

# ~~~The Gunnison Basin Roundtable~~~

## GUNNISON BASIN WATER PLAN - SUMMARY - January 2015

The Gunnison River Basin is a major tributary of the Colorado River, providing on average one-sixth of that river's part of the water supply for 35-40 million water users (mostly urban and outside the natural Basin), four million acres of irrigated land, and a great array of recreational adventures on and near the river.

Rugged geography and 10,000 feet of elevation changes make the Basin a very diverse region. Nine Wilderness Areas lie all or partly in the Basin - three of them more or less in the middle of the Basin. Yet the Basin also has large, rich alluvial valleys with some of Colorado's most productive agricultural land. High deserts with 10-12 inches annual precipitation are within a half-hour drive of mountain slopes that get 300 inches of winter snow on average. More than half the Basin is public land.

The Gunnison Basin Roundtable was formed by statute in 2005, under the "Colorado Water for the 21st Century" Act; it is one of nine similar Roundtables in Colorado, charged to "encourage locally driven collaborative solutions to water supply challenges," assess "basin-wide consumptive and nonconsumptive water supply needs," and "serve as a forum for education and debate regarding methods for meeting water supply needs." Its 32 members represent all local governments and significant economic and environmental actors in the Basin. (For list of members: [cwcb.state.co.us](http://cwcb.state.co.us) --> "Water Management" in top menu --> "Basin Roundtables" --> "Gunnison Basin".)

Colorado's Water Planning Process actually began in 2003-4 with a "Statewide Water Supply Initiative" study (SWSI) by the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB); a SWSI 2010 update, incorporating Roundtable work, indicated that by the mid-21st century, the state would be experiencing a gap of 200,000-600,000 acre-feet of water (65-200 billion gallons) between projected water demand for new population (mostly in the metropolitan area) and the known supply. This moved Governor John Hickenlooper in 2013 to order the CWCB to develop a "Colorado Water Plan" for reconciling that gap by 2050. His executive order mandated a grassroots process, with each Basin Roundtable first creating a plan for addressing its own needs and goals, within the context of these statewide goals:

- A productive economy that supports vibrant and sustainable cities, viable and productive agriculture, and a robust skiing, recreation, and tourism industry;
- Efficient and effective water infrastructure promoting smart land use; and
- A strong environment that includes healthy watersheds, rivers and streams, and wildlife.

Draft Basin Implementation Plans (BIPs) were completed in July 2014, and incorporated into a Draft Colorado Water Plan in December 2014; the draft BIPs are being reworked through April 17, 2015, with a final Colorado Water Plan to 2050 submitted to the Governor by December 2015.

### The Gunnison Basin Water Implementation Plan

(See the completed Draft Plan at [coloradowaterplan.com](http://coloradowaterplan.com) --> 'Communities' in top menu --> 'Gunnison Basin' page)

Developing the Gunnison Basin Plan followed the major steps summarized below:

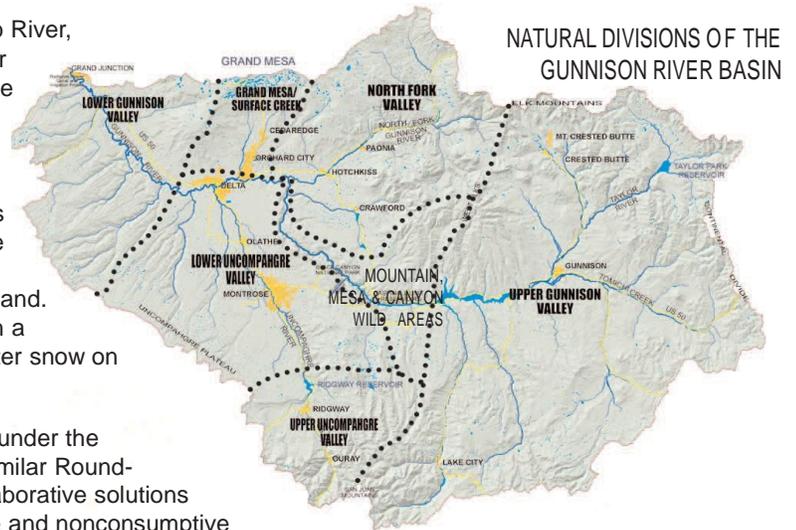
**DEFINING GOALS:** The first stage in drafting the plan at the Basin level was to define goals for the plan. The drafting committee began with **Intrabasin Goals**, to guide the future internal development of water resources within the Basin, out to mid-century.

**One priority Basin goal** was established early in the discussion:

- **Protect existing water uses in the Gunnison Basin.** This signifies a desire to preserve the existing mix of both decreed and nondecreed uses - agricultural, municipal and domestic, industrial, recreational and environmental - in the Gunnison Basin today; new projects or climate change scenarios should be evaluated in terms of potential impacts on the existing mix of uses.

**That primary goal is to be supported or supplemented by the following goals, given no priority over each other:**

- Discourage the conversion of productive agricultural land to all other uses within the context of private property rights.
- Improve agricultural water supplies to reduce shortages.
- Identify and address municipal and industrial water shortages.
- Quantify and protect environmental and recreational water uses.
- Maintain or, where necessary, improve water quality throughout the Gunnison Basin.
- Describe and encourage the beneficial relationships between agricultural and environmental/recreational uses.
- Restore, maintain, and modernize critical water infrastructure, including hydropower.
- Create and maintain active, relevant and comprehensive public education, outreach and stewardship processes involving water resources in the six sectors of the Gunnison Basin.



