
Stream Gage Oversight Work Group

Subcommittee of the Governor's Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee
<http://dnrc.mt.gov/stream-gage-oversight>

MEETING #4 SUMMARY NOTES

DATE: June 16, 2020

TIME: 1:30 – 3:30

LOCATION: ZOOM Webinar

Summary

This was the 4th meeting of the Stream Gage Oversight Workgroup. Meeting scheduled for April 13 was cancelled due to the novel covid-19 pandemic. Work Group discussed the shutdown of several USGS gages in June due to lack of funding. The group also heard partial results of stream gage user survey and reviewed revised draft of work plan.

Action Items

- Ask USGS to give a presentation on gage funding at the next Stream Gage Work Group meeting.
- Promote stream gage survey.
- Work Group members should look through the work plan and identify tasks where they can add value.
- Work with Bill Milton and other stakeholders to develop a process for incorporating their efforts into work plan implementation.

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

Attendees: Bill Milton- Musselshell Watershed Coalition, Madeline Gotkowitz-MBMG; Clayton Elliot-MT Trout Unlimited, Morgan Chase, Jennifer Schoonen-Blackfoot Challenge, Kirk Miller-USGS, John Kilpatrick-USGS, Matt Norberg-DNRC,

Review of the February 21st meeting

- Paul provide a recap of February 21st meeting.
- February Action Items
 - Post Terms of Reference to website
 - Revise work plan based on input from Work Group members and stakeholders.
- Work Group approved February meeting summary.

Shut down of USGS stream gages

- On June 8th the USGS survey shut down three Montana gages due to lack of funding.
- Paul noted that the loss of gage funding is the very issue the Work Group was created to address.

USGS stream gages shut down on June 8, 2020

Gage #	Location	Period of Record (yrs)	Funding	Status as of June 16
12323600	Silver Bow Creek at Opportunity	31	100% federal - EPA	Funding renewed
12323750	Silver Bow Creek at Warm Springs	35	100% federal - EPA	Funding renewed
06088500	Muddy Creek near Vaughn	82	Mix federal and local	No funding

- Stephen Begley asked USGS to address the sudden shut down of gages on Silver Bow Creek. Noting that back in February both FWP and DNRC informed USGS that the gages were important and requested to be apprised of the funding status. Yet, the gages were suddenly shut down with no warning.
- Kirk Miller (USGS) acknowledged and apologized for lack of notice. USGS had been working with EPA to renew funding. Kirk was working under the impression funding would come through. There was a last-minute snag on the EPA side of things. There was a mix up in communication between USGS and EPA. Kirk was unaware because he is not deeply involved with the funding side. When EPA's agreement expired, USGS was forced to shut down the gages because they are legally required to have 100% cost recovery. USGS now has an agreement in place so the gages are back on line.
- The gage on Muddy Creek near Vaughn, Montana is still down. Tracy Wendt with the Sun River Watershed Group is working to secure funding. Gage will remain off until funding is found.
 - Greenfields ID has offered to cover ½ cost over the next year - \$4,300
 - DNRC has offered \$2,000 over the next year – Stop gap funding
 - Still short \$2,300.
- Action Item – Ask USGS to give a presentation on gage funding at the next Stream Gage Work Group meeting.
- John Kilpatrick (USGS) updated Work Group on an item from February 21st meeting.
 - In February, John informed Work Group that USGS may have to discontinue up to 6 stream gages on Montana and Wyoming that are part of the Federal Priorities Program (FPP). FPP gages are 100% funded by USGS out of a special Congressional appropriation. Funding for this program has been flat for the last 10 years.
 - John now thinks USGS may have to discontinue at least 2 FPP gages in Montana unless Congress provides an increase of funds in FY21 (Starts October 1). John will not really know until he sees what Congress does.
 - John will consult with Work Group and stakeholders before making any decisions. He will give as much lead time as possible.
- Bill Milton expressed frustration with current situation. Despite efforts of stakeholders, gages are still being lost. Still no ability to lessen the impacts or come up with a positive response. For

the group to be effective, we are going to come up with a different approach so that all the appropriate players are looking at the same picture. Otherwise we will continue to lose gages.

- John Kilpatrick acknowledged the complexity of funding. Congress choose to fund federal stream gaging through very diverse mix of funding. Congress established the FPP gages to provide a baseline level of stability to the gage program. Unfortunately, Congress has never funded more than 1/3 of the gages eligible for the FFP funds.

