

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

Conceptual Forest Management/Watershed Protection for Today and the Future

The previous 10-year drought cycle, the many Colorado wildfires (the West Fork Complex fire particularly) and the recent “biblical scale” rainfall and extreme flood events along the front range all share a common denominator. That common denominator is that each of these, although drastically different, plays a significant role in the short and long-term health of our life-giving watersheds. Watershed health, or the lack of it, can’t tell the difference between agricultural, municipal or non-consumptive water. It is all treated the same. The river hydrology and it’s “deliverables” are either in ample supply or inadequate for all. It is the drastic-change milestones in history that require us to re-think and react outside of our “normal” way of doing business. This “new normal” mandates that if we want to continue to expect to derive the benefits we have become comfortable with as a result of a healthy watershed, it is up to us to maintain, enhance and even protect it for the future.

In Colorado, the headwaters of nearly all significant watersheds originate on federal, Forest Service land. *A public resource on public land.* Yet we expect that management and funding of those watersheds and the forests that surround them is the sole responsibility of the agency which holds title to those lands in public trust. Again, in traditional “normal” times this model has seemed to work fine. As the public whom the asset is being held “in trust” for, we have a responsibility to do all we can to help the Forest Service enhance their success in the future management of forests and watersheds. The states and the citizens of such have always been given a chair in the room to listen to what is being done. It is now time for the states to pull a chair up to the table and be an active participant in forest/watershed management in concept, politically and, to a degree, legally and fiscally. In many cases, Forest Service leadership has become frustrated with a forest management model that has not been adaptable to the many changes in our environment and economy that have occurred outside of FS control.

Concepts

Forest Watershed Roundtables

Similar to the creation of Basin Roundtables developed through the IBCC on water issues, a citizen-based roundtable or collaborative working alongside the Forest Service (ie: RWEACT) on matters of forest health, watershed health etc. seems to be a logical start. Similar to the Resource Advisory Councils used by the BLM, these Roundtables would be developed with a well-rounded constituency represented for the strategic, long-term management of watersheds and forests. The Roundtable would be populated with only citizens who reside within the boundaries of the local Forest (ie: Rio Grande National Forest) and would represent a cross-section of a broad-base constituency and appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture at a national level. Individual Forest Watershed Councils (as an example name for purpose of discussion) will

be authorized both Congressionally and through the Colorado General Assembly to serve in a policy-level advisory capacity to the Forest Supervisor of each respective Forest, within Colorado, with full support and under the jurisdiction of the Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region. This concept can be ratified through joint Colorado Congressional Delegate/State Legislative resolution which identifies the need for, mission of and empowerment vested in the FWC by the ACT to represent the FS in policy level forest management activities which can have direct or indirect impacts to watershed health. The ACT could go further to identify a funding source to support the activities of the FWC concept in Colorado with matching state and federal grants.

Each forest/watershed should have a “head-to-toe” assessment done to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the forest/watershed in the event of extended drought, wild fire or extreme rainfall/snow pack events and the effects of forest health on watershed sustainability. A direct correlation can be made to the Governor’s State-wide Water Plan initiative and the approved, specific Basin Water Plan(s) for each Forest Watershed Council. During the development of each Basin Water Plan, the Forest Service should be considered as a “stakeholder” in the Basin Water Plan outreach effort as the manager of the forest adjoining the watershed. In addition, each Forest Watershed Council representing the respective watershed basins within the Forest should be directly engaged by the Forest for the development and or revision of Forest Management Plans. The FWC can serve as a political advocate for aggressive, non-traditional forest management efforts that can have a direct benefit to both forest and watershed health.

Concepts for consideration

Pro-Active Watershed Treatments

Storage vessels (maintenance, construction)

River channel stabilization

Forest management contiguous to river channel (thinning, clearing, hydro-axe mulching, managed/controlled burns etc.).

Partnership Federal and State

Forest management strategies should encourage increased forest commodity industry that creates a local, forest level industry and economy. The revenue generated could be authorized through congressional act that enables funding to be managed and utilized at the forest level and to support the local multi-jurisdictional/cooperative effort established between the Forest Service and the FWC or RWEACT as it exists now.

In a partnership effort, State funding could be authorized and provided as a match to Federal funds authorized for specific watershed/forest projects identified as a result of the Basin Water Plans and Forest Management Plans mentioned above.