Henry's Fork Watershed Council

Tuesday, April 10, 2018

Participants began registering at 8 a.m. at the SpringHill Suites in Rexburg, ID.

Aaron Dalling, of the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District (FMID), called the meeting to order. Participants introduced themselves. Aaron 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. He explained that today is a forum to discuss topics, not fix or debate, but to learn about them. Aaron called for two minutes of silence to think about our purpose, why we are all here today, and to prepare for a respectful meeting. Aaron then opened the meeting up to any announcements or comments.

Community Building

There were no announcements.

Water supply update

Rob Van Kirk, Henry's Fork Foundation

Starting with the entire upper Snake River system, reservoir storage was held at 87% of capacity most of the winter. However, heavy precipitation over the past 6 weeks has greatly increased snow-water-equivalent (SWE), and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) is now operating Palisades Reservoir in flood-control mode. Outflow was increased last week to 18,000 cfs, and that may go to 20,000 cfs for an extended period this spring. Spill at Milner is now around 13,000 cfs because American Falls Reservoir is close to full, irrigation demand is still low, and capacity for managed aquifer recharge isn't nearly large enough to take much of the excess water.

In the Henry's Fork watershed, water-year accumulated precipitation is 107% of average, and SWE is at 112% of average. Temperatures have been average or below average since the middle of February, keeping snowpack on the ground. Onset of runoff is right at its normal timing. Today, April 10, is the average date of maximum SWE accumulation in the watershed, and SWE is still increasing. In fact, SWE accumulation over the past two weeks has matched that in 2017 very closely, and it is looking more likely every day that maximum SWE may end very close to last year's peak timing and magnitude. Henry's Lake and Island Park Reservoir have been nearly constant all winter, at outflows of 50 cfs and 500 cfs, respectively, both well above average. Natural watershed inflow between Henry's Lake and Island Park, a good indicator of long-term condition of the deep Yellowstone Plateau aquifers, was 452 cfs over the winter period, versus 415 cfs predicted last fall, reflecting good recovery from the drought of 2013-2016. Predicted summertime flow over the whole watershed is 108% of average: 99% of average in the upper Henry's Fork, 117% of average in Fall River, and 114% of average in Teton River. With 90% probability, summertime flow will be 89% of average. So, at worst, summertime water supply will be a little below average, and most likely will be average to slightly above average.

Middle Henry's Fork Watershed Aspen Enhancement Project

Jonathan White, Caribou-Targhee National Forest

Aspen is the most diverse forest type in the West and second only to riparian areas in biodiversity. Aspen stands are ecologically important for a variety of reasons including increased soil productivity, increased moisture retention and water yield, and habitat for wildlife, especially deer and elk. Additionally, aspen generate tourism and provide fire protection in the urban-wildland interface. However, aspen has been reduced by as much as 60% to 90% throughout the entire western United States and roughly 61% in Idaho. Eastern Idaho has experienced an approximate 60% loss of aspen in the last 100 years. Aspen once accounted for approximately 40% to 45% of the land area on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest but now cover less than 9% of the forest. In 1991, approximately 7,615 acres of aspen occurred in the Island Park subsection. In the late 1800s/early 1900s, aspen covered 35,219 acres. This is roughly a 79% decline. Assessment of aspen in the Island Park area using proper-functioning-condition comparison shows that age structure is dominated by mature stands, with very little recruitment of seedlings and saplings. Remaining aspen stands are fragmented and small in size.

The large majority of aspen recession throughout eastern Idaho has been linked to both conifer encroachment and lack of new growth via suckering or seedlings. This has been caused by a combination of fire suppression, re-planting of conifers following timber harvest in the 1960s-1980s, and even some deliberate removal of aspen during the decades when timber production was the primary management objective. The purpose of the project is to reduce the conifer competition and favor aspen by stimulating aspen root suckering and regenerate aspen clones that are being suppressed by encroaching Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine. Conifer will be maintained on the landscape in a better balance with aspen, mountain brush, sagebrush, grass and forbs to benefit mule deer, elk and other wildlife. Another objective of this project is to reduce the risk to the urban communities of an undesirable wildland fire event by reintroducing fire as a natural ecological process. By enhancing the presence of aspen, a fire break is created, slowing down or even stopping the spread of an advancing wildland fire.

The project area is the Henry's Fork watershed from Island Park Dam to the Warm River confluence. Harriman State Park lies completely within the project area and is included in the project area. Most existing aspen in the project area occur just inside the caldera rim along Big Bend Ridge. Other stands occur in the Last Chance area and near Mesa Falls. Around 100 different stands have been identified in the project are, but more detailed assessment will be conducted in 2018 and 2019. About 30,000 acres are being considered for treatment with conifer harvest and/or prescribed burn. Depending on the data collected in 2018 and 2019, the total acreage proposed for treatment will most likely be reduced. The project will require evaluation under the National Environmental Policy Act. Implementation is scheduled to begin in 2020 and could require 5-10 years to complete.

