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## **BLOG 2020-1: Water Party Meeting in Grand Lake January 16, 2020**

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Last month's water meeting at the Grand Lake Community House was a big success bringing some 40 people together not typically part of Grand County water discussions. Hosted by longtime local Tracee Lorens and the Grand Lake Chamber of Commerce, discussion was guided by Kirsten Heckendorf, Vice President of the Outstanding Grand Lake Foundation (OGL). Kirsten invited several local conservation groups with the same goals – a sustainable economy and clean, healthy waters – but taking different approaches. Hence this water party meeting. This is the first, and probably most important theme of the evening: **THEME 1: We're generally pointed in the same direction, surely we can at least communicate better together?**



**Outstanding Grand Lake (OGL)** – Local businessman and OGL President JT Piribek followed, sharing a remarkable recent New York Times article touting Grand Lake as one of the best beach towns in America. Yep, one of the best beach towns in America! And specifically

because of our unique lake-side beauty and diverse water-based recreation. JT runs Rocky Mountain SUP (standup paddle boards at [www.rsmsup.com](http://www.rsmsup.com)) on Grand Lake and sees the importance of clean water quality every working day – water quality is, indeed, the heart of our ecotourism. That’s why our Grand Lake Chamber of Commerce ([www.grandlakechamber.com](http://www.grandlakechamber.com)) is pressing for more collaboration.

**Upper Colorado River Watershed Group (UCRWG)** – Andy Miller, UCRWG Board President and Fraser Trustee, introduced the UCRWG Roadmap for a Healthier, more Resilient Watershed for the Colorado Headwaters (Watershed Roadmap, see [www.ucrwg.org/watershed-resiliency-plan](http://www.ucrwg.org/watershed-resiliency-plan)) funded by the US Bureau of Reclamation ([www.usbr.gov/watersmart](http://www.usbr.gov/watersmart)). In fact, the OGL concept grew from UCRWG outreach and planning. Andy shared ideas about funding large-scale efforts we’ll need to restore hundreds of miles of local impaired waters including Shadow Mountain Reservoir. After launching the Watershed Roadmap, UCRWG is focusing in on the North Fork of the Colorado River (NFCR) which starts up in Rocky Mountain National Park and flows into Shadow Mtn Reservoir. This UCRWG sub-watershed was identified as a “low-hanging-fruit” for detailed assessment and restoration due to its scale (~100 miles<sup>2</sup>), relatively simple ownership (mostly Federal lands), and because restoration here should make a clear, positive impact on Reservoir water quality. Unfortunately, they’ve has been frustrated by inconsistent County demands and conflicting directions. This is the second common theme we heard during the evening – THEME 2: Our County Government is confusing when it comes to water quality, often blocking grass-roots conservation efforts. In fact, stream and watershed restoration is not brain surgery, and does not require expensive Front Range consultants. Did I mention the UCRWG Roadmap? see [www.ucrwg.org/watershed-resiliency-plan](http://www.ucrwg.org/watershed-resiliency-plan)) funded by the US Bureau of Reclamation ([www.usbr.gov/watersmart](http://www.usbr.gov/watersmart)).

UCRWG Board Ken Fucik and Dave Troutman echoed the need for long-term funding mechanisms, bemoaning to vast wealth of water diverted eastward and now feeding massive growth on the Front Range while we in the Three-Lakes area pay higher prices for water service and struggle to even begin detailed restoration planning. If we were sending coal, or even corn, eastward, we would be flush with tax revenue.

Hey, why is that, anyway? Water is our common denominator for all human activities, indeed for life itself, and our Colorado Headwaters are rich with this liquid gold but the Front Range refuses to even consider reimbursing our basin of origin? Why are we afraid to ask for fair compensation for trans-mountain diversions?

**Three Lakes Watershed Association (TLWA)** – Kirsten read from a TLWA flyer since a representative was not able to join us. She praised TLWA for their commitment to bringing agencies together to address concerns for decreasing Grand Lake water quality. First identified by lakefront homeowners in the 1950s, reduced Grand Lake clarity followed almost immediately after the Colorado-Big Thompson system (CBT) diverting water eastward to the Front Range ([www.threelakeswatershed.org](http://www.threelakeswatershed.org)), probably because of algal blooms in shallow Shadow Mtn Reservoir. We hear news of Grand Lake clarity improvements in 2019, but

Shadow Mtn Reservoir had a really bad year. THEME 1 again: We are moving together in the same direction, surely we can communicate better together.

