

River Watch Update for the August 2026 UWP Board Meeting

- River Watch items of interest July 2026
 - August 2026 River Watch sampling was conducted between August 1st and August 6th. The Governor Basin road closure that began on August 3rd will apparently not affect River Watch sampling in September or October, since the road is only closed to public traffic above the intersection with the Sidney Basin Road.
 - In August our RiverCorps member, Elliot Risch, took streamflow measurements on all River Watch sites without stream gauges. At River Watch sites along US550 and Camp Bird Road there was little evidence of impact from the monsoon rains that occurred in late July. One exception was Imogene Creek which was running somewhat higher on August 1st (4.9 cfs) than it had been on July 9th (3.6 cfs). The other seven sites showed a drop in streamflow from July to August.
 - River Watch is preparing to ship supplies for low flow nutrient sampling. To ease the burden of doing all our sites in one month, we will be splitting nutrient sampling between October (eight sites) and November (seven sites).
 - River Watch also inquired about groups wanting to take macroinvertebrate samples this year. The samples will cost \$300 per site for analysis by CPW staff. For UWP sites the one high altitude site that lends itself to macro sampling is the Below Atlas Mill site where the stream restoration work was done. We could also take a sample at one of our previously sampled lower sites for a comparison in the current very low flow conditions.
- Precipitation and Streamflow:
 - As is typical of thunderstorm precipitation, it can be quite heavy in one location and nearly nonexistent a few miles away. An example is the precipitation on July 29th that resulted in the flash flood on Cutler Creek. Radar data indicated very heavy rainfall rates over the burn area in the upper part of the Cutler Creek drainage, but the closest rain gauge at Portland only recorded 0.15 inch on the afternoon of the 29th. Similarly, the upper Sneffels Creek drainage received very little rainfall on the day of the flood, only 0.05 inch at Governor Basin.
 - For the period from July 1st through August 8th the discharge at the USGS gauge on the Uncompahgre River near Ridgway (Figure 1) showed a steady drop in discharge from 77 cfs on July 1st to 55 cfs on July 19th. For the same period the median discharge dropped from about 400 cfs to 200 cfs. The effect of monsoon storms was observed between July 20th and July 31st. The peak discharge during the flash flood on July 29th was 918 cfs at 7:45 pm. Since August 1st the discharge has dropped to 39 cfs on the 8th when the median is about 163 cfs.

At the Cow Creek DNR stream gauge discharge oscillated between 1.5 cfs and 4 cfs between July 1st and July 17th. For the same period the average discharge dropped from 126 to 63 cfs. Responding to monsoon storms, the creek's main discharge peaks were between July 24th and July 31st. A peak of 157 cfs was noted on July 24th and the highest peak of 490 cfs was found on July 29th at 8:15 pm on the day of the main flash flood on Cutler Creek. Since August 3rd Cow Creek discharge has been 3-5 cfs.

There was very little impact to Dallas Creek discharge from the late July monsoon storms. There was one period from July 25th to July 28th when discharge was greater than 4 cfs. A "peak" discharge of 9 cfs was noted on July 26th, prior to the flash flood on Cutler Creek on the 29th. As of August 8th, Dallas Creek discharge was at times down to 0.13 cfs.

- A Comparison of 2026 and 2010 flash flood events

Figures 1 and 2 show the discharge graphs for the USGS gauge near Ridgway for periods in July 2026 and July 2010. The peak discharges on both graphs occurred during flash floods; 918 cfs in 2026 from the Cutler Creek flood north of Ouray and 1030 cfs in 2010 from the Sky Rocket Creek flood in Ouray. An attachment on page 3 from Woodling (2012) briefly describes the impact of the Sky Rocket flooding on the Uncompahgre River. Woodling indicated the main negative impact to aquatic life might have been the fine sediment transported into the Uncompahgre River. It's likely fine sediment, and also ash from the burn scar, was carried into the river in 2026. Visual observations from the two events were somewhat similar although the 2026 event caused much more destruction when large boulders and logs destroyed homes at the lower end of Cutler Creek. By coincidence in 2010 I was staying at the motel where Sky Rocket Creek flows under 550. Logs and other debris clogged the Sky Rocket Creek bridge opening and water and debris flowed over the highway and flooded the motel parking lot. The clean up of the streambed upstream of the bridge took several years. Today you mainly see a wide channelized stream bed covered with large rocks, and generally no visible water.

