

Big Hole Situation Assessment

April 17-21, 2006

Laura Van Riper (National Riparian Service Team (NRST)) and Mike Lunn (Sustainable Solutions) conducted interviews in the Big Hole watershed in southwest Montana, during the week of April 17-21, 2006 as a key step in the preparation of a Riparian Workshop to be conducted by the Montana Riparian Team scheduled for July 11-12, 2006. Kelli Stone, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in Alamosa, CO, accompanied them as a “Learning Lab” participant in order to observe, learn about the interview process, and to learn from people in the Big Hole about the natural resource and other issues they face.

Purpose

As used by the NRST, the situation assessment has multiple purposes. It allows improved understanding of the issues and situation in the area, providing an opportunity to tailor future workshops or other activities specifically to the needs of the area and people. Insights are gained about the social and human capacity within the area, and the process of creating an environment of listening with respect, is established. Potential barriers and opportunities are identified, and relationships established that can further the work of the local people.

There were very specific objectives for this particular series of interviews: (1) to visit with landowners to help provide insights and recommendations regarding the design of the July 11-12 workshop (to increase landowner participation and identify topics that they would like addressed), and (2) to get a better perspective on the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) for the protection and management of the Arctic grayling. As a result, the interviews were focused largely on the private landowners, because that is the area covered by the CCAA, and that is where most of the grayling and grayling issues are.

Process

Two types of interviews were used. The first evening, Mike, Laura and Kelli met with 15 people representing the MT Riparian Team, the Beaverhead Conservation District, MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), the Big Hole River Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), the Water Commissioner, MT Department of Natural Resource Conservation, the Forest Service, and the Big Hole Watershed Committee (BHWC). During this session, each participant provided their view of the current situation in the Big Hole, and described their worst and best outcomes. The document “best possible outcomes if we all work together for success” is attached, and reflects parts of a common vision for the people working together.

The other interviews involved Mike, Laura and Kelli with 1-3 landowners at a time, usually at their homes. They visited with 14 different landowners and a total of 19 people (on some occasions were joined by multiple family members). They also attended the Wednesday evening meeting of the Big Hole Watershed Committee in Divide. Prior to arriving, the three had reviewed various background documents about the Big Hole area and the work being done by many people and groups to restore conditions that would be suitable for perpetuation of the grayling in the Big Hole River.

They were not able to communicate with many outfitters/guides (or other recreation users) during their trip to the valley (beyond the Big Hole Foundation and one rancher/outfitter family). There were also some landowners who expressed interest in being interviewed but they were unable to meet due to time limitations. Tom Pick from the MT Riparian Team will follow up with these individuals.

Finally, it is important to note that this report is purposely general. First of all, confidentiality is promised, with no attempt to attribute comments or thoughts. Second, the interviews are highly subjective and not intended to garner any kind of statistical information. When the terms "most" or "some" are used, there is a relative difference but no standard protocols. Much of it is interpretation, not a response to the same questions asked as the persons being interviewed are basically allowed to direct the course of discussion. There several purposes; to establish an environment where people feel they will be listened to with respect and without judging; to get a better feel for the area and the issues folks are facing; and to help get more people interested and engaged in the upcoming activities (in this instance the July workshop).

Working Relationships

There is more than a decade-long history of the ranchers and others working together to confront the issues around water and grayling recovery, and a solid record of accomplishment such as with the Drought Management Plan. Several ranchers pointed out the cooperative efforts of people like Pete Lamothe and Noor Parwana as being very helpful. And, the water leasing effort by NRCS in 2004 was cited by nearly every rancher as being a program that caused much discord within the ranching community, and also with the agency's credibility. A number of ranchers mentioned that the changed priorities of the NRCS have affected if, when and how landowners work with the agency today. In the past, the ranchers could usually count on people to come work with them on the ground in problem solving, designing and surveying ditches, diversions, etc. Now they feel that mostly the NRCS comes to them to get signatures on paper or to pass out money. There wasn't animosity expressed in this, just a sense that they preferred the old way of doing business. Many landowners also noted that they were unwilling to take NRCS money because for a variety of reasons - didn't like 'hand-outs', didn't want to deal with what they considered to be excessive red tape and strings attached to that money.

