

# Henry's Fork Watershed Council

Tuesday, October 17, 2017

Participants began registering at 8 a.m. at the Henry's Fork Foundation Community Campus in Ashton.

Brandon Hoffner, of the Henry's Fork Foundation (HFF), called the meeting to order. Brandon thanked everyone for traveling to a new location and welcomed them to the new HFF Community Campus. Participants introduced themselves. Brandon explained that the Watershed Council began in 1993 in an effort to build trust and to find a way to collaborate, solve problems, and open lines of communications among the various stakeholders in the watershed. Brandon called for two minutes of silence, noting that it has been a tradition of the council at every meeting since its inception. Brandon then opened the meeting up to any announcements or comments.

## ***Community Building***

Aaron Dalling, Fremont-Madison Irrigation District (FMID), commented that FMID and Egin Bench Canal's interest in the Wilderness Study Area (WSA) topic stems from the fact that they have built a new recharge canal but have been somewhat limited in the amount of water they can recharge because expansion of the existing recharge ponds would encroach on the WSA.

Jeff Raybould also commented that his farm borders BLM ground and the WSA. He says that the study has been in place since before he starting farming that ground 39 years ago, so it's time to assess the study to see if it is complete.

## ***Sand Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA)***

Amy Taylor, Senator Risch's Office

Multiple stakeholders have requested that the Sand Mountain area be released from WSA designation, so Senator Risch wants to hear from the local community. He wants to hear from the state anytime a land designation change is proposed. He has no agenda except to hear what the community thinks. There is no formula for releasing areas from WSA designation, so any legislation would be specific to the Sand Mountain area. The Senator wants to ensure that releasing the area from WSA designation is what everyone wants.

## ***Sand Mountain WSA – History and Background***

Jeremy Casterson, BLM

A Wilderness Study Area (WSA) is a roadless area that has been inventoried (but not designated as formal Wilderness by Congress) and found to have wilderness characteristics. WSAs must be at least 5,000 acres or border another WSA. For the BLM, the process starts in the inventory phase, during which potential WSAs are identified. Then, in the study phase, the BLM assesses the suitability of the location. In the reporting phase, the BLM reports the suitability or non-suitability of the area for formal Wilderness designation to Congress.

In 1979, the Sand Mountain WSA didn't make initial screening, but that decision was appealed, so the land was inventoried. In 1981 the inventory resulted in recommendation of Sand Mountain as a WSA. That decision was appealed, but the appellants lost. In 1985, the Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan recommended Sand Mountain as unsuitable for Wilderness designation, so the BLM made a plan for how it would be managed if released from WSA designation. In 1988, the study phase was completed, and the land determined to be unsuitable for Wilderness designation, so in 1991, the BLM reported this to Congress. The Sand Mountain WSA was found unsuitable because it did not have clear boundaries, it is less than exemplary for naturalness and solitude, and it is a premier area for motorized recreation.

WSAs are unique to the BLM, and the BLM is obligated to protect their value so as not to preclude future Wilderness designation until Congress acts. There are 545 WSAs in the U.S. totaling approximately 12,790,291 acres. The BLM manages them to retain their potential for Wilderness designation. Any potential project would be looked at to see if it would impair the land. That means nothing permanent can be added and there can be no surface disturbance, but hiking and livestock grazing are allowed.

The Sand Mountain WSA is unique in that motorized recreation is allowed. Because of the nature of the landscape, any tracks left by motorized recreation are blown away after each wind/sand storm, so it is considered a temporary rather than a permanent addition or surface disturbance.

Brandon Hoffner suggested the group circle back to this discussion through the WIRE process or in a December/January HFWC meeting.