**Kawuneeche Group (KGroup)** – Becca Hofmeister showed what citizens can do with agency support, listing 2019 field studies by the Grand-Lake-based Kawuneeche Group, our informal team of professional and citizen scientists working to promote beaver restoration along the Colorado River and tributaries in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP at [www.nps.gov/romo](http://www.nps.gov/romo)). Becca is an Environmental Science student at Colorado Mesa University now doing an internship with local Grand Environmental Services. She’s studying how beaver communities were lost in this part of RMNP over the last 20 years, and how their restoration could improve fishery and wildlife values, including the Colorado River Flyway, while mitigating for climate change. The Kawuneeche Group is an UCRWG affiliate working under RMNP Research Permit and plans to follow our successful 2019 year with regular workshops and field trips this next year ([www.kawuneechegroup.com](http://www.kawuneechegroup.com)). I’d say this is the third message of the evening: THEME 3: Maybe it’s time for citizens to move ahead with local grass-roots projects as long as our work is well-considered and follows regulations and industry best practices?

**Grand Environmental Services (GES)** – My task was to introduce the vast collection system now feeding water to the US Bureau of Reclamation’s (USBR) Colorado-Big Thompson (CBT) system which expanded the original Grand Lake watershed (~75 miles<sup>2</sup>) ten-fold to include the North Fork Colorado River (NFCR) up into RMNP on the north, back and up to Berthoud Pass on the south, up to the Continental Divide on the East, and down to Windy Gap Reservoir.

So the CBT collects water from ~750 miles<sup>2</sup> of watershed, including undisclosed miles of streams not meeting Colorado state standards for water quality (“impaired waters”, see [www.ucrwg.org](http://www.ucrwg.org)), and pumped up to Shadow Mtn Reservoir, also impaired by low dissolved oxygen and elevated levels of Arsenic. Here, it gathers nutrients, stews under the sun, grows vegetation and algae, and then is pumped through Grand Lake to the Adams Tunnel and the Front Range beyond. Literally everything that happens between Winter Park, Granby, and Grand Lake influences lake water quality, including all the urban, agricultural, and forest lands in between. This is the logic behind USBR helping pay for water-treatment improvements in Fraser and agricultural improvements near CLazyU arguing this will improve water quality in the Three Lakes Area. In a more direct way, this is why UCRWG is targeting the NFCR for watershed improvements since it flows directly into Shadow Mtn Reservoir.

**Tracee Lorens** – Third-generation local Tracee Lorens was our final scheduled speaker. She shared photos of the Colorado River running chalk-green on September 11, 2019 by her property where the river flows into Shadow Mtn Reservoir. Holding an inch-thick stack of printed e-mails and phone logs, she spoke of confusing communications starting with our County Water Quality Specialist who sent her on a wild-goose chase as far away as the Corps of Engineers in Omaha. Now four months later with no explanation for the toxic spill, she’s been told by Grand County staff that “*Shadow Mtn Reservoir is ground zero for the Three Lakes System...don’t you know that all reservoirs eventually die.*” Tracee is a retired attorney and

fastidious note-taker. She wrapped up by calling for our community to work with groups like Save the Colorado [www.savethecolorado.org](http://www.savethecolorado.org) a Colorado Riverkeeper affiliate, that knows how to support grass-root efforts and communicate these kinds of concerns. Full transparency here: Save the Colorado leads a consortium of environmental groups suing the Federal Government in order to stop new transmountain diversions eastward through the CBT Adams Tunnel (the so-called “Windy Gap Firming Project”). Our County Commissioners support the additional diversions to the Front Range even though we see no mitigation agreements applicable to the NFCR-Shadow Mtn Lake-Grand Lake area.

Tracee thus blends the three themes of the evening: 1) We’re generally pointed in the same direction; and we surely can communicate better together, 2) Our County Government is confusing when it comes to water quality, tending to block local grass-roots efforts 3) Maybe it’s time for citizens to move ahead with local projects as long as our work is well-considered and follows regulations and industry best practices?



