

Genesis of the Upper Colorado River Watershed Group

COHeadwaterScience.com Blog 2020-3 by Geoffrey E. Elliott, MSc.

Dear Reader, there still seems to be some confusion about the Upper Colorado River Watershed Group (UCRWG, sounds like oo-ker-woog), in particular how we won our WaterSMART grant, competitiveness, budget, and deliverables. Let me address some of the questions here:

1. Our 2015 pre-UCRWG working group (Joy Phelan, Ken Fucik, and me) prepared and submitted our application for the US Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) WaterSMART Grant at risk and with considerable investment of pro-bono (volunteer) hours. These WaterSMART grants www.usbr.gov/watersmart are quite competitive, with our team going up against many such teams in the USBR Upper Colorado River Region which includes western Colorado, most of Utah, and New Mexico. As part of our stakeholder outreach Ken invited our Grand County Commissioners and the Grand County Water Information Network to take the lead on the project but they opted out. Ken also visited the "Learn by Doing Committee" (LBD) who also opted out of working with us.
2. To my amazement, we won the grant with \$50K for Fiscal Year 2017 and, after meeting USBR requirements for substantial progress the first year, we were awarded a second \$50K for FY 2018. We had a warm, very positive relationship with the USBR watershed team but the USBR financial team was brutal, reviewing every penny and denying several expenditures. This is the reality of Federal funding but, as my dear Mother would say, "if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."
3. Our final budget was finalized by USBR with final payment in late in 2018. I can summarize here:

Over the two project years a total of \$80K went to our Grand Environmental Services (GES) technical team including Joy Phelan (Wildlife Biologist, Columbine Lake) and subcontractors Ryan Lokteff (Watershed Scientist, Grand Lake), Samantha Bruegger (Environmental Studies, Grand Lake), Lisa Buchanan (Hydrologist, Boulder + family has cabin in Wild Acres near GL Metro Rec District for 20 years), and Lisa Caruana (Environmental Studies + Journalism, Fraser). Ken worked substantial pro-bono hours but not formally tallied, GES contributed an additional \$11K pro-bono, all of which is documented under credit memos in QuickBooks.

\$20K went to Shadowcliff for administration and public outreach including four public meetings + social media. Shadowcliff Director Hilary Mizia was wonderful to work with, taking the lead on our community conversations and helping us digest public input. NOTE Shadowcliff is a Grand Lake based 501(c3) with an impressive sustainability-minded Board of Directors and all expenditures are audited annually.

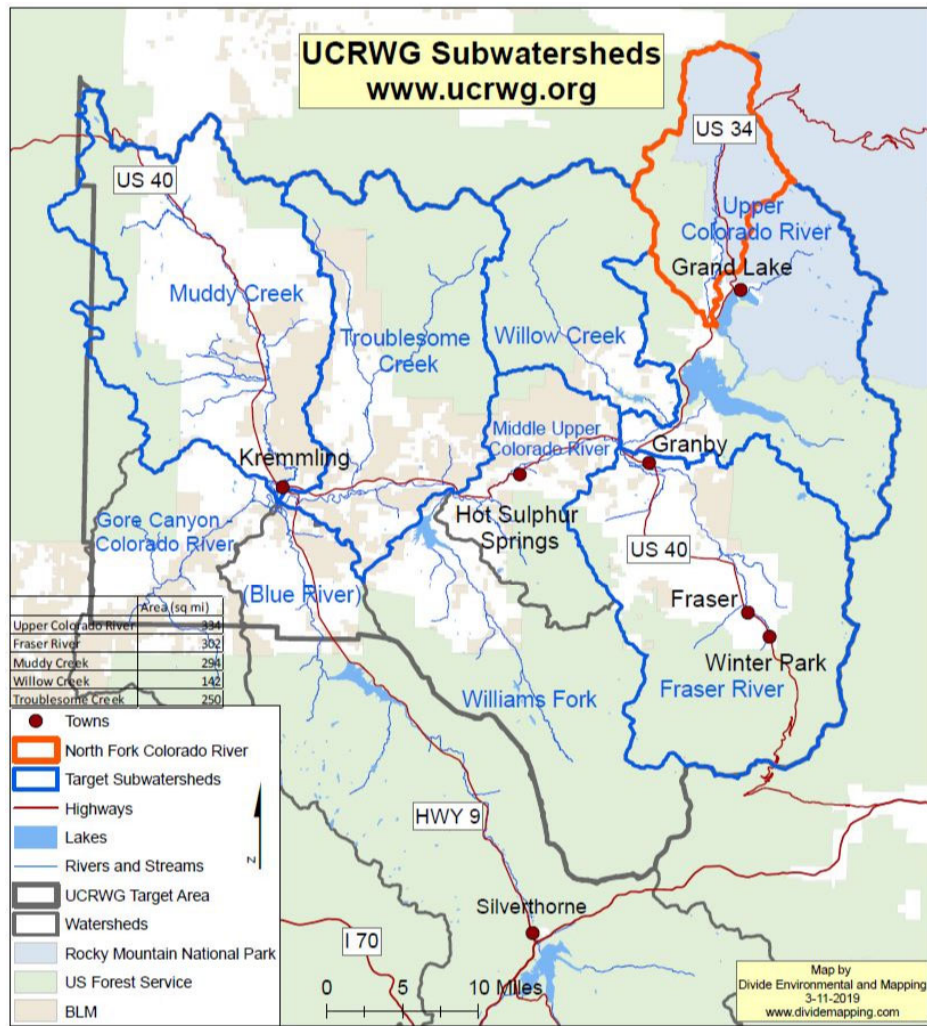
NOTE close to 100% of the WaterSMART funds were spent here in the UCRWG project area.

