intake problems for water users such as The Town of Rangely as well as private land owners. The RBWCD financially contributes to this investigation which hired the U.S. Geological Survey last year to conduct the water quality and stream morphology investigation. Vanden Brink reports that the RBWCD had success in 2018 flushing water out of the dam into the lower White River which helped to alleviate some of the algae problems in that area. They intend to use that method again in 2019 but likely earlier in the year.

Taylor Draw Dam was constructed in 1983 to create Kenney Reservoir. One hundred percent of the dam was funded by the taxpayers of western Rio Blanco County, including the Town of Rangely. In 1993 a 2-megawatt hydroelectric generator was added. The generator is capable of variable power output matching the flows of the White River. At full power production capacity, the hydroelectric facility provides up to 30 percent of renewable energy for Rangely. The energy created goes immediately onto the energy grid.

The Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District will meet again on Wednesday, March 27 at 6 p.m.

By Roxie Fromang | *Special to the Herald Times*