Numerous landowners expressed appreciation for the various groups and agencies that are working to help in the grayling recovery effort; however, most also expressed frustration with the difficulty of knowing who is doing what and getting needed information and process updates in an efficient way. This wasn't aimed at the people involved, just the difficulty of keeping up with all this and doing all the work necessary to keep their ranches operating. Efforts such as those of the Big Hole Watershed Committee, like the meeting we attended, are excellent forums for general information sharing. But there are simply too many players managing too many programs for the ranchers to keep track of unless they are constantly involved with meetings and activities; time that most of them don't have.

Several people expressed concern that some key restoration choices are being made by a single specialist (e.g., biologist) or focused on a single issue (e.g., fish), rather than a

more interdisciplinary, integrated (interviewers words, not ones they heard) approach that involves collaborative solutions. One rancher talked about the importance of getting involvement of riparian ecologists. Several others echoed that sentiment, stating the need for understanding larger issues relating to watershed functions (e.g., riparian and uplands, and the interaction between the two).

Several landowners spoke of the ‘radical’ environmental group from AZ (Center for Biodiversity) that is currently engaged in a lawsuit to list the grayling. They expressed the need for everyone involved to meet in the middle of the road to resolve the problem, and are disappointed that this group of players will not come to the table and get out on the ground to help find solutions.

Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances

The landowners, agencies and NGO partners in the Big Hole are committed to working together to solve the issues that limit grayling, and pose a threat to the future of the ranching lifestyles that have formed the culture and economy of that area. Every rancher/landowner interviewed indicated strong commitment to do whatever they reasonably could to make improvements or modify practices to aid in grayling recovery. They are well organized through the efforts of the Big Hole Watershed Committee, enabling them to compete for scarce funding through agency programs and grants. Voluntary conservation, such as providing additional water to the river in drought periods, has served them well in the past. A few ranchers said that they felt punished by the CCAA – noting that they must have been doing something right, because the last remaining native population of Arctic grayling is in the Big Hole, and now they are the ones who suffer because of it. A few landowners also felt that their participation in the CCAA was not truly voluntary – it was more of a situation where either they participated or felt there would be some negative consequence.

The Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances was undertaken by the partners, including 40 landowners that control major portions of the private land within the recovery area. These 40 landowners signed on to the program, agreeing to implement on their own lands, those conservation practices deemed necessary to provide conditions for grayling that would preclude their listing. By their voluntary participation in conservation work, they believe they will receive assurances from the FWS that will prevent them from losing their use of irrigation water or otherwise being adversely effected in the event of listing (e.g., incidental take permits). Several of the ranchers interviewed compared their situation to that of the Klamath Basin in Oregon, and wanted to avoid the same kinds of things from happening in the Big Hole (e.g., shutting off irrigation water as occurred in 2001). Within the group of rancher/landowners interviewed, there was a wide range of support, frustration, anxiety, and apprehension regarding the CCAA. Most indicated a general understanding of the program and the intended processes and outcomes, but they did not feel they were involved enough up-front (beyond signing papers) to have a clear picture of what’s going on. Furthermore, there was little consensus on what seemed to be some key questions, including:

- “Will there be adequate funding to pay for the extensive improvements required?”
- “What happens at the end of a year (April, 2007) if the projects are not fully planned and/or implemented?”

- “How will adequate staff and technical resources be available to the ranchers for planning and the development of sound conservation measures within the necessary timeframes given budget reductions?”
- “Given the rate of increased costs, will cost/share rates be adjusted for projects that have been planned several years before implementation, or does the rancher absorb the added costs from planning to implementation?”
- “What are the opportunities to negotiate conservation approaches/actions between the landowner and agencies?”
- Will the assurances be granted by FWS and will they be legally binding (i.e., hold up in court)?

