Stream Gage Oversight Work Group

Subcommittee of the Governor's Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee

MEETING #2 SUMMARY NOTES

DATE: December 18, 2019

TIME: 1:30 – 4:30

LOCATION: Fred Buck Conference Room. 1st floor DNRC Water Resources Bldg. 1424 Ninth Ave, Helena

Summary:
Work Group members reviewed progress on compiling information on who funds USGS stream gages and their reasons for doing so. Members also reviewed draft Terms of Reference. Stakeholders shared their thoughts what they would like to see as an outcome of Work Group's efforts.

Action Items

- Continue to develop spreadsheet of funders.
- Develop story map for stakeholder outreach.
- Create a website to share the information of the Work Groupe, focusing on education and resources.
- Revise Terms of Reference
- Keep Developing stakeholder list
- USGS meeting is February 5th. Probably ½ day.

Member Present:

- Stephen Begley – Fish Wildlife & Parks – Co-Chair
- Paul Azevedo – Dept of Natural Resources – Co-Chair
- John Peterson – Dept of Ag
- Darrin Kron – Dept of Environmental Quality
- Mike Honeycutt – Dept of Livestock
- Wayne Johnston – Dept of Commerce

Regards:

- Andrew Long – Military Affairs/DES

Guests: Stephanie Adams-SWCDM, Thor Burbach-USFS, Pedro Marques-BHWS, John Kilpatrick-USGS, Ethan Kinard-MWCC, Dave Callery-USFS, Madeline Gotkowitz-MBMG, Mike Murphy-MWRA, Nikki Sandve-DNRC, Matt Norberg-DNRC, Brent Zundel-DNRC

Phone: Laura Nowlin-Musselshell Watershed Coalition, Bill Milton- Musselshell Watershed Coalition, Jason Mohr-Legislative Services

Welcome and Introductions

- John Peterson replaced Brett Heitshusen as the Dept of Agriculture's representative
- Wayne Johnston replaced Jennifer Pelej as the Dept of Commerce's representative

Review of the August 27th meeting

- Paul provide a recap of August 27th meeting.
- Work Group approved draft of August meeting notes.

Action Items from August 27 meeting

- Field trip to stream gage. No action because of conflicting schedules and early snow.
- Terms of Reference – See below.

Update on USGS Meeting on September 18th

- Paul provided a summary of September 18th meeting hosted by USGS. 35 stakeholders participated. Stakeholder discussion at the end of the meeting focused on how to increase funding support for USGS stream gages in Montana. Difficult to figure out how to increase support when it's not clear who contributes funding now. Action items from USGS meeting which dovetail with interests of Stream Gage Work Group include:
    - Document who currently provides funding support to USGS network in MT and their reasons for doing so.
    - Develop an interactive web-based map to display the information.
- Stephen Begley led review of working draft of Gage Inventory excel table showing who provides funding and why. Spreadsheet is based on data provide by USGS.
    - Spreadsheet already contains 237 rows and 24 columns of data. Currently only contains information provided by DNRC and FWP and will grow as more data is added. While the spreadsheet contains valuable information, it is difficult to comprehend in its current format.
- Paul led review of interactive web-based statewide map (beta version). Map is driven by data provided by USGS. Clicking on USGS gage symbol opens text box showing funding source(s) for that gage.
- General discussion about how to make these products more useful.
    - Connect the information to the people who live and work there. Break the information into neighborhoods, watersheds, or some other relatable geographic area. A Story Map might be a better vehicle for making this connection. While useful, Story Maps can be resource intensive to create. Who is going to collect and compile the stories?
    - Consider a way to highlight gages that are risk of losing funding. Something like a high, medium, and low risk. Some gages may have a very stable funding source and low risk of being shut down. Example, DNRC contributes funding to the USGS below Toston Dam as a requirement of FERC licenses to generate hydroelectric power. That gage has a low risk of losing funding support. We don't need to focus on gages with stable funding sources.
- General discussion on building public support for stream gage funding.
    - Stream gage data is business intelligence. Get more people to re-think the power of the data and its importance to long-term economy of the state.
    - People will become advocates for gages in their neighborhood when they can see the connection to their management decisions.
    - Stream gages are critical infrastructure for the economy. They are as important as roads, bridges, and street lights.

Review Terms of Reference.

- Paul gave a quick overview of a draft Terms of Reference (Action item from August 27 meeting).

- A Terms of Reference defines the purpose and structure of a project, committee, meeting, negotiation, or any similar collection of people who have agreed to work together to accomplish a shared goal.
- Sections that need additional work:
  - Scope – defines the boundaries of the Work Groups efforts. Those areas or issues on which we will spend time and resources
    - Delivery of information/data USGS system and other groups - how we make sure it is available to the public.
    - Identifying the funding need and funding sources for the gages.
    - Keep the scope to what the legislation provided - specifically asked to look at stream gage network (not at other networks).
    - Examining coordination and communication between agencies and user groups with respect to USGS gage network. Intent on improving how the process works. (No last-minute surprises...)
    - Communication network that addresses the above. Potential brainstorming of solutions.
    - What is a base network of gages that must be maintained no matter what?
    - Consider - proactively prioritizing gages so the public knows if there are additional funding cuts which gages may be next to be turned off. This will allow organizations to potentially come foward with other funding.
  - Out of Scope – Areas or issues the Work Group will not address
    - SNOTEL network and soil moisture monitoring network. All agreed that snow pack and soil moisture are important, they were not included in SB32.
  - Objectives/Goals
    - Additional work needed here.
  - Outcomes
    - Building public support/awareness for the stream gaging network, and the role it plays.
    - Secure funding for what we have and funding to meet future priorities.
    - Education
    - Informed decision makers – local, state, federal levels.
  - Deliverables
    - Report to Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee as required in Section 2-15-3308 MCA.

- What do the stakeholders behind SB32 want to see for an outcome? What should the Work Group do to address the concerns they brought to WPIC?
  - Bill Milton – Want to be certain that we don't lose stream gages in the future. Go through a process to identify the core base infrastructure that we manage water resources. If we all agree, we are going to make a collective effort to keep these funded. Regardless of what administration comes in and goes out. If a gage does not have people in Montana advocating for it – that gage has an easy possibility of getting shut down.
  - Laura Nowlin – There is a plan for how the gages will be funded. Not necessarily government funded, but there will be a plan. No more chopping block.

- Pedro – Eliminating the surprises at the 11th hour on funding issues. Early warning system if something is not going to be funded any longer. Big Hole watershed does not want to go through another 2017 style funding scramble. There should be a high level of confidence that the gages will be there (after the committee sunsets). The spreadsheet is heading on the right track for where the Big Hole wanted to head with this process.
- Ethan - MWCC got involved as a response to the local groups challenges with the gages.

Stakeholder Involvement

- Paul is developing a list of stakeholders. He went through the individuals or groups he already has listed. Other than CSKT, the list is missing tribal interests. John Kirkpatrick (USGS) will provide him with additional names.

Other discussion items

Mike Honeycutt - We should have legislation proposed by April or May to get them through the process. We are on a relatively tight time frame. By the time this group comes together in February we are well on our way to having budgets and ideas for next legislative session bills.

Wayne Johnston - Do we have an idea of the amount of funding we would need to run the gages?

Paul – figure 240 gages x $18,000/gage would be about $4 million and change. Ball park estimate to run all the real-time USGS gages in Montana. DNRC provided $287,050 in FY19. FWP provided $185,590 in FY19 and has committed $205,610 in FY20.

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Next meeting

- Week of February 19th. A doodle poll will be sent.