

Press Release: updated May 24, 2021 (original May 21, 2021)

Joint Statement of the
Ute Mountain Ute Tribe (UMUT)
and
Dolores Water Conservancy District (DWCD)

The Dolores River is **once again** headed toward record low runoff, on the heels of an abysmal 2020 water year.

The Dolores Water Conservancy District and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, primary users of Dolores water flow, said this circumstance places the **burden** of two horrible years on the Dolores Project users, who will only see a 5 – 10% supply.

The shorted water deliveries will fall on the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Farm and Ranch Enterprise, DWCD full-service irrigators in Montezuma and Dolores Counties, and the downstream fishery, according to Ken Curtis, general manager of DWCD.

Given the natural **precipitation** cycle for Colorado, these conditions **began** forming last fall when the monsoon rains failed to deliver fall moisture to replenish river flows and soil moisture for the 3rd year in a row. “These water deficits dried up smaller tributaries in the upper watershed and sent us into the winter with an **enormous** hole to fill from the first spring snowmelt before starting the runoff. Locally we were lucky to avoid major wild fires last fall in the San Juan Mountains, **Curtis explained.**

The winter likewise failed to deliver at **historical average**, peaking out with only 83% of normal snowpack on April 1st. Another dry windy warm spring further depleted the snowpack to where current forecasts project 25% of the historical average, only 74,000 AF for McPhee that normally runs 250,000 through **its delivery system** to all users. Conditions may continue to degrade given recent weather and current forecasts. That places 2021 dropping towards the 4th worst runoff after 1977, 2018 and 2002.

With 2020 **providing the seventh** worst recorded runoff, McPhee Reservoir carryover was only 4% of the active capacity.

Curtis said the result will be no supplemental irrigation supplies available to the senior water rights. The Project irrigators are cutting back irrigated acres by 90% to most efficiently use the extremely low water supplies and will run partial season irrigation at best on those limited acres. Curtis is also working closely with Dove Creek Mayor Brett Martin to keep their water supply reservoir full from DWCD irrigation canals that won't run all summer.

The downstream fishery will see flows of 10 CFS for a few months that **will then** drop back to a trickle of 5 CFS for the remaining 8 months until next spring. The lower river faces significant trout and native fish populations losses.

“Financial impacts will be hard on all agriculture producers. **The Tribe’s Farm** and Ranch Enterprise **will** limit employment and cut back buying farm supplies drastically, with longer term impacts, “**DWCD Board President Bruce Smart said. “The** recovery for producers, the UMUT, and the District **will take years**. The fishery impacts may not be known until 2022, but the river will **likely** experience flows similar to pre-McPhee.”

Long time farmers have seen this before, after 2002 it took seven years to financially recover and this year looks worse. Farmers expect a significant hit to their pocket books that will trickle through the local economy. It’s too early to tell what crops will make it through the season, but without some rain many farmers expect significant loss to their perennial stands. If next year’s supply doesn’t improve Curtis worries “that multigenerational farm families may face bankruptcy.”

“At stake is the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe’s highly productive and efficient 7,600 acre farm. With a 10% water supply from the Dolores Project this year we are limited to growing corn for our Bow and Arrow Brand, and protecting our highest value alfalfa fields,” according to **Manuel Heart, Chairman of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe**. “We have spent 25 years developing productive crops on 109 center pivot fields and a trained workforce of Tribal members. With most of our fields fallowed and very little crop income, everything that we have developed is at risk. We intend to work closely with DWCD and the Bureau of Reclamation to protect the continued viability of our farm. Our participation in the Dolores Project is a result of the Colorado Ute Indian Water Rights Settlement and we will exercise these Settlement Rights in the fullest to protect our Farm and Ranch Enterprise and keep the Dolores Project viable”, concluded Chairman Heart.

DWCD and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal leadership have discussed the drought impacts with the Bureau of Reclamation, and potential drought impact assistance is being explored.

Both Montezuma and Dolores Counties will be asked to consider emergency drought declarations next to raise these concerns to the State level where the District and the Tribe will also work with the State of Colorado in coordinating any drought response.