Few landowners the interviewers talked with believe the listing of grayling can be avoided, even with all the best efforts of everyone, so it is highly important to them that the CCAA program be successful. A number of times the statement was made - if they take away our water, we'll be unable to survive (e.g., continue ranching/haying) in the valley.

Most, if not all landowners and partners expressed concern over grayling threats that are not addressed in the CCAA, and if or how they would be handled. There was particular concern over the effect of non-native trout, which some noted were stocked in the river by MFWP. Another concern noted was the fact that air temperatures are increasing and precipitation is decreasing (i.e., climate change), which also effects the cold water habitat needs of the grayling. One rancher pointed to a sentence that he had highlighted within the CCAA which states that the decline in the grayling population is due to agricultural use of the land, and stated that in his opinion, this is an incorrect characterization of the situation.

Riparian Management

Riparian management and restoration is one of the key areas identified in the CCAA. Many different perspectives and levels of understanding about riparian management were expressed (ranging from those who want to better understand the definition of riparian areas to those who have a high level of understanding regarding riparian vegetation, stream channel morphology and overall watershed function). Several people noted instances where stream channel alteration, vegetation alteration or other practices, had adversely affected the Big Hole River or its tributaries, in the past. Many people also noted that it was important for fish recovery and maintenance to focus on providing good riparian and aquatic habitat, and not just additional water. During the riparian workshop planned for July, it will be important to cover some very basic items, including a good discussion of what riparian areas are, as well as important characteristics and functions of healthy riparian areas.

Federal Land Grazing

Several of the permittees noted that they had livestock grazing permits for Forest Service and BLM allotments. This statement was typically made in reference to that fact that they had an understanding of, or have been exposed to, riparian issues, which are a primary focus and often a concern in terms of public land permits. Problems occur because there is either a lack of full understanding or full agreement on the appropriate standards for management. One rancher spoke in-depth about his previous interactions with the BLM as a permittee, which started off being very negative but have since turned

around as a result of trainings and problem solving efforts during the mid-late 1990s. These were specifically designed to create a common understanding and vocabulary about riparian issues among diverse interests and focused on finding solutions that worked for all involved.

For a number of ranchers, Forest Service and BLM permits are an essential part of their year-round operations, and generally they noted a downward trend in their abilities to fully utilize those rangelands. Much of it on the National Forest is caused by the continuing loss of transitory range due to the reduction in timber harvest and other changed practices that result in less forage. Along this same vein, a few people also noted that they were concerned that the large areas of dead and dying trees posed some potential threats to water quality, including temperature. At least one rancher raised the issue of permit transfers in the context of "new" ranchers coming in and buying long-time family ranches. He didn't feel it had been fairly handled; that may have been from a lack of knowledge about permit transfer protocols, it wasn't clear. One final issue that came through consistently is a need for a coordinated approach to planning that considers the entire operation of a rancher/landowner, and where a federal permit is an integral part of that, all the agency and NGO partners should be involved.

Changing Culture and Practices

The interviewers learned of a number of large ranches that had sold to outside interests at high prices, and heard comments about ranch values (particularly those associated with riparian/recreation values) increasing at the rate of 20% per year or more. While this increase in land value helps increase ranchers' borrowing power, it also comes with a variety of problems. For instance, there is less money going into the community and schools. When sold, these ranches are often run by managers and the owner lives elsewhere. Often, large 'starter castles' are built and some landowners have tried to block access to the rivers. The long-time ranchers sense a real change in the culture and associated norms they value, which is a loss to them. And some noted that the risk of sub-division and fragmentation increases (loss of open space, as well as other cultural values) if the ability to continue ranching is lost. Many noted that it will continue to become a lucrative proposition to sell, especially if prices continue to rise and the situation in the Big Hole valley continues to get worse (i.e., more difficult to continue making a living). This is compounded by the decrease of children and young-families returning to the valley, as is the case in many agricultural communities across the country.

