

Focus on what you can do, and don't spin your wheels on things that you can't.

That was one main conclusion of a massive multi-year project conducted by the Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership, which culminated in the presentation of a 106-page draft watershed plan in Ridgeway last December, and in Ouray last week.

The exhaustive report identified both issues and solutions to problems within the river basin. It was authored by Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership coordinator Sarah Sauter, and was preceded by a number of forums on mining, agriculture, stormwater, wildlife and riparian zones, and recreation, conducted in Ouray, Montrose and Delta counties.

It is the intention of UWP to use the plan both as a tool to restore health to the watershed where needed, and as a guide to keep the watershed healthy in future decision-making. However, Sauter cautioned at the presentation in Ouray last Thursday night (Jan. 12), it is important to apply appropriate criteria in determining what's healthy and sustainable.

"In a lot of cases, the standards are not appropriate," she said. "The regulatory framework often does not reflect the ambient conditions."

For example, segments of the Uncompahgre River are listed by the Environmental Protection Agency for heavy metals pollution, under the terms of the Clean Water Act. While discharge from historic mines in the upper Uncompahgre watershed contributes to the problem, much of that "pollution" comes from the

mineral-laden landscape that the river flows through on its downward journey from Lake Como to its confluence with the Gunnison River.

Sauter pointed to the example of a consortium concerned with the Eagle River, which also has a lot of ambient heavy metals pollution. The group successfully removed the Eagle River from the EPA's Impaired Waters List, simply by revamping its standard to meet the needs of brown trout rather than the more sensitive rainbow trout.

"It was possible to recalculate a standard that was more appropriate for their system," she concluded.

Sauter recommended a similar strategy on the upper Uncompahgre. "Looking at the data and metals concentrations and what the potential recalculated standard would be on the Uncompahgre, I think we could make some significant progress on getting the river off the Impaired Waters List in the next couple of years," she concluded. "We need to look at changing the standard. It doesn't necessarily mean that the water quality would improve, but you'd get rid of the stigma of having the impaired water."

Currently, the Uncompahgre River from Red Mountain Creek to Montrose has the same water quality standards. Yet the river is radically different above and below the Ridgeway Reservoir. The overall approach, Sauter said, should be to protect the river as it is. "Let's not set standards that will never be achieved," she said.

Since the Uncompahgre Watershed is divided into two distinct geographical sections, it needs two distinctly separate stakehold-

er groups and sets of standards to ensure its wellbeing going into the future, Sauter said — one focusing on the upper river from its source to the reservoir, and another focusing on the river from the dam to its confluence with the Gunnison River.

While there are issues that span the entire basin, Sauter said, "There's a very natural boundary line with the reservoir."

One item of concern right at this nexus regards the health of trout living in the river immediately downstream of the Ridgeway Reservoir. Since the construction and operation of the reservoir, supersaturated nitrogen levels have been a concern in the river,

the report states. A 2004 study conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation found evidence of gas bubble trauma in fish below the dam, stemming from nitrogen supersaturation. These fish show trauma similar to what scuba divers would call "the bends." Sauter recommended that the anticipated construction of a hydroelectric facility at the dam in the near future would be a "great opportunity" to address the problem, which could be fairly easily resolved by applying simple methods of aerating the water as it spills from the reservoir into the river below.

Further downstream, right in the City of Montrose, trout are thriving in a coldwater fishery that could have tremendous economic benefits. The temperature of the river here is just below or at the threshold of the coldwater standard, and needs to be protected, Sauter said.

More pervasive threats to the health of the watershed noted in the report run the gamut from tamarisks and other invasive flora and fauna, to heavy metals contamination and sedimentation, to the dewatering of the river due to irrigation demands, and dust-on-snow events leading to rapid early run-off.

The report also warns that municipal water shortages resulting

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My teeth were eating into

MY CONFIDENCE

WATERSHED

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from climate change, dewatering, and increased domestic consumption are projected to hit the Uncompahgre watershed by 2050.

The purpose of the recent presentations was not only for the public to hear about the problems identified and the possible solutions targeted by the plan, but also to gather citizen input prior to the writing of a final draft.

Sauter encouraged interested

parties to read the draft report, which can be accessed at www.uncompahgrewatershed.org, and get back to her with comments as she prepares the final draft within the next few months. At that point, she will be stepping away from the project, and Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership Outreach Coordinator Matthew Jurjonas will steer it through a transition period as stakeholder groups are formed.

Sauter urged the formation of a stakeholder group dedicated solely to the issues pertaining to the upper watershed. "This community, County, has consistently called all the meetings," Sauter said. "It makes a lot of sense to focus on issues in your back yard. Thank you for paying attention to the health of the river to be here."

For more information, contact Matt Jurjonas, Uncompahgre Watershed Partnership Outreach Coordinator, UWPVista@gmail.com; 773/726-0105.

Uncompahgre Watershed Draft Plan Urges Realism