

BIG THOMPSON WATERSHED COALITION, IT'S ROLE IN RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

by Larry Rogstad

First, my apologies for not being able to attend today's session, but I've been dealing with repetitive bouts of covid for the last several weeks and I've been struck again with a new recurrence. I am a proud alumnus of the Water literate Leaders program which provides critically important information to community members in promoting intelligent decision making at all levels concerning water management in the arid west. Therefore I was delighted to have been asked to present, especially in the area of water for the environment and for informed resource management. One point of clarification, while I am listed on the agenda as Board President of the Big Thompson Watershed Coalition (BTWC), I have stepped down and currently serve as Vice President of BTWC, with Rich Alper, one of your classmates, serving as the current President. My comments on the BTWC are based on work with the Coalition since its inception in 2013, additionally as a flood recovery lead for the State of Colorado Parks and Wildlife in multiple drainages impacted by the flood I had opportunity to interact with several other watershed Coalitions, government agencies and individuals impacted and involved in flood work up and down the Front Range. While my comments will focus on BTWC and the role of watershed coalitions in conservation, as an ecologist long involved in land and water management for conservation purposes in Northern Colorado I will also speak briefly to conservation concerns we face.

On the heels of the 2013 flood, with the guidance and assistance of the State of Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Water Conservation Board multiple watershed coalitions coalesced and formed in many impacted watersheds from Denver to Wyoming. In some cases there were existing watershed organizations doing good work, and in other drainages like the Big Thompson new coalitions formed ad hoc to work on flood recovery, reclamation and restoration. In intervening years, several of the smaller ad hoc coalitions have gone dormant or have become inactive as recovery was achieved, while the larger more solidly based organizations continue on. BTWC is kind of in the middle of the coalition spectrum, and while much flood recovery work has been successfully completed, our community has continued to realize additional resource management needs and opportunities for BTWC to pursue. We are neither well funded nor consistently supported financially in a major manner by local interests, and therefore BTWC continues to struggle to maintain a sustainable base while much of our income comes from grants with specific spending limitations and restricted funding. However we do have robust partners who continue to help support us and we constantly seek new supporters from within our community.

Working with 10-12 watershed groups post flood, it was apparent to me that each watershed coalition formed based on local conditions and needs, with participation by community and board membership priorities being determined by local community values. For instance, in Boulder County with its well established and robust local governments staffed deeply with expertise, watershed Coalitions along on Boulder Creek, 4 Mile, Left hand Creek and the St Vrains had strong representation from governmental agencies, with relatively minor input from individuals. On the Poudre their already existing Coalition had and continues to enjoy strong

representation from local business and a good deal of expertise from the University and professional Community.

On the other hand, the Big Thompson Watershed Coalition was formed as a grass-roots organization of citizens primarily along the Big T, and from the outset high value was placed on local citizen involvement. In fact our organizational bylaws stipulate that BTWC Board membership must have 50+% representation by persons living in and along the watershed. Over the years, maintaining our citizen focused composition has at times been difficult, and in decision making, engaged citizens lacking technical background have benefitted from advice and support from subject matter experts in agencies seated in non-voting positions on our Board, who provide background to the voting Board members in project development and execution.

the primary benefit of a functional grass-roots watershed coalition in post-flood resource management, is in the ability to serve as a go between or liaison between the local community, individuals, and the various and many governmental entities involved in flood recovery efforts, each of which may potentially provide technical input and funding opportunity for post flood remediation. The diverse manner in which agencies interact with individuals, complexity of application/implementation processes and detailed administration of governmental funding can be impediments to individuals caught in crisis, and coupled with an inherent societal suspicion or distrust of governmental entities makes it difficult for some private parties to want to interact with government associated agencies in obtaining expert advice and essential funding to cover recovery efforts. Additionally while Individuals tend to focus on fixing their own property, generally flood damage presents the same basic needs up and down the impacted area and coordinating efforts on a larger scale increases efficiency with improved results throughout the watershed. Coalitions present the opportunity to have a locally tied, coordinating entity within the watershed that has valid connections and the expertise to prioritize needs and implement projects, additionally the skill set needed to apply and manage funding strings and execute and administer grants that fund effective resource management projects on the ground. With the local tie to the community, watershed coalitions encourage participation by community members that may otherwise be reticent or unable to successfully participate in meaningful restoration. An essential benefit of coalitions is in their ability to bring together diverse, individual needs into a broader synergistic effort maximizing success and reducing overall costs of coordinated restoration work rather than haphazard outcomes resulting from individual, ill-informed efforts, and in combining work to leverage funding on cost share requirements, decreasing costs by utilizing contractors for multiple site work rather than piecemeal restoration. Finally and in my mind most importantly, coalitions provide a meeting place and rallying group so that individuals affected by natural disaster can find and participate in a strong support system, and may engage in their recovery with a sense of combined mission rather than the hopeless feeling of isolation that often results from natural disasters.

