

New Group Aims to Protect Uncompahgre Watershed

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Partnership to Develop Plan to Improve Water Quality

OURAY COUNTY – There is a new movement afoot to protect and improve the health of the Uncompahgre watershed.

Concerned citizens in the upper and lower Uncompahgre River basins have formed the Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership. With funding from the Environmental Protection Agency, the group intends to develop a watershed plan that will identify and prioritize projects that will ultimately improve water quality and ecosystem health in the watershed.

According to Jeff Crane, executive director of the Colorado Watershed Assembly, the movement began about two years ago when the Friends of the River Uncompahgre began a concerted effort to work on riparian buffers in the Montrose area, while the Ridgway/Ouray Community Coalition was working on water issues in the upper basin. Both had requested organizational assistance from the Colorado Watershed Assembly.

“It seemed like a good opportunity to begin a collaborative effort to develop a comprehensive watershed plan to include all stakeholders in the watershed,” said Crane.

The Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership initially received funding for the plan from an EPA 319 planning grant; a \$50,000 grant from the Water Quality Control Division; and \$10,000 from the Healthy Rivers Fund. Crane said his organization would continue to apply for other funds as the project proceeds and specific tasks become apparent.

“This partnership hopes to identify opportunities in which citizen groups can work collaboratively with special districts, local governments and other organizations where they can build understanding, consensus and mutually benefit from each other’s efforts,” said Crane.

One of the most important ongoing objectives of the planning stage has been identifying parties with an interest in the long-term health of the watershed. Involving them in assessing the health of the Uncompahgre Watershed by identifying current and future needs related to keeping it healthy will help the Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership develop a comprehensive plan.

For instance, the Tri-County Water Conservancy District is interested in developing a new water source at Ridgway Reservoir for domestic to support the valley’s growing population. At the same time, Ridgway/Ouray Community Coalition is interested in improving the water quality in the upper watershed through a water quality-monitoring plan to identify the most egregious draining mine sites

above Ouray. This could lead to a mitigation project designed to improve water quality in the stream and simultaneously reduce treatment costs for Tri-County.

Selenium pollution below the reservoir is also an area of concern. Opportunities exist for organizations to form new partnerships with the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association to help efforts to reduce selenium contamination in the watershed.

To help educate the general public about the importance of watershed health and protection, the Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership will host a series of six forums on water quality in the Uncompahgre Basin. The first, Land Uses in the Watershed: Mining and Reclamation, is slated for early November in Ridgway. It will begin by examining metal contaminants in the upper watershed.

“These forums are for anyone interested in the river from any perspective,” said Camille Price, forum organizer from the Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety.

According to Price, the session will give participants a look at the natural geology of the area, a brief history of mining, the status of mine reclamation in the area, and a snapshot of the current status of water quality in the Uncompahgre's Upper Basin.

Subsequent forums will focus on other uses of the river such as recreation, agriculture, growth and urban development. The forums will be held at various locations throughout the watershed, including Montrose and Delta Counties.

For more information about the forums, contact Rein van West at 970/626-9702 or Sara Coulter at 970/626-4496.