Update on Stream Gage Survey

- Link to survey is [HERE](#)
- Paul provided an update on stream gage survey jointly developed by representatives from DNRC, FWP, USGS, NOAA, Sun River Watershed, Big Hole Watershed Committee and Trout Unlimited. The survey is a product of USGS funders meetings held on Sept 18, 2019. The purpose of the survey is to shed light who uses USGS stream gage data, why they use it, and how they access the data. Survey went live in April and will remain active through September.
- Partial results as of June 8th
 - 502 responses
 - Highest use in spring and/or summer
 - 93% access information from USGS Water Data Website
 - 40% cite recreation as the primary reason
 - 63% don't realize annual costs
 - 20% do not know source of funding
 - Responses from zip codes across MT
- Efforts are underway to promote and raise awareness of survey.
 - 1000 fliers promoting survey have been printed. Close to 600 have been distributed.
 - Information is being provided to constituent groups for posting in newsletters
 - USGS has promoted it on their Twitter account
 - DNRC has posted it to web site.
- Bill Milton wondered if irrigators or other water user groups were filling connected to the survey or feeling compelled to fill it out. The results will not be representative if 40 to 50% of the respondents are recreational users. Irrigators may not be participating in the survey. They have an economic need for the gages but may not visit internet sites promoting the survey. It will be important for groups like the Watershed Coordination Council and MACD to promote the survey to their constituents.
- Paul acknowledged Bills concerns. Survey is opt-in. People can choose to respond or not. The responses will not be from a random sample of water users. It is going to be up to folks close to the ground to get the word out to their constituents.
- Stephen noted that he was part of group developing the survey. They went through an extensive effort to identify and notify the groups who would have an interest in the survey. Those groups were provided a link to the survey along with sample text to use in their newsletters.
- Paul - Another push is planned for this summer and a third one towards the end of survey period.
- Bill foresees need for a parallel advocacy group. It is not the Work Group's job to get the right people to respond to the survey. Stakeholders need to organize among themselves. Effort needs to complement that of the Work Group.

- Stephen, and Darrin agree on need to form different partnerships to carry this forward. Must be more than just agency representative's.

Update on Outreach

- Paul gave an update on outreach activities since February meeting.
 - Montana Water Summit – March 3 & 4
 - Bill Milton and Paul hosted a lunch table on stream gaging. Topics discussed
 - How does access to stream flow information support your or your organization's decisions?
 - Who should advocate for solving the problem?
- MACD Spring Board meeting – June 10
 - Paul gave a presentation on Stream Gage Oversight Work Group at the Montana Association of Conservation Districts Spring Board meeting in Helena.
- Work Members viewed a video produced by DNRC to promote a better understanding of how stream gages work.
 - Link is [HERE](#)
- Nikki Sandve (DNRC) is working with Cheryl Miller with USGS on develop some great stream gage related graphics and themes of education that will go on the USGS website. Target date is September.

Draft Work Plan

- Stephen led a discussion on draft work plan. Version dated May 14.
- Work plan was revised based on discussions for February meeting and comments received from stakeholders.
- Will be a big lift to accomplish the tasks given current available resources. Will need to spread out the work.
- Action Item - Work Group members should look through the work plan and identify tasks where they can add value.
- Bill Milton asked about opportunity for stakeholders to get involved creating and implementing work plan.
- Action Item – Work with Bill Milton and other stakeholders to develop a process for incorporating their efforts into work plan implementation.
- Timeline
 - Any potential policy recommendations developed by Work Group will need to be vetted by agencies. Draft policy recommendations would have to ready for agency vetting by May 2022. DNRC and/or FWP will probably take the lead on vetting policy recommendations.
 - Stakeholders are not bound to agency timelines. They are free to work with their elected representatives.
 - Report to WPIC would have to be delivered early in the 2022 interim session. WPIC will need time to review and decide if they want to craft legislation.
 - Legislation that includes additional funding would have to be done by June 2022 for introduction into 2023 session.
 - Agree to set deadline of April 30, 2022.

Public Comment

- Stakeholders provided input throughout the meeting. There was no additional input during public comment period.

Next meeting

- Target date for next meeting is first 2 weeks of August.
- Potential agenda items
 - Approve Work Plan
 - Presentation on funding by USGS.