### ***Bureau of Reclamation Water Update***

Brian Stevens, USBR

The reservoir system is currently at 72% of capacity and 188% of average. There is 1.96 million acre-feet more water in the system than last year (309% of last year). Palisades dam outflow is approximately 3,800 cfs and by early November will be down to 2,500 cfs. Palisades Reservoir is currently 91% full and will be managed to keep 50,000 acre-feet of space throughout the winter. Island Park Reservoir is 82% full with 110,000 acre-feet of water and an approximate outflow of 480 cfs. There is no need to make drastic changes so, depending on inflow, outflow from Island Park Dam will be 425-450 cfs through the winter.

### ***Water District 01 Water Update***

Lyle Swank, WD01

The Snake River (at Heise) recorded the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest annual unregulated natural flow volume this year over the period 1911-2017. The Henry's Fork near Ashton was not nearly as high, but Fall and Teton Rivers were above the median. In WY 2017, 317,000 acre-feet of water was recharged to the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer through July 4<sup>th</sup>. Since August 30<sup>th</sup>, 16,000 acre-feet of water has been recharged.

There are currently numerous issues surrounding water rights and their administration in the State of Idaho that are being discussed from multiple viewpoints. These include accounting of flood-control releases and subsequent “second fill” of federal storage reservoirs (currently a popular topic of discussion in the Boise River system), interface of private managed aquifer recharge with the State’s public-benefit aquifer recharge program, flexibility in water-right place-of-use assignments, and renewal of the Columbia River Treaty between the U.S. and Canada. Different theories of water rights could affect legal and administrative decisions made surrounding all of these issues, with real effects on how water is managed and accounted in Water District 01.

## ***Henry’s Fork Water Quality Update***

Melissa Muradian, Henry’s Fork Foundation (HFF)

Water conditions were good this year concerning water temperatures and dissolved oxygen. Turbidity, which was a concern last summer, was quite low this year. One of the only concerns HFF received this year was concern over water temperatures in the Harriman reach of the Henry’s Fork. Anglers were concerned water temperatures might be too high and stressful to trout populations. HFF’s data shows that water temperatures were warm, but not stressfully so. Water temperatures never reached a level that would cause physiological stress to trout.

Lower flows were released from Island Park Dam this summer than last summer, thanks to Fall and Teton rivers meeting most of the irrigation demand, and anglers asked if higher flows from the dam would result in cooler water temperatures. The data indicates that much higher flows did not lead to cooler temperatures last year than this year. In fact, keeping more water in Island Park Reservoir provides benefits such as cooler water outflow from the dam, decreased turbidity, and increased winter flow, which improves over-winter survival of juvenile trout.

HFF has been developing a website to host this water quality data, including real-time data from the water quality instruments (sondes) in the field. This will be a publically available website where users can access water quality data real-time. The first installation is complete for one of the sonde locations and the data will be transmitted via Verizon cell service. The website is still in progress, but will include an interactive map where users can view water quality parameters like temperature and dissolved oxygen for a given sonde location and compare parameters between two locations.

## **Community Building and Wrap-Up**

Aaron, FMID, asked for one minute of silence to wrap-up the meeting before closing comments and announcements.

Brandon Hoffner thanked everyone for coming out today and thanked the presenters for sharing a lot of good information.

John Sullivan, Harriman State Park, expressed thanks and appreciation to the Henry's Fork Foundation for their partnership in a variety of projects over the past few years. John presented Brandon with a Regional Recognition Award from the Idaho Dept. of Parks and Recreation.

Keith Esplin, Eastern Idaho Water Rights Coalition (EIWRC), commented that if the WSA has been recommended as unsuitable, EIWRC would support changes to enable more recharge. Keith also announced that there would be a legislative forum regarding cities water rights on December 4<sup>th</sup> at 9 AM in Rexburg. Keith can provide additional information to those who are interested.

Rob Van Kirk, HFF, commented that Lyle's presentation pointed out numerous issues with water rights and their administration that need to be resolved in order to fully utilize all water available during above-average water years with minimal spill at Milner.

Aaron announced that the Idaho Climate Summit will serve as the HFWC annual conference this year. HFWC co-facilitators HFF and FMID are looking into coordinating a Rexburg or Idaho Falls remote location.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30.