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Changes Proposed to Flaming Gorge Operations

Story and photo by Jack Gillund jgillund@ubmedia.biz Jan 29, 2019



A group of stakeholders is proposing changes to how Flaming Gorge is operated.

Jack Gillund

Unhappy with the current way Flaming Gorge is being operated, a group of stakeholders recently proposed changes they feel will benefit both local wildlife and the residents who live near the national recreation area.

“The Flaming Gorge Stakeholders are the communities up and down the Green River from above the Flaming Gorge reservoir to Green River City Utah,” said T. Wright Dickenson, a former Moffat County commissioner whose family has ranched in Brown’s Park for 135 years. “We very much appreciate the support of the county commissioners in each of the respective counties and communities, the landowners and the businesses that operate along the river.”

Speaking to attendees at this year's Uintah Basin Water Summit, Wright explained why the stakeholders feel it is time to change the way Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area is operated.

"The current operation of Flaming Gorge is under the construct of the record and decision that was passed in 2006 and is done for the purposes of benefiting the native fish," he said. "What that really concentrates around is you all down here in the Uintah Basin in Reach 2 – to try to recreate some of the natural conditions.

"The recovery program is a very beneficial thing for all of us," he added, "because we're not in court and we're operating and using water in the Colorado River system because of this program."

Write said the Flaming Gorge Stakeholders are not opposed to the current program. They feel, though, that it doesn't work the way it is currently set up.

"In Reach 1, because of now how we trigger the releases and create the manmade flood for Reach 2, the recreational fly-fishing community, which Dutch John is famous for, the larval emergence happens as early as April 7, and as late as June 24," Wright said. "(That's) more than 60 days-worth of swing whereupon that river is placed into as much of a flood stage as they can to create flooding events down here in Reach 2."

Write said that swing has "destroyed and decimated" both the fishing experience and the businesses in Daggett County that depend on it.

"They can't plan," he said about the individuals who want to come to the area to fish. "As you all know, in recreation you have people that are booking two and three years in advance for their vacations. To not be able to have that experience, they quickly go someplace else, and that has been very devastating.

"In Reach 1, we also have the issue, because of the construction of Flaming Gorge, that the water coming out of Flaming Gorge has no sediment in it and is a very hungry water," Wright added. "As a result, we have a tremendous amount of bank erosion that is occurring. As Jack Smith, Utah State University emeritus, has commented, 'we're treating Reach 1 like a ditch.'"

To address these issues, the stakeholders are proposing changes that include working with landowners along the river to create a set of wetlands, canals and irrigation structures to help raise native fish "for the benefit of the program."

"We have a nonnative fish population in the Green River now that is completely out of balance," Wright said. "What we've got to do is get our big native fish big enough to eat the nonnatives. We believe that by working with the (agriculture) community and actually raising fish at various points along the river, and putting them back in the river in sufficient quantities, that we can eat the nonnatives back to where they belong – which is extinction.

Wright said to do this, a new management structure for Flaming Gorge has to be created.

"We believe we can manage the river within its banks, and still keep a natural hydrograph and a natural ecosystem within the river," Wright said.

"By raising the natives, and putting them in with such efficiency, what we can do is bring down those nonnative populations that have bio-massed the river completely out of context.

“It’s time for a new program, in our opinion,” he said. “We, of course, want to recover the fish and we also want to have a safe and dependable recreation experience. We want to minimize bank erosions, stop the intentional flooding in Reach 2, and prevent any flooding occurrence in Reach 3. As long as we’re staying at 20,000 (cubic feet per second) or below, we don’t threaten Green River City, Utah.”

According to Wright, several landowners along the river are “more than willing,” to sign agreements to raise native fish, something that is not new to the Bureau of Reclamation.

“This is done right now in California and other places with native fishes for similar kinds of intents,” he said.

According to Dale Hamilton, who facilitates the Flaming Gorge Working group for the United States Bureau of Reclamation, the government has a similar goal.

“We want to recover the fish, for sure,” he said. “We have to operate within the boundaries of the 2006 Record of Decision in order to work to recover those fish.”

Hamilton said the working group currently is addressing two different items.

“We’re addressing long-term proposals like the ones that T. Wright has proposed and we also address yearly issues,” he said. “To date, we have received the stakeholder proposal from T. Wright and we have also received an additional proposal from the Whitewater Group.”

Hamilton said the Flaming Gorge working group is in the process of reviewing both proposals to see how they fit within the operations of Flaming Gorge Dam and how they may be able to incorporate them.

“We’ve added an additional meeting in March (which will be held in Price) to come together and get proposals like these, he said. “We hope to have at least a preliminary answer back to the stakeholders in our April meeting.

“Bottom line is, we want to work with you. We’re committed to working with the stakeholders and helping the community,” Hamilton added. “We want to make sure we are assisting the recovery program and the stakeholders.”

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