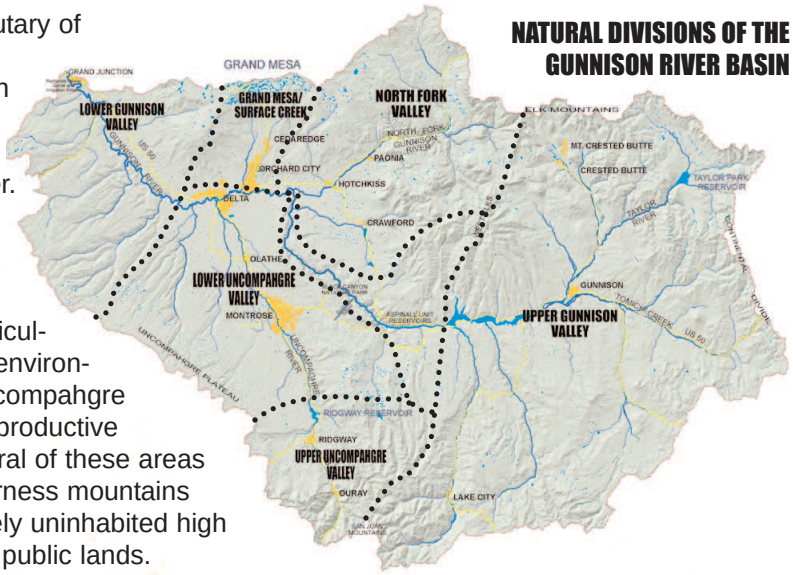
~~~The Gunnison Basin Roundtable~~~

BASIN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN - PROGRESS REPORT 1

BACKGROUND: The Gunnison River Basin is a major tributary of the Colorado River, providing on average at least one-seventh of that river's water supply for the 35-40 million people who use its water, the four million acres of land it irrigates, and the great array of recreational and educational adventures on public lands around the river.



Rugged geography and elevation divide the Gunnison Basin into a very diverse region. The climate and topography of the upper valleys (above 7,000 ft. elevation) limit them primarily to livestock and hay production agriculturally; they are also notable for their recreational and environmental value. Rich alluvial floodplains in the Lower Uncompahgre and North Fork valleys have some of the West's most productive farmland, noted for fruit and vegetable crops. But several of these areas are separated by a very rugged central region of wilderness mountains and canyons, and the Lower Gunnison Basin is a largely uninhabited high desert region. More than half of the Gunnison Basin is public lands.

The Gunnison Basin Roundtable was formed by statute in 2005, under the "Colorado Water for the 21st Century" Act; it is one of nine similar Roundtables in Colorado, charged to "encourage locally driven collaborative solutions to water supply challenges," assess "basin-wide consumptive and nonconsumptive water supply needs," and "serve as forum for education and debate regarding methods for meeting water supply needs." Its 32 members represent all local governments and significant economic sectors in the Basin. The next logical step for the Roundtables, after fulfilling those charges, is to take on the new task of developing a statewide water plan....

THE COLORADO WATER PLANNING PROCESS

Since 2003, the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) has been conducting and updating a Statewide Water Supply Initiative study of the state's water resources (SWSI). Given the state demographer's population projections of 3 to 5 million additional inhabitants by mid-century, the SWSI study indicates a significant gap by then between the state's known water resources and the projected demand for water for the expanded population. Depending on the implementation of conservation measures and the construction of planned projects between now and then, "The Gap" may be from 200,000 to 600,000 acre-feet of water annually (65-200 million gallons) - mostly on the Front Range.

Confronting those projections, Governor John Hickenlooper in May 2013 ordered the CWCB to develop a "Colorado Water Plan" with a 2050 horizon. His Executive Order established three overall end goals for the planning process:

- A productive economy that supports vibrant and sustainable cities, viable and productive agriculture, and a robust skiing, recreation, and tourism industry;
- Efficient and effective water infrastructure promoting smart land use; and
- A strong environment that includes healthy watersheds, rivers and streams, and wildlife.

The Governor's order instructed the CWCB to bring the Basin Roundtables into the planning process, along with other "ad hoc" groups; the CWCB has therefore assigned each basin's Roundtable to draft a Basin Implementation Plan for meeting its own needs, both consumptive (agriculture, municipal/domestic and industrial) and nonconsuptive (environmental, recreational and other uses like hydropower that use water without consuming it).

Each Basin Implementation Plan is asked to 1) define Basin goals, consistent with the statewide goals; 2) assess Basin consumptive and nonconsumptive needs; 3) evaluate the Basin's constraints and opportunities in meeting those needs and implementing goals; 4) identify and analyze projects, programs or methods that would enable the Basin's needs and goals to be met; 5) identify project-specific strategies necessary to carry out the Basin's projects, programs and methods; and 6) determine how success in meeting Basin needs and goals would be measured.

