

INTRO

My name is Deanna Drew and I am currently serving a two-year volunteer term as Board President of the San Miguel Watershed Coalition. We are pleased for this opportunity to publically thank the Southwestern Water Conservation District for their support of our organization through the years. This presentation is intended to give the audience a brief overview of the San Miguel Watershed and a sampling of the Coalition's most recent programs and projects that have been funded by the District and other watershed partners.

THE WATERSHED

The free-flowing San Miguel River extends for 80 miles from high alpine headwaters above Telluride through scenic valleys and canyons to a confluence with the Dolores River in red rock desert country near the Utah Border. The river is one of the last remaining ecologically and hydrologically intact river systems in Colorado, with no dams on its main stem. The San Miguel watershed is about one million acres in size, with the majority of land being controlled by the United States Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Within its boundaries are the distinctly different west end communities of Nucla, Naturita, Norwood (where agriculture is prevalent) and east end communities of Placerville, Sawpit, Telluride, Mountain Village, and Ophir (where recreation and tourism are the primary economy). Roughly 6,000 people live and work in the watershed with many more commuting into the area for employment and enjoyment.

WATER QUALITY

For about 20 years, the Coalition has been performing water quality monitoring on the San Miguel and its tributaries. We currently collect and evaluate samples at 27 locations in the watershed, including control, impact and special interest sites, and make the data available to the public and state agencies using the Colorado Data Sharing Network. Areas of concern include impacts from resource extraction, both past and present, residential and commercial development, agriculture, industry, naturally occurring metal inputs and municipal discharges. The Colorado Water Quality Control Division has identified 15 segments of impaired streams in the San Miguel Watershed. Seven of these sites are included because of high levels of heavy metals lingering from historic mining operations near Telluride and Ophir. The others are listed due to concerns over pH, dissolved oxygen, temperature, selenium, and E.coli from agricultural and other human activities. The Coalition strives to meet the water quality monitoring needs of our funding partners and watershed citizens, in order to educate and inform science-based management decisions that protect the integrity of the San Miguel River. Thanks to the district for supporting our water quality monitoring program through the years.

RESTORATION PROJECTS

In 2014 The Coalition partnered with The Nature Conservancy and the BLM, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife to implement the Tabeguache Creek Native Fish Barrier Removal Project in Montrose County, on BLM lands at Tabeguache Creek just above the confluence with the San Miguel. A concrete diversion structure spanned Tabeguache Creek and served as a barrier to the upstream movement of native fish and under the majority of flows, and blocked several miles of suitable or preferred spawning and nursery habitat for three BLM sensitive fish species: **bluehead sucker**, flannelmouth sucker, and roundtail chub. All three species are native, endemic species to the Colorado River Basin and all have seen substantial population declines throughout their range. An Environmental Assessment was performed, and after the project was approved the removal of the dam was completed in two days with no incident. Fish sampling by BLM and CPW at the site one year later confirmed the presence of significant populations of the three target species of concernup to nine miles upstream of the project. This proves the barrier removal was successful in facilitating upstream movement and use of historic habitats at a much greater rate than pre-barrier removal, opening up access to over nine miles of preferred spawning and nursery habitat for native fishes. Thanks to the District for supporting this and other restoration projects within the watershed.

STATE OF THE SAN MIGUEL WATERSHED REPORT

In 2015 the Coalition released the State of the San Miguel Watershed scientific report. This report was produced in partnership with our local, state and federal land management agencies to assess the ecological health of the watershed, in the areas of Water Quality, Water Quantity, Fisheries, Macro-invertebrates, Climate, Vegetation, Forest Health, Wildlife, Soils, and Land Use. The State of the San Miguel Watershed Report is intended to be a public information tool for watershed management discussions and thoughtful discussion among stakeholders. The Coalition will work with the agencies to refine monitoring protocols and update this dynamic report every five years, with annual progress reports in between. Copies of this report are available here today. Thanks to the district for supporting our State of the San Miguel Watershed Report and future public outreach tools.

SAN MIGUEL RIVER ENVIRONMENTAL AND RECREATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT and STREAM MANAGEMENT PLAN

The new Colorado Water Plan, finalized last November, seeks to understand the state's water needs, identify gaps in those needs, and promote projects and processes to meet those needs through the creation of a Basin Implementation Plan for each of the 8 basins of the Colorado River.

While developing its Basin Implementation Plan, the Southwest Colorado Basin Roundtable (which includes the San Miguel, Dolores and San Juan River systems) identified a significant gap in information necessary to understand the basin's Environmental and Recreational water needs. Understanding E&R water needs is particularly challenging given the size of the area, and diversity, of the nine sub-basins that make up the Southwest Basin's area of interest. Given these challenges, the Southwest Basin Roundtable voted to support a pilot project to develop E&R water needs information in ONE of the sub-basins, with the thought that the approach could be replicated, with adjustments, to meet local needs in other basins.

The San Miguel River basin has recently been selected and funded for a pilot project, an Environmental and Recreational Needs Assessment and Stream Management Plan, to help guide cooperative water management efforts in the basin and to answer Governor Hickenlooper's call to support and implement the Colorado Water Plan on a local level. This work is hoped to provide a model for conducting cost-effective watershed-scale evaluations of Environmental and Recreational needs, and for implementing stream management planning efforts in other areas of the Southwest Basin. Where environmental and/or recreational gaps are identified, a collaborative effort will be initiated to develop innovative tools to address those gaps.

This project is a partnership between the Southwest Colorado Basin Roundtable, the San Miguel Watershed Coalition, and Trout Unlimited. I would like to introduce Mely Whiting, in the audience, who will be representing Trout Unlimited for this project. Mely is also a member of the Southwest Basin Roundtable's Environmental and Recreational Needs Sub Committee, and will be serving to keep the roundtable members informed and updated on the progress of this project throughout its term, currently scheduled through 2017.

The Coalitions' role in this project is to assist the project managers with data collection and coordinate stakeholder engagement and cooperation in our watershed communities. It has been made clear to us that this project, as well as the Colorado Water Plan, must be a transparent and collaborative effort that involves and respects all users of the river. Therefore, the Coalition has made this effort a priority, and pledges to work collectively with all of our watershed communities to carry out this pilot project, and to work together to meet all water needs while maintaining healthy rivers and streams for future generations.