The Poudre Runs Through It group reflects the diversity of values held by stakeholders in the Poudre River. Some value the river mainly as a working river—for agricultural, municipal and industrial needs. Others value its rich recreational opportunities and ecological attributes. But we all want a river that meets our human needs AND is a healthy river in its own right. In the past, we too often found reasons not to work together. This group is trying instead to find broadly acceptable ways to meet multiple objectives: to have both a working Poudre and a healthier Poudre. We know the Poudre is a managed river and it is not our goal to return the river to its pre-development condition. We have focused on areas for mutual gain while not letting divisive issues inhibit our thinking.

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After 8 months of all-day meetings in 2012 and 2013, the group is ready to report on its progress. At times we talked among ourselves and at times we listened to “success stories” from around the region that provided examples of win-win collaboration. The group dealt with the challenge of grasping an understanding of the multiple perspectives/stakes in the river, the challenges brought about by complex legal and institutional realities, as well as the challenges of plans for new diversions. But the group also identified a variety of innovative opportunities for voluntary, collaborative solutions that may help protect habitat and water quality while respecting private property rights.

The work group is now launching a trio of initiatives it believes embody the dual goals of a working river/healthy river. These initiatives are in the incubation stage. Each of them will take a great deal of work and cooperation.

**Flows, Funding, Forum**

The initiatives described below fall under the categories of “Flows, Funding, and Forum.” The Poudre Runs Through It will continue to meet with the assistance of the Colorado Water Institute and local funders through at least the next year to help cultivate these three initiatives and to consider more than 40 other ideas that the group brainstormed. The members of the work group will build on the relationships they have formed—relationships that would have seemed unlikely less than a year ago—as they consider additional ideas that may be ready to launch in the future.

**Progress Report**

2012-13 Accomplishments & 2013-14 Prospectus

Let’s make the Poudre River the world’s best example of a healthy, working river.

That’s the vision of a diverse group of regional leaders brought together and facilitated by CSU’s Colorado Water Institute to better understand both the operational and ecological needs of the Poudre River. Sharing their knowledge and experience, this work group learned together about many aspects of the Poudre River to identify opportunities for cooperative action.

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FLOWS: Improving the flows of the river while protecting water rights

What would it take to manage the working river system to keep more of the water in the river at critical times and in critical places to begin to improve the river’s ecology? Given the large number of agricultural and municipal interests involved, it may be complicated, it may be expensive, and in fact it may prove impossible. Nonetheless, there are at least two distinct approaches that are being investigated. The key to each is using the river, instead of canals or pipelines, as a conveyance to move water from upstream to a downstream beneficial use, and moving that water in a way that minimizes losses, does not interfere with anyone’s water rights, can be administered under Colorado water law, and is market driven. In addition to these two approaches, there may be others that deserve investigation, but these are two that the group is focusing on now. Let’s look at each of these in turn (realizing that each approach can benefit the other):

Approach A: Instream flow designation for a section of the Poudre

One way to improve river flows is to officially designate a length of river between specific points as needing a specified minimum flow. Such a minimum flow designation is recognized by Colorado law, established by the Colorado Water Conservation Board in conjunction with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and water dedicated to such a reach is administered within the state’s water right priority system. One such stretch—that could improve both the ecology of the river and its recreational and aesthetic values—could be through the City of Fort Collins. Water leased or otherwise acquired upstream of Fort Collins could then be run through the designated instream flow reach, applied to the beneficial use created by an instream flow right in the designated reach, and used in turn by downstream agricultural or other users. This is a long process with no guarantees, and it would ultimately be expensive. However, if done well, it would protect (and perhaps even improve) the river’s diversions for agricultural and municipal use while also helping to protect some of the river’s environmental values.

Approach B: Regional Conveyance

A second option to use the river as a conveyance may involve other regional stakeholders with a need to move water from the Poudre Basin to downstream growth areas. For example, the City of Thornton will be moving water south to its citizens and possibly could move all or part of that water further downstream on the Poudre through Fort Collins and perhaps Windsor. Since Thornton’s water currently leaves the Poudre upstream from Fort Collins, using the river as a conveyance could add water back into at least a portion of the Poudre that for years has been diverted from the river. (Regional voices such as Windsor, Greeley and Thornton are involved with The Poudre Runs Through It, too.)