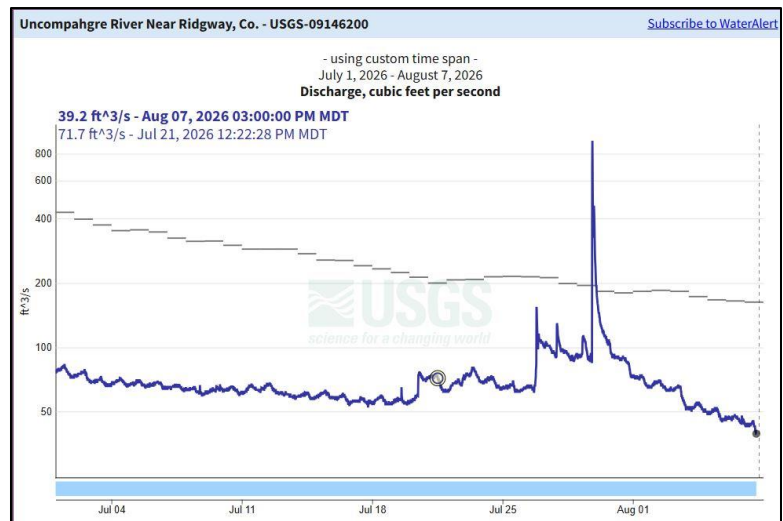


Figure 1. Discharge at the USGS gauge near Ridgway from July 1st to August 8th, 2026. The peak of 918 cfs occurred on July 29th, 2026, at 7:45 pm during a flash flood on Cutler Creek south of Ouray.

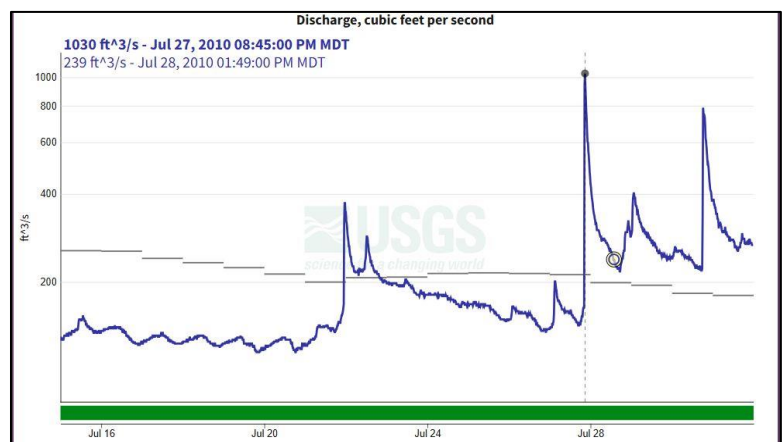


Figure 2. Discharge at the USGS gauge near Ridgway from July 15th to July 31st, 2010. The peak of 1030 cfs occurred on July 27th, 2010, at 8:45 pm during a flash flood on Sky Rocket Creek in Ouray.

Uncompahgre River Water Quality Report: Woodling 2012

three, collected in July and August, may have been an artifact associated with a summer spate. Aquatic life in the mainstem Uncompahgre River do not appear to be exposed to suspended solids levels that could be considered detrimental to trout (Appendix 1). The median suspended solids concentration was a decimal point lower than 270 mg/L that resulted in 80% mortality to sub-adult rainbow trout after a 19-day exposure (Herbert and Merkens 1961).

The low water column suspended solids measurements are not an indicator of the sediment regime in the Uncompahgre River from Ouray to Ridgway Reservoir. The substrate of the Uncompahgre River from Ouray downstream to Ridgway Reservoir is covered with fine sediments, gray and black in color. Composition of these sediments is not known but will include both aluminum and iron depositions. These sediments fill the interstitial spaces between the rock cobbles on the stream bottom. Backwaters and eddies are often filled with these fines to a depth of several inches. The habitat needed by aquatic macroinvertebrates has been eliminated. The space needed by trout eggs and fry is filled with these sediments. Sediment levels in the mainstem Uncompahgre River are adequate to limit or even eliminate aquatic life even if the river met chronic Colorado metal Table Value Standards.

The source of these sediments is not apparent from the existing water quality database and routine sampling does not appear to have captured the potential short-term increases in sediments due to sudden summer spates and storms. Elevated stream flows and movement of the fine sediment bed load associated with intense summer rain events is one source of these fine sediments. A flashflood resulted from an extensive summer spate on July 27, 2010 (Melinda May, WQCD, personal communication).

Rainfall in Sky Rocket Gulch basin resulted in a flashflood in that basin. The water level in the Uncompahgre River increased visibly and stream flow turned black with suspended sediments (photo). This small flood event moved fine black sediments into the mainstem Uncompahgre River. Similar sediment deposits were observed in the lower portions of Canyon Creek (See Section 6.4). Additional information concerning the bed load of the Uncompahgre River Basin is needed to assess influence of suspended solids on the designated uses of the river as assigned by the WQCC.



Fine sediment from Sky Rocket Gulch blanket the Uncompahgre River below Ouray after a summer flood event on July 27, 2010.

