

Tongue River Watershed Discussion
April 23, 2005
Forsyth Country Club
Notes

Facilitator—Warren Kellogg, NRCS Watershed Specialist

Introductions:

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Why are we here? What is the purpose of this meeting? What are some general goals and objectives for the watershed?

- John: Water quality is very important. Tongue River stakeholders are limited to using river water for irrigation because the ground water is not suitable. High value crops are very salt sensitive. Fisheries will be degraded by a reduction in water quality. Plant and aquatic life go hand in hand. They need help with monitoring and ultimately the protection of a long term river plan.
- Les: More people need a good understanding of the problem. There is a need for a partnership with a larger group, as there is strength in numbers. We need help writing a grant to study the problem.
- Art: Tongue River has a reservoir operation plan for irrigation and the fisheries. They haven't been able to follow it because of drought, etc. Water quality is a real issued. There is a need to study the long term effects of the use of Coal Bed Methane water on soils, fish, etc.
- Suzanna: Good science is necessary to provide reliable background data-MSU can provide that.
- Jim: A watershed group can accomplish whatever their vision is with local input and leadership. The Conservation District's hands are tied while watershed groups have much more flexibility. The Tongue is going to change and they need a watershed group to steer the change. A proactive group provides a boundless forum for transformation. It is necessary to consider the larger scope. The group needs to set up an organizational structure.
- Doug: Rosebud Watershed group has been active for a year and a half. The group is starting to develop a sense of "ownership". There was a meeting a week ago and one of my neighbors called to remind me of it. The group has influence that a single person does not have.
- Marge: She works with a large management group on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. BIA oversees trust resources. She is here to learn the purpose of the watershed group.

- Lynette: She is here to understand the issues facing the Tongue River landowners. We need to understand them to manage the trust lands of the tribe.
- Karen: Montana Watercourse conducts water education through the university. They help people to think through the process—simplify things and make sure all the options are known. The group helps to educate the public.
- Gloria: The Conservation District knows that Coal Bed Methane is going to be developed. They believe that a strong watershed group is very important so the landowners can speak with one voice.
- Carol: The district doesn't want the waste water. DEQ needs to do more monitoring and more oversight.
- Laurie: Rosebud Conservation District will help however they can. A strong watershed group can do great things.

Group Discussion:

Water quality and quantity are priorities because of CBM development but most watershed groups are concerned about other issues as well. The proposed Tongue River Railroad corridor is a concern because of property rights and values. There would be a lot of sediment if the railroad is developed, an estimated 10,000 tons per year from the railroad alone.

Our group needs to get peoples attention. In order for this to happen it has to be more diverse. People need a sense of fairness. When CBM development is considered to the west of Billings it is an ecological disaster, while east of Billings it is called economic development.

Group Identity—What are the boundaries? What will the group be called? Who will it include? The more players that are involved, the more complex things become, but with diversity of inclusiveness comes credibility. A group that includes more players becomes more powerful.

Group Operations—How will the group operate? Operating guidelines or bylaws need to be established, and an operating plan needs to be put into place so everyone is working under the same set of guidelines. A watershed plan needs to be devised stating the focus of the group. The plan needs to be open to changing direction and priorities. It must be dynamic and flexible.

Karen Filipovich—Montana Watercourse Watershed groups—definition, history and examples.

Every watershed is unique; therefore every watershed group is different. The Big Hole, on the upper Missouri, has three main focuses: ranching, trout fishing and the arctic grayling. The oldest water right is owned by the city of Butte, which is across the divide. At first the ranchers and the fishermen couldn't even meet in the same room. Now, some time later, they are able to meet together once per month and have developed a water mitigation plan that provides for both fishing and irrigation interests. NRCS has provided emergency money to shut off head gates. By working as a group they have raised their issues to the national level.

The Sun River is near Great Falls on the front range of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The water of the Sun has been re-routed to Gibson Dam and is being used to irrigate 83,000 acres on the bench. The Sun River was drying out and the irrigation return was dumping lots of sediment into Muddy Creek. An agreement reached within the group allowed for a minimum flow of 50 cfs, allowing some deep pools to remain even during extreme drought. Water leasing schemes and other creative solutions were developed by the group over the years. Committees were formed to address water quality, quantity, fishing and weeds. Eventually a non-profit group was formed which could receive funding that was not available to a conservation district.

A watershed group needs some shared visions in order to function. It is best to start with something small and concrete that will show results. It is helpful to start with a project.

Suzanna Roffe MSU Extension
Current water monitoring projects in Montana—
watershed groups, irrigation districts, TMDL
processes and long term monitoring.

Suzanna presented a PowerPoint showing various water and soil monitoring projects MSU has been involved in.

Watershed organizational structure—who to invite to the table,
operating guidelines and scope of the watershed.

There are three main reaches of the Tongue watershed; Montana, Wyoming and Powder. The Powder has very different irrigation practices, water type and soils. They will be encouraged to develop a group of their own, but not invited to join ours. The Wyoming reach has a totally different philosophy on CBM and will also be encouraged to organize, but will not be asked to participate in this watershed group. If all three reaches form watershed groups there is potential for a coalition in the future.

Many different types of operating guidelines exist. There are loosely organized groups, very structured partnerships and everything in between. It is up to the group to put together guidelines that fit the organization.

There are many types of landowners along the Tongue River, including the Forest Service, DNRC, and BLM, reservation and private stakeholders. There are many different agencies that can be called upon to provide assistance, including DEQ, FWP, conservation districts, and extension and weed districts. The role that each of these takes will be outlined in the operating guidelines.

Where do we go from here?

Rosebud Conservation District will act as fiscal agent for the Tongue River group and administrator Laurie Kelley will carry out coordinator duties until the group gets organized and can take care of the duties themselves.

The next meeting will be held at the Birney school at 7 pm on May 10. Warren Kellogg will facilitate the meeting. Operating guidelines from several different watersheds will be sent out prior to the meeting along with the minutes from this meeting and the agenda for the next meeting. There will be a review and discussion of draft Operating Guidelines. Jim Bauder, MSU Extension Soil and Water Quality Specialist, and Larry Fox, Rosebud CD technician, will present monitoring initiatives and their applicability to the Tongue River.