

Press Release

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TU supports Windy Gap project in light of new river protections

Says new permit conditions put threatened river and fishery on road to recovery

(Denver)—Trout Unlimited today praised a multiparty agreement reached with the Municipal Subdistrict of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District (Municipal Subdistrict) that provides significant protections for the Upper Colorado River to offset impacts from the proposed Windy Gap Firming Project (WGFP). The package of protections—negotiated among the Municipal Subdistrict, Grand County staff, Trout Unlimited and the Upper Colorado River Alliance (UCRA)—was approved today by the Grand County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) as part of a permit issued for the Windy Gap firming project.

“These permit conditions provide critical measures for protecting the health of the Upper Colorado River and its world-class trout fishery,” said Mely Whiting, counsel for Trout Unlimited. “TU has not been able to support this project in the past. But the subdistrict and the project participants have gone the extra mile to try to address our concerns and do what’s right for the river.”

Already, water diversions remove about 60 percent of the native flows of the Colorado headwaters. The proposed Windy Gap expansion would further reduce native flows. Without additional protections, said TU, the water-deprived river would be on life support.

“For years, those of us living in Grand County have seen the once-mighty Colorado in a state of serious decline,” said Kirk Klancke, president of TU’s Colorado River Headwaters Chapter.

“This agreement will provide protections and new investments in river health that can put the Colorado River on the road to recovery.”

A Colorado Parks and Wildlife biologist’s study last year pointed to Windy Gap Reservoir as a primary cause for steep declines in aquatic life and habitat in the Colorado River. The study flagged the need for periodic flushing flows to help scour the river bottom and prevent the buildup of choking algae and sediment, along with a “bypass” channel around or through Windy Gap that would reconnect the river, improve water quality, and boost river health. Trout also depend on cold water, and excessively warm stream temperatures have been a problem, with the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission listing the Colorado River as being impaired due to high water temperatures. The conditions included in the permit approved by the BoCC today include restrictions on water diversions and other requirements that address each of these needs by:

- preventing stream temperature impacts during low flows in the summer.
- providing periodic “flushing flows” to cleanse the river during runoff.
- requiring the construction of a Windy Gap Reservoir bypass to reconnect the river, in accordance with the bypass study and funding agreement.

The bypass agreement is one of the most important components of the WGFP approval package, said TU leaders, who called the bypass “critical” in addressing the root causes of habitat problems in the Upper Colorado. A bypass study, paid for by the subdistrict, is expected to be completed by October 2013. If river benefits are shown, WGFP participants committed up to \$2 million to construct the bypass. An additional \$2 million would be available from the Colorado Water Conservation Board if approved by the Colorado Legislature during its upcoming session.

In addition, the permit includes measures to address impacts to water quality and clarity in Grand Lake and to riparian vegetation and wetlands, as well as monitoring requirements.

The overall package also includes an agreement with Grand County to enable pumping and storage of water to deal with summer low flow problems and the subdistrict’s commitment—approved by the state Wildlife Commission last year—to contribute \$4 million and in-kind services for stream improvement projects in the Colorado River downstream of Windy Gap Reservoir.

“This is not a perfect deal,” said Whiting. “This is the product of compromise. But looking at the entire package, we firmly believe it offers the best chance for the upper Colorado River’s recovery. It also offers an opportunity for a new way of doing business—where stakeholders work side by side with water providers in an effort to protect our valuable streams. TU is proud to be a part of this effort to find balanced, pragmatic solutions.”

TU noted that the agreement is the product of years of hard work, negotiations and collaboration. “We thank Grand County for its leadership role and tireless efforts to improve the conditions of the Colorado River,” said Klancke. “The efforts of our landowner partners, UCRA, were instrumental. And, of course, we commend the subdistrict and its participant water providers for their willingness to listen to our concerns and work together to find solutions.”

Drew Peternell, director of TU’s Colorado Water Project, said the agreement had larger lessons for Colorado water planning.

“In our Filling the Gap report, we said that WGFP, if done right, had the *potential* to be part of a smart supply portfolio for Colorado’s Front Range, along with stronger conservation and reuse programs and better ag-urban water sharing strategies,” said Peternell. “We’re pleased that Northern’s subdistrict has stepped up to address WGFP’s impacts on the Colorado headwaters so that it can achieve that potential as a smart supply project. Through a balanced portfolio including smart supply projects like WGFP, Colorado can meet diverse water needs, from municipal needs to recreation, while keeping our rivers healthy.”

Peternell added, “The job of protecting the Upper Colorado isn’t finished. Denver Water needs to step up to provide additional protections for the Fraser River in its Moffat expansion project, which if done right, also has the potential to be a ‘smart’ project. We’re not there yet, but this agreement provides a roadmap of how we can get there.”

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Trout Unlimited is the nation’s largest coldwater conservation organization, with 140,000 members dedicated to conserving, protecting, and restoring North America’s trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds. Colorado Trout Unlimited has 10,000 grassroots members across the state.