In the 2013 flood the State of Colorado used the Big Thompson Canyon as a poster child for recovery efforts, touting building back with resiliency as the goal. Priority was placed on the effort to recover the US 34 Loveland to Estes Park transportation corridor making it resilient to

future flooding, with concomitant restoration of the river as a scenic corridor and highly prized trout fishery, by restoring stream habitat which had been decimated by the flood. Colorado Department of Transportation led the effort with a huge participative group (35-50ologists [people with a host of different skill areas and technical expertise] with weekly meetings over a two year period, with CDOT leading on the road design and Colorado Parks and Wildlife taking a lead on stream recovery. However this group's efforts in the Big T was mandated to restrict its efforts to portions of the road on or adjacent to the highway right of way and portions of the River that touched the right of way. Consequently, much of the discussion in these meetings was road/river oriented and individual landowners attending often felt left out. Additionally, it was difficult or intimidating for local landowners to show up for a weekly meeting to press for their site specific needs in a room full of "experts." The Big Thompson Watershed Coalition played an absolutely essential role in working with property owners and others along the Big Thompson with restoration/recovery needs not adjacent to the highway corridor, to coordinate, develop and implement recovery efforts on private lands which did not touch the highway right of way, so that recovery would be consistent between public and private portions of the River and its tributaries. The BTWC worked with agencies and their programs to fund needs not directly associated with the Road or associated River, but rather were focused on private lands restoration opportunities. The Coalition representative served the important task of attending the meetings to speak on behalf of those individuals impacted who were uncomfortable with or did not have time for weekly meetings, and then in bringing essential recovery information back to individual property owners so they could meaningfully restore their properties. In implementation of projects the Coalition also put together group volunteer efforts at revegetation, stream bank stabilization and other work that provided a sense of community and commitment to teamwork.

The Big T Coalition's overarching objective has been to foster resilience in the watershed by providing multipurpose/multi-stakeholder benefits to water and forest resources including the wildlife and people who depend on sustainable river function. The Big Thompson is unique along the front range in its association with the Colorado Big Thompson Water project as a major conduit for bringing west slope water to the Front Range for utilization. Proper function for the Big T is essential not just for people in the Watershed, but to millions beyond.

Since the 2013 flood the Big Thompson Watershed Coalition has helped raise over \$10,000,000 in federal, state and local funds for river restoration, primarily on private lands without resources for recovery. The Coalition has developed and is implementing three major river management plans to protect and enhance river sustainability and bring the River closer to our watershed community. BTWC has completed 10 major river enhancement projects involving multiple miles of stream frontage up and down the watershed including a major renovation of an agricultural stream diversion to improve silt transport and facilitate fish movement while improving the efficiency of water delivery for agricultural operations. All of this has been accomplished working with over 150 private landowners and organizations.

