**Rio Grande Water Fund, A Wildfire and Water Source Protection Project**

**Conference call with Laura McCarthy of the Nature Conservancy**

**March 19, 2018, 1:00PM**

Notes:

**The event that resulted in setting up the organization:**

The Las Conchas Fire in June 2011. 156,000 total acres burned. It affected 23 watersheds of the Rio Grande. August rains focused on the most impacted area, Cochiti Canyon, causing a huge debris flow and a sediment plug at the entrance to the Rio Grande that was 70 feet deep. Cochiti Reservoir was choked with debris.

**Goals:**

To restore fire-adapted forests. But the scale being pursued was not big enough. The Rio Grande Water Fund was formed to leverage funding to treat 10 times the amount of land being treated.

**Accomplishments vs. cost:**

* First experiment: Santa Fe Water Source Protection Fund. Set up in 2009 between the Santa Fe Water Department’s two reservoirs, the USFS and the county.
* After this small collaboration, they began to work on the large-scale solution. Next steps:

1- Obtain a risk assessment map *[The Arkansas Valley has one of these. Called the Upper Arkansas Watershed/Wildfire Assessment]*

2- Choose an area to target, based on need

* The RGWF set a goal to restore 600,000 acres over 20 years.

Baseline goals in 2012: 3-5000 acres/year

New goal: 30,000 acres/year

Baseline funding- $6 million/yr.

New goal: $21 million/yr.

60 organizations have signed on to the RGWF

Structure includes Executive Committee, which is connected to the 60 contributors, and several working groups

Steps: Used existing efforts and plans by the county and the USFS

Studied diverse sources for collaborative funding:

-Did an economic study to determine that 80% of water users were willing to pay $1 or less per month for watershed management

-State funding was secured through legislation

- Albuquerque contributed $200,000/yr

$3.6 million in private funding leveraged $30 million in public funding. RGWF is approaching the $30 million goal.

**\*\*\*Important planning tool: *waterfundstoolbox* (google it)**

**Original Group:**

3 business people

Santa Fe Water

County

USFS

CSFA

Nature Conservancy

Irrigation District Chairman

Government agencies did not want a new organization to be formed and they did not want to give money to the Nature Conservancy.

- Nature Conservancy created a government to government option, so one govt. agency (example-county) could invest in a another govt agency project (example-USFS)

- Corporations and interested investors could contribute directly to the Nature Conservancy

- Water Utilities contributed to Nature Conservancy. Originally the water departments did not want to be the major funder because they felt it put a target on their backs and they did not want their customers to be on the hook for the funding. But once a diverse funding base was developed, the water department got on board.

-Once two water utilities were on board, the Water Conservancy District followed suit.

**Information Gained from Questions asked to Laura McCarthy:**

1. *Was there an affinity between downstream users and areas of land treated?*

Not directly answered.

But there is a disconnect between the water and forest world. RGWF created a forum to educate the different worlds with each other to overcome this disconnect.

1. *Greg Felt pointed out that the cities of Colorado Springs and Pueblo have an affinity with the Upper Arkansas Valley.*

Laura pointed out that there is a research group in Golden that could help bring entities together.

1. *Chelsey Nutter asked how projects were prioritized?*

-The Forest Service has a process for planning and prioritizing projects

-RGWF made an open call for proposals within these priorities.

*4. Follow up question by Chelsey: Who puts together the proposals?*

-National Forest, State, NGOs

-RGWF approached project funding on a case to case basis, searching for the most effective method. Federal money is slow.

1. *Greg Felt asked how did RGWF get over bureaucratic hurdles?*

-Planning money goes toward bottlenecks

-Categorical exclusion sometimes works

-3 forests combined to do the NEPA process

1. *Jim Pitts asked who was in the room for the first meeting? How did you get a consensus?*

The first year of organization consisted of mostly one on one meetings.

After the first year, a meeting was held with about 20 organizations: 5 water concerns, 5 forest concerns, 5 business concerns, and 5 NGO, academic, &/or user concerns.

The Nature Conservancy was in charge of follow up summaries to keep the process moving and show credibility, which got stakeholders to believe in the viability of the group. Then working groups were formed.

**\*\*\*The waterfundstoolbox can help with the process.**

The 5 phases of setting up the RGWF were:

1-feasibility studies

2-design the fund

3-launch

4-operations (which is where they are now)

5-maturity

1. *Greg Felt asked if David Harrison (Colorado Water Attorney) was involved?*

Probably. He is a great contact

Greg knows Jeff Post, David’s nephew, in Salida and could try to recruit David.

1. *Cindy Williams asked if RGWF experienced engagement or pushback from the community?*

Laura recommends that the story and the message be honed before going to the community. She said she expected pushback from the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, but they were enthusiastic.

Laura recommended to start with individuals in the community

who have a trust relationship with your effort first.

1. *Cindy Williams asked if private land treatments were part of the effort?*

Yes. Private land treatments were faster to set up than federal land treatments. More of the acres that have been treated have been private than have been federal for that reason.

There also wasn’t pushback from downstream users about funding private land treatment.

In some cases, there was pushback about why treatment wasn’t happening faster. The answer for this is to keep letting the public know that the group is still trying. Having a broad coalition helps to move things along. In New Mexico the Regional Forester didn’t delegate but remained in charge of the effort.

**After Laura left the call, there was a brief follow up discussion:**

Cindy Williams asked participants to send their insights from the conference call to her.

Greg Felt (Chaffee County Commissioner) mentioned that limiting the boundaries considered for an Arkansas Valley collaboration to Chaffee County would not be big enough. He thought the scale should be the Upper Arkansas region.

Damon Lange (CSFS) suggested that Lake County has done a lot of ground work. They have the Headwaters of the Arkansas working group, and the Frying Pan/Arkansas MOU with Colorado Springs Water, the USFS and the Bureau of Reclamation. He recommends that Lake County be included, and that the collaboration follow land management area territory boundaries. Including too large an area can sink the collaboration.

Chelsey Nutter (UAWCD) suggested that the first step should be for the current working group to understand what has been done and what other efforts are out there. She recommends listening to the USFS, the CSFS, and the BLM to learn what they have done before we go on to any next steps. It was generally agreed that another meeting should be set up in the next few weeks to do as Chelsey suggested.