Both Approaches A and B have elements in common. Both may require the replacement or retrofitting of existing infrastructure such as diversions and head gates, as well as adding telemetered flow measurement. All such changes would be expensive, but doable, and may provide additional benefits such as fish and recreational passage. Both too may require new cooperative agreements among water rights holders to maximize the efficiency of the river—for both working AND healthy river goals. It will take a huge effort and a significant commitment of time—as well as teamwork and cooperation.

Flow Education

Any approach to improving flows will involve considerable expense and therefore require public support. Public support can only come through education. Therefore the group has identified as a priority broadening public understanding of key water management concepts. For example, since the right to take water from the river is usually measured in cubic feet per second, it will be helpful to understand just how much a “CFS” really is. Yet few beyond the “experts” understand flow measurement, and fewer still pay much attention to how much river flows fluctuate through time, or even from place to place along the river. In order to help all of us better understand river flows, a subgroup of The Poudre Runs Through It has imagined a simple but effective project. They will place some attractive flow gages and interpretive signs at strategic places along the river (probably one in Fort Collins and one in Windsor, initially) to help the public visualize flows as measured in cubic feet per second. Sometimes something simple is just what it takes to invoke an “aha” moment.

FUNDING: Translating Vision into Reality

“Putting your money where your mouth is” will be required for us to achieve our goals of making the working river a healthier river. None of the improvements envisioned will be easy or cheap. They will require engineering and legal fees. They likely will require expensive retrofit of infrastructure and measurement and extensive educational campaigns. The Poudre Runs Through It has undertaken an initiative to investigate how such funding could be generated. They will look at successful models, such as Larimer County’s Open Space Tax or the state of Colorado’s GOCO fund, and others, for inspiration. They believe that those who live in the Poudre River Basin will respond enthusiastically to this vision. Studies show that most everyone loves and benefits from the Poudre. All of us want it to continue providing for our agricultural, urban, and recreational needs. But all of us want the river to be healthy and clean, and that all takes money.

FORUM: Convening for Cooperation

Another initiative will be the establishment of an annual Poudre River Forum to bring together all the communities that benefit from the Poudre to celebrate and cooperate. A one-day gathering will feature presentations and panels, think-tank topics, and fun. The purpose of the forum is to convene the wide diversity of those who care about the river to collaborate on how we can meet the dual goals of working river/healthy river. A subgroup is now planning for the first Forum to take place early in 2014. What’s the scope of this vision? At least 300 people – maybe as many as 500 – meeting annually to strategize for a healthier working river.

The Poudre Runs Through It—Some Background

In 2011, UniverCity Connections, the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, and Colorado State University’s Colorado Water Institute and Center for Public Deliberation joined forces to convene a community series on the Poudre River and the future of Northern Colorado’s water. As many as 350 attended the educational and public deliberation sessions. The result was a resounding agreement that those of us who live along the Poudre and in its valley respect its values of supporting agriculture and urban water use. We love it for its recreational values. But we also want it to be a healthier river. We may disagree on how to get all of that, but we share the common values.

The Colorado Water Institute at CSU, with partial funding from the Bohemian Foundation's Pharos Fund, decided to build on the momentum. The result is the convening in October 2012 of a group of 30 leaders from the Poudre’s various communities in an eight month process of study and action leading to the initiatives outlined above. Participants were chosen for their expertise related to the Poudre River, including those from the agricultural, environmental, municipal, industrial, recreational, business, development, and other sectors. Another factor in the selection of participants was the intent to include individuals associated with the wide diversity of organizations with interests in the Poudre River. These leaders devoted a full day each month to learning from one another and from outside resources in order to build the relationships and the knowledge to come together on these initiatives. They learned about a number of individuals and groups already working on projects aimed at making the best use of the Poudre River and improving its health—ranging from downtown development to restoration projects. Members of the work group and the organizations with which they are affiliated are shown on the following page.