



*Promoting the wise use of all natural resources*

---

Quarterly Report to Rio Blanco County  
March 30, 2021

The White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts (Districts) are happy to provide the below report to the County Commissioners regarding the work and activities from January through March 2021. The report does not incorporate specific activities but provides highlights on each of the five priorities within the Districts' annual plan of work that are prioritized by public input gathered from Rio Blanco County (RBC) landowners during the Long-Range Planning process. 2021 is the second year of the three-year Long-Range Plan. The top five priorities include long-term sustainable funding, implementation and enforcement of the RBC Land and Natural Resource Plan and Policies (LUP), water, rangeland, and wildlife.

**Long Term Sustainable Funding:**

- Conservation Corner articles:
  - The Districts provide the information for the Conservation Corner in the Rio Blanco Herald Times to provide conservation information to the community and to create awareness of the Districts within the community.
- Grant writing and administration to implement on-the-ground conservation projects through the Coordinated Resource Management Plans (CRMP), White River Algae Study, and White River Integrated Water Initiative as well as small educational grants.
- Ongoing sales programs including sales of tire tanks, polyacrylamide (PAM) and seedling trees.
- Ongoing rental programs including no-till drill, pipe fusion machine, weed sprayer, and broadcast seeder.

**LUP Specific:**

- Staff attended a County Commissioner work session and provided comments, based on LUP policy of "no net gain" of federal lands, regarding a sale of private property to CPW. They also participated in the County's Interagency meeting and provided an update on the Districts' activities.
- Attendance at weekly BLM NEPA meetings on Tuesday mornings.
- As a part of the Districts' coordination efforts, BLM & USFS management staff attended Districts' February board meetings to provide updates and answer questions. Kyle Arnold (BLM) attended both district board meetings in their entirety.
- Staff attends the NACD Federal Lands Resource Committee meeting to stay informed on issues.
- Staff has been working with new County NR Director, Eddie Smercina and helping him become familiar with the natural resource issues in Rio Blanco County.
- Staff participation in Club 20 Ag Committee updating resolutions.
- Many of the priorities and activities below are the result of the LUP and/or utilize LUP policies to guide the activity.

## **Rangeland:**

### **• BLM Agreement:**

- Range Monitoring and Weed Control Update: The Districts continue to work closely with BLM and Contractor, Osborn Industries, in the fourth year of a five-year agreement to conduct intensive rangeland monitoring in the Piceance East-Douglas Herd Management Area. Osborn is currently developing a report for BLM summarizing the data and analysis for the first three years that will be used to support the BLM decision to remove excess horses.
- Coordinated Resource Management Plan (CRMP): The District staff is actively engaged with five ranches/BLM permittees in developing their respective CRMPs. Through this program, BLM is prioritizing CRMP projects to expedite NEPA and cultural clearances, NRCS and BLM are cooperating to expedite endangered plant species clearances, and permittees are applying through NRCS and HPP for project implementation funding. The Districts continue to support CRMP projects as priorities for funding through various partners. Unfortunately, the Districts did not receive the Colorado RESTORE grant that was applied for in 2020 and that would have provided \$450,000 in 2021 and 2022 for these projects and administration.

### **• NEPA:**

- The Districts requested NEPA training through the local BLM to gain a better understanding of their NEPA processes. Many coordinating agencies participated including County staff and Commissioner.
- Districts' staff met with BLM leadership and reached an agreement that the Districts would engage in grazing permit renewals at the very beginning of the process and engage with the permittee to help them develop their respective proposals. The Districts continue to engage as needed throughout the process as requested by the permittee.

### **• Excess Horse:**

- The BLM has issued a "Decision" to gather and remove all excess horses from within the Herd Management Area (HMA). The Districts provided comments supporting the removals.
- A large gather will not take place until this coming winter (2021-2022), assuming they get on the national gather list. The Districts have made multiple phone calls to the State and national offices to request excess horses be removed from the County. It does not look like they will have local horses for the Meeker Mustang Makeover again this year.
- The National Horse and Burro Rangeland Management Coalition is slowly being revived and District staff continues to engage in those efforts.
- District staff met with Representative Boebert and her staff to provide information on the "wild" horse issues within the County and nationally.

## **Water:**

### **• WR Algae Study & TAG:**

- The data collection portion of the three-year Algae study is complete. The USGS is analyzing the data and will have a report completed by end of 2021. The Districts have secured sufficient grant funds to cover the 2020 – 21 portions of the study. For information on the Study, please see the [Districts' Algae Study web page](#).

### **• White River Integrated Water Initiative (WR Initiative):**

- Good progress is being made on the WR Initiative. The Diversion Structure and Riparian Health Assessment teams have been meeting and will be ready to conduct the assessments this summer. Additionally, the Districts secured a Colorado Water Conservation Board grant to hire an Initiative Coordinator that will coordinate and facilitate the process through 2022. The Districts are in the process of hiring for that position. For more information, please visit the [Districts' White River Initiative web page](#).

- **Yampa-White-Green Basin Round Table (BRT):**

- District staff engages in the bi-monthly BRT meetings and several committees including the Big River committee that has been working on the Demand Management Proposal and the Basin Implementation Plan (BIP) committee that is updating the Basin Plan.

- **White River Management Plan**

- District staff and boards are working closely with Alden Vanden Brink of the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District to seek opportunities to actively engage in the conservation efforts that will benefit the RBC community and the endangered fish.

**Wildlife:**

- **Wolf Introduction:**

- District staff submitted written comments and provided oral testimony multiple times to the CO Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Commission and on multiple wolf related bills.
- The message the Districts are sending is that:
  - since Proposition 114 passed, we will have wolves introduced into Colorado.
  - Western Slope rural communities, in locations where the wolves will likely be released, should have a large voice in the development of the Wolf Management Plan.
  - The Commission should host most of the stakeholder meetings in these communities and they should have multiple representatives on the Stakeholder Advisory Committee.
- The Districts continue to monitor the discussions regarding legal action on this issue but at this time there does not seem to be any clear path to successful outcomes.

**Additional Activities:**

- The Districts have been actively engaged at the State level this year. Marc Etchart (White River CD Board President) is serving as the Colorado State Conservation Board (CSCB) Representative from our Watershed. Marc and staff have been actively engaged with Colorado Association of Conservation Districts (CACD) and others supporting water and soil health policies that moved forward from our Districts and Watershed Association. Staff have testified on behalf of these policies at the State legislature.
- The Districts hosted Colorado Commissioner of Agriculture, Kate Greenberg, at their March joint board meeting. She engaged in discussion with the Boards via Zoom regarding the Soil Health Program, Drought Preparedness, and Wolf Introduction.
- Staff assisted in interviews for the new County Natural Resource & Emergency Management position and looks forward to working with the new hire, Eddie Smercina.