4. Participants in our four public meetings were invited to join the UCRWG Board in a totally transparent process. Board membership is limited to 1) people residing in Grand County, and 2) members sit on the board as individual citizens, not representatives of other organizations. They can of course be part of other groups, like Andy Miller being a Fraser Trustee or Katelyn Cimino being President of the Middle Park High School Rotary Interact Club, but they sit on the board as individuals with no other clout than their passion for our Colorado River Headwaters. The UCRWG 501(c3) organization was thus set up to avoid direct conflicts with top-down political groups like GCWIN and LBD.

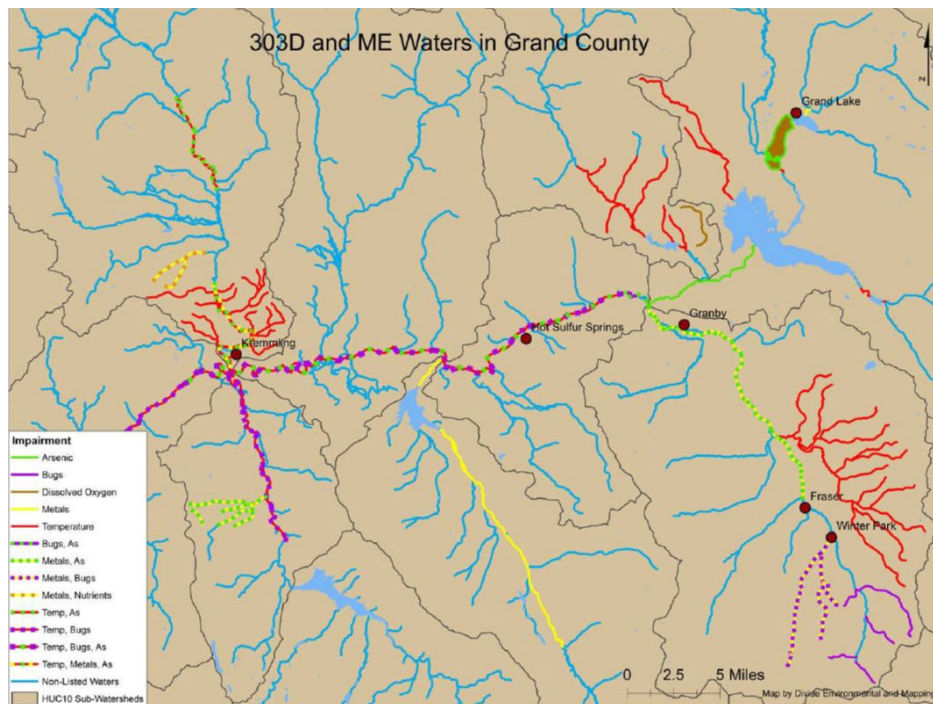


5. DELIVERABLES:

- a. We completed our required Upper Colorado River Watershed Resiliency Plan (downloadable below, 18 pages) six months early and substantially under budget so, after discussing with Hillary, the USBR watershed team, and Charles Curtin from the Headwaters Land Trust, I worked with Lisa Caruana to push ahead with a more detailed plan with specific details to fit the USEPA “9-Elements” format recommended by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) for projects seeking Federal 319 watershed funding. This is the “WaterSMART Roadmap to a Healthier, More Resilient, Upper Colorado River Watershed” (downloadable file below, 22 pages).



b. I also worked with Ryan Lokteff to develop a map of GC waters not meeting State standards 303d and ME Waters in Grand County (downloadable below) after we found out GCWIN and our Grand County Water Quality Specialist did not have a summary of these waters, nor did we anything we could use in either of the two FIRMING Project EIS's.



c. The last of our budget went to our Beaver Restoration Assessment Tool (BRAT) analysis for the UCRWG project area (downloadable below). We were pleased to learn that USBR's sister agency the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) officially recognizes beaver restoration as a cost-effective approach for large-scale watershed restoration mitigating climate change which is one of the principal goals of WaterSMART. USFWS has a great list of non-lethal beaver mitigation strategies as well as grants under the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

This large-scale planning puts UCRWG in a strong position to move ahead on analysis and restoration planning for the North Fork of the Colorado River (NFCR), identified in our planning as the low-hanging fruit of UCRWG HUC-10 sub-watersheds. I will continue to work with the local UCRWG technical team as their volunteer Project Scientist until we can secure funding to move ahead in a bigger way (after COVID19 gets under control).

Drop me a line if you are interested in our WaterSMART efforts or if you'd like to learn more about restoration of restore a healthier, more resilient Upper Colorado River Watershed.

Downloadable Files:

- Upper Colorado River Watershed Resiliency Plan
- Roadmap to a Healthier, more Resilient Upper Colorado River Watershed
- Maps of 303(d) listed waters and BRAT Output