They also noted that as new owners come in, management on some of the ranches is changing which is affecting the water use. Traditionally, ranchers irrigated until early July, and then turned off the water so they could cut hay. In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of season long pasture where livestock are often trucked in and grazed on meadows that are continually irrigated throughout the summer. Several ranchers indicated that this complicates water delivery to the grayling during the late summer months when the river is naturally low.

There is widespread recognition among all involved that there is a huge workload ahead, a limited timeframe, and uncertainty about whether the dollars and staffing will be available to do the work. In the face of all this, there was a commitment by everyone to forge ahead and do the best job they can. There is a clear understanding and

acknowledgement that it is important to keep ranches economically viable and to do everything possible to recover grayling. The interviewers learned that the multi-generational ranch families in the Big Hole valley have been solving tough problems since the late 1800's, and that they intend to solve this one too. The ranchers have come together as a cohesive community to adapt and manage important issues, and have among them people willing to take leadership in the work. And there is an excellent team of agency and NGO people working to help them.

Recommendations for the July Workshop

Call ranchers/landowners a day or so before the workshop to remind them about it. Either MT Riparian Team members could take this on, or see if someone from the community could help you with this task (e.g., Noor or Pete or Harold Peterson, Blake Huntley, John Jackson offered to help as needed). It will also be important to do the same thing with key agency and non-profit partners. It is important that the types of conversations that will occur during the workshop are with all parties present and engaged. Ask if Noor would mention the workshop during the May and June BHWC meetings. Maybe one of the MT Riparian Team members could get on their agenda to give a short overview? During the workshop, it will be important to focus on some specific issues that are relevant to the particular situation in the Big Hole:

- Given the strong interest in rapid recovery, it would be helpful to have a presentation on engineered restoration including the range of tools from bio-engineering to channel manipulation (such as often done by Rosgen and others) to less intensive forms of riparian restoration. The presentation should include an in-depth discussion of the time, cost and risk associated with different approaches.
- Another topic that would be well-received is a discussion about the down-cutting of banks (e.g., natural aggrading and degrading vs. disturbed processes) and stabilization techniques (e.g., rock, root balls, etc.), including how these affect channel and floodplain evolution.
- Finally, it will be very important to discuss willow ecology and re-establishment. During the watershed committee meeting and elsewhere, references were made to past failed attempts to re-establish willow communities, as well as a new grant proposal to grow rooted stock. During interviews with landowners, they talked about how they know how to successfully plant and establish willows.

It will also be important to allow adequate time for discussion, questions and answers, and time for building relationships and understanding among the different parties involved in the Big Hole. The use of one or more facilitators is recommended, preferably Laura and/or Mike given their familiarity with the situation and the people.

It will be important to note and reiterate the good working relationships, high levels of commitment, and strong evidence of success that already exists in the valley. In addition to recognizing this upfront, it would be useful to bring some of the key individuals into the development and delivery of the July workshop if possible.

It might also be useful to consider using the time before and after the session to work individually or in groups (to get out on the ground or have further discussions) with landowners, agency folks and non-profit partners if they are willing and interested.

Finally, "community" cannot be successfully built without ALL of the stakeholders actively involved. It will be important to engage the Forest Service, BLM, as well as outfitters/guides, local citizens and others as watershed scale discussions about social and resource conditions continue and grow. There is a lot going on in the Big Hole watershed and this is just one step in what can and should become a much larger process. The interviews and the upcoming workshop are intentionally focused to suit a specific purpose. This will need to be expanded in the future to meet larger watershed and community goals.

Recommendations Beyond the July Workshop

Increase coordination among CCAA partners and if possible, identify one person to coordinate across the agencies and non-profit organizations relative to the CCAA process. This individual would serve as a single point of contact proactively providing information and updates to the landowners regarding where the group is in the process, etc., rather than waiting for the landowners to come to them.