Targhee Pass Environmental Assessment and U.S. Hwy. 20 Projects

Andrea Gumm, Langdon Group (consultants to Idaho Transportation Department)

Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) ITD initiated an Environmental Assessment (EA) to engage the public, and evaluate impacts, risks, benefits, opportunities, and costs associated with

reconstruction of Targhee Pass, a four-mile section of U.S. 20 between its junction with Idaho 87 and the Montana state line. The Federal Highway Administration is the lead agency on this EA and will be signing the final study document. The EA is being completed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The purpose of the project is to improve driver safety, traffic flow, and roadway structural integrity. Crash data indicate safety concerns related to road icing, blowing/drifting snow, and wildlife-vehicle collisions. Traffic flow is hindered at times by congestion and slower moving vehicles climbing Targhee Pass. Lastly, roadway pavement and foundation age exceed the expected life cycle of 40 years. Poor drainage creates soft spots and allows frost heaving of the road during the winter. Recent investigations show the aged road foundation is not suitable for long term pavement stability. Other important community issues to be evaluated in the Environmental Assessment include improving safety for pedestrians and bicycles within the project area and enhancing wildlife movement across US 20 within the project area. Wildlife movement across US 20 is a safety issue for both drivers and wildlife and can impede migratory, dispersal, and daily movements of wildlife.
Five alternatives are being analyzed in the EA.

Alternative 1 (No-Build)

Replace existing pavement only. No roadway improvements will be made to address traffic flow and capacity, driver safety, bike and pedestrian safety, wildlife-vehicle collisions, and wildlife movement enhancement. The No-Build Alternative provides a comparison of future conditions without improvements to future conditions with improvements.

Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 all share a common set of transportation elements, summarized in the table below. These four alternatives differ from one another in the particular measures included to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Needs	Transportation Elements
Roadway Structure	• Replace pavement • Replace ballast (road subsurface) • Drainage improvements including improved culvert at Howard Spring
Traffic Flow/Capacity	• Climbing lane added entire length • Left and right turn lanes into Big Horn Hills Estates, both entrances
Driver Safety	• Cut back trees in areas where shading increases ice • Shoulders widened to 6 to 8-feet • Curve reductions, road geometry improvements • Measures to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions

Alternative 2

Three wildlife crossing structures and **wildlife fence** throughout the four-mile project corridor.

Alternative 3

Animal detection system would be implemented throughout the four-mile project corridor. The system would alert drivers to the presence of animals. This alternative does not include wildlife fencing.

Alternative 4

Fencing throughout the four-mile segment, with **one wildlife overpass** structure in the upper segment of the pass. In the lower segment, one or more **at-grade wildlife crosswalks** would be created, with an **animal detection system** to detect animals and warn approaching drivers.

Alternative 5

Fencing, wildlife overpasses, and animal detection systems would not be installed. Instead, ITD would rely on **operational measures** such as variable message signs to alert drivers of potential wildlife presence on the road.

The Targhee Pass EA Schedule is given in the table below. Public meeting #4 will be held at the Emergency Service Building in Island Park in late June. The 30-day public comment period begins at that time. A final decision will be made after ITD has had time to consider and respond to all public comments.

OCT-DEC 2016	JAN-JUNE 2017	JULY-AUG 2017	AUG-DEC 2017	JAN-SPRING 2018	EARLY SUMMER 2018
Study initiation Public Meeting #1	Incorporate comments	Public Meeting #2 Alternatives workshop	Public Meeting #3 Present draft alternatives	Complete impact analysis	Public Meeting #4 Present EA document
Stakeholder assessment Public scoping & comment period (12/15/16-1/30/17)	Refine Purpose & Need Evaluate strategies for reducing wildlife collisions & maintaining wildlife movement	Incorporate comments Develop draft alternatives	30-day public comment period Incorporate comments & refine alternatives	Prepare environmental assessment (EA) document	30-day public comment period Finalize EA Prepare & publicize decision

Other U.S. 20 projects are being considered for:

- Chester to Ashton
- Sheep Falls to Pinehaven
- Pinehven to Buffalo River
- Buffalo River to Island Park Lodge

ITD is currently collecting additional field data (cultural, environmental, etc.) associated with these projects and will hold a public meeting in Ashton in late May with more information on environmental work and schedule.

Community Building and Wrap-Up

Brandon Hoffner, HFF, asked for one minute of silence to wrap-up the meeting before closing comments and announcements.

Kathy Rinaldi, GYC, announced that the Greater Yellowstone Coalition would be hosting a conference with Montana State University on recreation in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem on April 23-24.

Brandon Hoffner, HFF, announced that the High Divide spring meeting in Dillon, MT would cover topics including Wildland-Urban-Interface (WUI) issues, drought resiliency, and disease. The meeting would take place at University of Montana Western from April 18-19.

Mark Chandler, FRREC, expressed that the main threat to wildlife is losing their winter range. It's important to protect that desert habitat for big game.

Leanne Yancy, citizen, asked if there is land [winter habitat] available for purchase and if we should put money in that direction. LeAnne also asked about the Sand Mountain WSA.

Brandon, HFF, indicated that the agenda for the meeting was changed due to related bills that could impact that WSA. The group might discuss it again at a later date. Brandon also shared that there will be a Farm Bureau tour with the Friends of the Teton River in August. This tour might also serve as the HFWC annual tour. Dates forthcoming.