These Basin Implementation Plans are to be completed by July of this year, at which point the CWCB staff will shape them all into a statewide water plan by year's end that will provide a map for further developing or redirecting the state's water resources as necessary to address "The Gap" by mid-century.

THE GUNNISON BASIN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

DEFINING GOALS: The first step in drafting the plan has been to define goals that will guide the development of the Gunnison Basin Implementation Plan. The drafting committee began with ***Intrabasin Goals***, to guide the future internal development of water resources within the Basin, to mid-century. ***One priority goal*** was established early in the discussion:

- ***Protect existing water uses in the Gunnison Basin.*** This signifies a general satisfaction with the mix of uses - agricultural, municipal and domestic, industrial, recreational, educational and environmental - in the Gunnison Basin today; any new project should be evaluated in terms of potential impact on the existing mix of uses.

That primary goal is to be supported or complemented by the following goals, given no priority over each other:

- *Discourage the conversion of productive agricultural land to all other uses within the context of private property rights.*
- *Improve agricultural water supplies to reduce shortages.*
- *Identify and address municipal and industrial water shortages.*
- *Quantify and protect nonconsumptive water uses.*
- *Identify, quantify and encourage beneficial relationships between agricultural water uses and nonconsumptive uses.*
- *Restore, maintain, and modernize critical water infrastructure, including hydropower.*
- *Maintain an active and comprehensive public education process about water resources in the Gunnison Basin.*

The committee then generated several ***Statewide Principles*** to guide the Basin in further developing its relationships with the other Basins on the West Slope, and also with the rest of the state:

- *Future supply of Colorado River water is highly variable and uncertain; therefore any proponent of a new supply project from the Colorado River System must accept the risk of a shortage of supply however the shortage occurs, strictly adhere to the prior appropriation doctrine, and protect existing water uses and communities from adverse impacts resulting from the new supply project.* ("New supply" in the context of these principles, refers to any new project taking water from the Colorado River Basin with water rights later than December 31, 2013.)
- *A new supply development from any location in the Colorado River System must be explicitly recognized as impacting the entire Upper Colorado River Basin, due to still-undefined Colorado River Compact obligations.*
- *Any new supply project from the Colorado River System must have specifically identified sponsors and beneficiaries, and must meet certain minimum criteria concerning the subsequent use of that water.*
- *Appropriate demand management and water conservation techniques must be employed prior to any new supply development from the Colorado River System.*
- *Local or regional solutions, rather than a major state water project, must be utilized to meet specified future water needs.*
- *Adequate water supply factors must be incorporated into land use planning and development.*
- *Scenario planning (low, medium, high) should be used for water planning, given uncertainties like climate change.*
- *Continue statewide discussion and education concerning the Gunnison Basin Roundtable vision for Colorado water development.*

DRAFT NEEDS ASSESSMENT: Consultant Greg Johnson has held meetings with agricultural and municipal consumptive users and recreational/environmental nonconsumptive users, and ascertained these shortages and other project or program needs in the Basin:

- Agricultural shortages exist in all Basin Water Districts, most of it reflecting a need for storage of water for late-summer and fall irrigation. SWSI 2010 estimates this Basin shortage at ~128,000 acre-feet (>2 million acre-feet statewide).
- Municipal/domestic and industrial shortages will probably be modest in the Basin, despite a projected doubling of population (mostly urban); SWSI 2010 projects M&I shortages at ~6,500 acre-feet/year (~1% of the 2050 statewide shortage). There are other M&I challenges, however. The main M&I water supplier in the Basin, Project 7 serving 50,000 people in the Montrose-Delta Corridor depends on water from the aging Gunnison Tunnel with only a 30-day reserve supply.
- It is difficult to quantify all of the nonconsumptive uses of water in the Basin, especially environmental "ecosystem services." Recreational user groups, however, have increasing economic impacts in the valley. American Whitewater, for example, has done a quantitative analysis of optimal flows for whitewater sports in the Gunni-son Basin, and similar information for other recreational uses will be included in the analysis of future developments.

In all of these technical meetings, however, all users indicated an awareness that there was neither political will nor economic resources for addressing shortages; the main concern expressed was that the shortages not grow significantly worse in the future, through either in-basin development or state-level projects or programs. (See priority intrabasin goal above.)

What does the Gunnison Basin Roundtable need from you now?

We need to know if the ***Intrabasin Goals*** and ***Statewide Principles*** the Roundtable presents above are consistent with your hopes for the Basin's future. We will present some questions to stimulate discussion on that during today's meeting.

There is also an online survey that will help us decide what to focus on in identifying projects or programs for future planning: **http://www.coloradomesa.edu/watercenter/GunniBasinPlan.html**. We would deeply appreciate it if you would take 10 minutes to engage that survey.

For more information on this planning process, call (970-641-4340) or email George Sibley (george@gard-sibley.org).