The Gunnison Roundtable also generated several *Statewide Principles* to guide the Basin in further developing its relationships with the other Basins on the West Slope, and with the rest of the state. These principles are summarized:

- *Future supply of Colorado River water is highly variable and uncertain; therefore any proponent of a new supply project from the Colorado River System must accept the risk of a shortage of supply however the shortage occurs, strictly adhere to the prior appropriation doctrine, and protect existing water uses and communities from adverse project impacts.*
- *A new consumptive use development from any location in the Upper Colorado River System must be explicitly recognized as impacting the entire Upper Colorado River Basin.*
- *Any new supply project from the Colorado River System must have specifically identified sponsors and beneficiaries, and must meet certain minimum criteria.*
- *Local solutions must be utilized to meet Colorado's future water needs without a major state water project or related water right.*
- *Water conservation, demand management, & land use planning that incorporates water supply factors must be equitably employed statewide.*
- *Scenario planning should be used as the principal tool for water planning.*
- *Statewide discussion, outreach, and education concerning the Gunnison Basin Roundtable's vision for water development in Colorado should be continued.*

**ASSESSING BASIN NEEDS:** The second major planning task. Technical meetings were held with the Basin's agricultural and municipal & industrial consumptive users and recreational & environmental nonconsumptive users, to determine what water needs, shortages, gaps, et cetera exist in the Gunnison Basin. The following needs have been identified and catalogued (af=acre-feet):

- **Agricultural water shortages** have been identified in all Basin Water Districts, in three categories: a) **Physical shortages** mostly reflecting a need for storage of water for late-summer and fall irrigation; b) **legal shortages** due to calls from downstream senior users; and c) **irrigation practice shortages** caused by labor shortages, inefficient or deteriorating delivery systems or other infrastructure issues. SWSI 2010 estimates this Basin "ag gap" *currently* at ~128,000 acre-feet (>2 million acre-feet statewide).
- **Municipal/domestic and industrial shortages** will probably be modest in the Basin, despite a projected doubling of population (mostly urban), with M&I demand increasing from 24,000 af to ~44,000 af; of the increase, SWSI 2010 projects unidentified M&I shortages at ~6,500 af/yr (~1% of the 2050 statewide unidentified shortage); much of this could be made up through conservation and infrastructure efficiency and some agricultural conversion (retiring ranchers). There are other M&I infrastructure needs, however. The largest M&I water supplier in the Basin, Project 7 serving 50,000 people in the Montrose-Delta Corridor, depends on water from the aging Gunnison Tunnel with only a 30-day reserve supply; a Uncompahgre Valley reservoir is needed. Other communities either have, or anticipate by mid-century, problems with aging infrastructure.
- **Environmental and Recreational needs** have been identified in 29 "Priority Stream Segments," which all need an inventory of specific projects to alleviate the identified needs. These segment needs run the gamut of environmental, recreational, scientific and educational uses; some involve problems of water shortages at critical times; others are water quality problems (sometimes exacerbated by water quantity problems). Endangered or threatened species problems are nearly all water-related - even for non-aquatic species like the Gunnison sage grouse which needs wet-meadow ecosystems, many of which have lost water tables to gullies over time. Quantifying environmental and recreational needs is difficult but necessary. It would be advantageous to agricultural users to better identify and quantify the ecosystem services provided by high-country irrigation.

***In all of the technical meetings, agricultural and recreational users indicated an awareness that there were neither financial resources nor political will for addressing most of the identified shortages; the main concern expressed was that the shortages not grow significantly worse in the future, through either in-basin development or interbasin projects or programs.***

**IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING PROJECTS AND METHODS:** Roundtable members generated than 130 potential water projects and programs for addressing identified needs and goals; that list has been pared down to 102 projects and programs, and further sorted into three tiers:

- Tier 1:** The project or program will help meet Basin Goals, meet No/Low Regret goals, and implementation is feasible by 2020.
- Tier 2:** The project or program would help meet Basin Goals but implementation is probably not feasible by 2020.
- Tier 3:** The project or program is unfeasible by 2020, in preliminary planning stages, or may have lesser impact on Basin Goals.

A summary of the tiered list is attached to this Progress Report; the full list with more description is online with the Plan. Further discussion of feasibility, constraints, and other analysis of the projects and programs will be in the full plan, now available at the website cited above. ***Your comments on this "shopping list" of projects and programs will be appreciated.***

## **What does the Gunnison Basin Roundtable need from you?**

We need your input on these things: **1)** Are the ***Intrabasin Goals*** and ***Statewide Principles*** presented above consistent with your hopes for the future of the Basin and the State? Is anything missing? **2)** Do you perceive any ***water-related needs*** not covered above? **3)** What other ***projects and programs*** should be considered for meeting future needs?

The Roundtable planning committee also has a more formal survey ***online*** at [www.coloradomesa.edu/watercenter/GunniBasinPlan.html](http://www.coloradomesa.edu/watercenter/GunniBasinPlan.html). It will help us if you will take 10 minutes to engage with this survey. ***We need your grassroots participation. This is an opportunity to help shape the world our children will grow up in.***

**For more on this process, contact GBRT Outreach Chair George Sibley - [george@gard-sibley.org](mailto:george@gard-sibley.org), 970-641-4340. Or look up the Roundtable member from your area on the CWCB site, and invite him or her for a cup of coffee!**