**US Forest Service (USFS)** – Several other participants were heard after the scheduled speakers including Clayton Cornwell from the US Forest Service. Cornwell now manages the Arapaho National Recreation Area including Shadow Mtn Reservoir and parts of the NFCR watershed. He invited our meeting participants to help the USFS address concerns including aquatic vegetation in Shadow Mtn Reservoir. I myself am eager to be part of those conversations and to getting out into the field and into the water to learn more about reducing the seasonal weed patches that limit landowners, including my clients, from enjoying their lake-front properties.

**Grand County** – Retired County Commissioner James Newberry shared some water history describing negotiations that led to the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement (CRCA [www.denverwater.org](http://www.denverwater.org)) in 2012. He's to be credited with shepherding that effort, since Denver Water originally offered no mitigations whatsoever and had to be brought to the negotiating table kicking and screaming. Unfortunately, the CRCA only applies to the Fraser River and Colorado River downstream from Windy Gap; in fact, additional CRCA-enabled transmountain diversions will significantly reduce river flows into Windy Gap Reservoir, the diversion point where waters are pumped up to the Three Lakes Area. So we get even less dilution, making the CRCA a net-negative for Shadow Mtn Reservoir and Grand Lake.

Several participants voiced real concern for the future of Shadow Mtn Reservoir, their concerns fueled to some extent by County staff talking about Shadow Mtn Reservoir “dying.” We do know that UCRWG filed a Freedom of Information Act request tracking certain Federal-State conversations about draining the reservoir if certain “structural solutions” are constructed to pass water more directly to Grand Lake. This would be an enormous and deeply unpopular move and not likely to happen without our own kicking and screaming. In fact, we believe a collaborative mix of large-scale watershed restoration here in the Colorado Headwaters and water conservation on the East Slope would be a more cost-effective and jobs-creating solution to long-term Shadow Mtn Reservoir health.

MOVING FORWARD: We're hearing good response from participants and already talking about more local water party meetings in the future – maybe a water BBQ later this year? Let us know what you think and please do consider joining one of the participating organizations. And let's not forget to give a big shout out to Tracee for buying us all dinner and refreshments. We are indeed blessed to have Tracee and so many others committed to our local waters!

## **A Guide to Who's Who and What's What at the Grand Lake Water Party Meeting**

CBT = Colorado-Big Thompson Project, Federal facilities collecting water in the Colorado Headwaters and sending it trans-mountain through the Adams Tunnel to benefit Colorado Front Range cities, [www.northernwater.org](http://www.northernwater.org)

CRCA = Colorado River Cooperative Agreement, [www.denverwater.org](http://www.denverwater.org)

Grand Environmental Services = Grand Lake based consulting firm, technical team leader for the UCRWG Roadmap and Kawuneeche Group, [www.grandenvironmental.com](http://www.grandenvironmental.com)

Kawuneeche Group = professional and citizen scientists working under RMNP Research Permit to promote beaver restoration in the Kawuneeche Valley which is the upper part of the NFCR, [www.kawuneechegroup.com](http://www.kawuneechegroup.com)

NFCR = North Fork of the Colorado River, headwaters in Rocky Mountain National Park, flows into Shadow Mtn Reservoir, UCRWG choice for additional assessment and restoration

OGL = Outstanding Grand Lake, the 501(c3) non-profit educational arm of the Grand Lake Chamber of Commerce [www.grandlakechamber.com](http://www.grandlakechamber.com)

RMNP = Rocky Mtn National Park, [www.nps.gov/romo](http://www.nps.gov/romo)

RMSUP = Rocky Mtn SUP (standup paddle boards) at [www.rmsup.com](http://www.rmsup.com)

Save the Colorado, conservation group fighting to protect the Colorado River from over-consumption, also Colorado River Waterkeeper Affiliate, [www.savethecolorado.org](http://www.savethecolorado.org)

TLWA = Three Lakes Watershed Association, focus on Grand Lake Clarity, [www.threelakeswatershed.org](http://www.threelakeswatershed.org)

UCRWG = Upper Colorado River Watershed Group, funded by USBR WaterSMART grant, Roadmap for a Healthier, more Resilient Upper Colorado River Watershed [www.ucrwg.org](http://www.ucrwg.org)

USBR = US Bureau of Reclamation, runs WaterSMART cooperative watershed management program and funded UCRWG Roadmap, [www.usbr.gov/watersmart](http://www.usbr.gov/watersmart)