Increase two-way, communication between landowners and other partners early in the process in an attempt to create mutually agreed upon, innovative solutions that recognize and incorporate local knowledge, expertise and experience. For instance, consider involving landowners more in upfront discussions regarding riparian restoration (such as willow regeneration) practices, in order to better understand their perspective of what works and what doesn't in this particular area. This will increase the ability to discover opportunities for directly involving landowners in the creation and implementation of solutions and finding ways to keep money within the local community. Also, it will foster commitment to the success of both process and outcomes.

In addition to the creation of conservation measures and practices under the CCAA, it would also be a good idea to increase the education and outreach component. There is concern that some landowners will not know enough about riparian function and species needs to make informed choices and decisions regarding what they should do in terms of their specific conservation plans.

Best Possible Outcomes

Following is the collective statement of the participants of the Agency/NGO meeting held at the NRCS office, April 7, 2006, in response to a question regarding best possible outcomes. Collective statements are the result of adding all the individual statements together, keeping each person's words to the best extent possible and organizing them into topics. This technique captures the range of perceptions regarding how people felt and what they learned. *Words in italics added by facilitator to help understanding.*

“What are the best possible outcomes if we all work together for success?”

Ranchers remain large and ownership remains local. Ranchers stay in business and prosper.

Grazing and irrigation is managed to support profitable ranchers, healthy riparian area and range area. Landowners *are* able to stay in business. Excellent stewardship on land resulting in prolonged sustainability of resources, especially people's way of life.

Locals take leadership. *We develop a* spectacular model for large-scale preservation of an endangered species (and a ranching community) despite Western water issues. Something the ranchers can be proud of and brag about! Become role for other areas to assist in solving their watershed/ecosystem issues. Landowners go to other areas to mentor other landowners. We are successful in keeping our landowners on the ground while improving things for the grayling and in doing so we develop something that is applicable to other watersheds. *There is increased* awareness of the issues and willingness of the landowners to address them.

We have a well functioning river system that supports not only a good fishery and wildlife habitat but also present land use i.e., ranching. Riparian areas achieve potential. *We are* able to maintain or improve upon the biological and cultural heritage of the Big Hole.

A best outcome is neighbors losing some of their distrust of government agencies/personnel. Working together for a common goal, fish recovery, resource protection. Irrigators and rec (*recreationists?*) work together. Development of a shared vision of success and cooperation to accomplish it.

Grayling and other wildlife flourishes. Grayling not listed. Sustainable grayling and other populations of riparian/riverine species. Grayling would not be listed. No lawsuits filed.

Dams are built. Reconsider dam and/or implementation of dam is unique.

Enough money, cows, fish, grass, water (not in that order). Lots of rain. People will make new friends.

***Facilitator Note** – This collective statement was written using the words of the meeting participants as recorded by them on the 3x5 cards, then developing paragraphs of similar thoughts. The only words added are shown in italics.

People interviewed by Mike, Laura, and Kelli:

Art Christensen
Bob Leinard - MT Riparian Team
Cal Erb
Joe and Sue Johnson
John Jackson
Dave Smith
Ed Guinnane
Jim Hagenbarth
Joe Fidel - NRCS Bozeman
John Dooling
Max and Debby Lapham
Fred Hirshy
Ray Weaver
Blake Huntley
Harold Peterson
Randy Smith
Kevin Greenwood – Forest Service
Kris Berg – NRCS
Jim Boetticher - Water Commissioner
Bryce Bohn - MT Riparian Team
Damon Pellicori - DNRC
Jeff Everett - USFWS-MT FWP
Mike Bias - Big Hole River Foundation
Nate and Kim Finch
Peter Lamothe
Tom Pick - MT Riparian Team
Tim Griffiths - NRCS
Noorjahan Parwana - BHWC