As a Watershed Coalition the Big T Group recognized early on that it is not just river function that matters, rather an essential element of Watershed health relies directly upon what is on and

covering the hillsides above the river. To this end as we began to complete flood restoration work our Coalition increasingly became involved in strategic planning and proactive forest health initiatives and building fire defensible space around residences and infrastructure. In 2020 The East Troublesome and Cameron Peak Fires burned significantly into the Big T Watershed, almost immediately causing significant negative impacts to the stream and water quality. Silt and debris flows clogged and blocked roads contributing to serious water quality issues for our communities, and burnt hillsides left unprotected continue to be prone to sloughing adding increased future threat to natural resources and water management issues. Recognizing the multiple negative consequences due to unregulated fire, the Big Thompson Watershed Coalition has become involved with post fire remediation efforts, once again primarily on private lands, coordinating funding from multiple sources to get exposed hillsides mulched down in a process prioritized through modeling to cover the worst, first. Working with local affected communities, the Coalition has managed aerial mulching and other projects applying first aid to hillsides damaged by fire, a process unaffordable for most private landowners.

As a person involved in a lifetime of conservation work, attempting to steward natural resources to benefit future generations, I would be remiss to squander the opportunity to mention a significant natural resource issue that is largely unrecognized to a group of community leaders interested in informed use of natural resources, so excuse me if I wander a little.

Ecologists recognize that a/the major limiting factor in resource management is the steady decline and loss of habitat quality and fragmentation of key habitats resulting in loss of species diversity. Managed properly, high quality habitat maintained well is a community asset; increasing community esthetics, bolstering land values, attracting others into the community. In ***Last Child In the Woods***, Richard Louv articulately praises the benefits of open space in communities in offsetting what he terms the nature deficit disorder. Public health officials have shown through multiple studies the benefits derived to individuals and communities by maintaining quality open places. The upsurge in visitation to trails and other outdoor recreation sites during the covid pandemic bears witness to the value of maintaining accessible natural resources for individuals and the community.

In terms of wildlife diversity and abundance, low elevation (below 5,000 Feet) cottonwood-willow riparian habitat, as typical of our local streams from the foothills stretching eastward, is Colorado's and the American Southwest's most important wildlife habitat. Because this habitat is where pioneers explored and communities settled leading to farming, development, graveling and other uses, this habitat is also unfortunately the most prone to alteration and compromise. Colorado's Water Plan and other sources recognize the benefits of this habitat for the many roles played in maintaining species diversity, stream function/sustainability, recreation, esthetics, ground water stability etc. We are quickly and progressively altering this critical habitat, removing and replacing riparian terrestrial vegetation with highly fluctuating reservoirs/impoundments. Additionally through dry up covenants and mandated management practices we are dramatically removing the streamside woody vegetation component along our waterways and working actively to discourage or prohibit the replacement of trees and shrubs

that have been removed. Extant trees are essential for cavity nesting species and without replacement as they age or are removed, there is no future for multiple species dependent on diverse woody cover. Open water, fluctuating reservoirs do absolutely nothing to benefit riparian terrestrial species habitat. Removal and replacement of expanses of riparian and adjacent transitional terrestrial sites concentrates wildlife on residual habitat, further challenging prey populations when crowded onto residual sites utilized by their predator base, and in concentrating species into reduced space increasing susceptibility to disease. To make matters worse, after permanently altering key habitat we place recreational trails and roads adjacent to and through residual habitat increasing habitat fragmentation, further compromising low elevation riparian habitat critical to so many species. The net result of progressive habitat loss is that pristine species having lost their habitat disappear, to be replaced by species well adapted to human proximity. In a process known as cosmopolitination, yellow warblers, belted kingfishers and many other glorious species disappear to be replaced by robins and starlings.

To get a sense of the extent of habitat conversion that is ongoing take a drive along any South Platte tributary or along the main stem of the South Platte from Fort Lupton south through Brighton and into Denver. The replacement of quality riparian habitat is slow, but also unrelenting, non-stop and likely permanent. North of Fort Lupton there continues to be significant high quality riparian reaches, but notice new development activity that is scattered along these river reaches. In five, ten, 20 years those isolated work sites will join together and our community will wind up with river corridors in which 90+% of the most important wildlife habitat to Colorado has been obliterated.

Many or most Front Range Communities have funding strings and infrastructure to manage open space for the many community benefits they provide. For example, the City of Denver is currently involved in a project to plant a million trees along their riparian corridors, I believe at a cost well in excess of \$1Million. Reclamation/restoration efforts are expensive and rarely fully recover ecological function. Doesn't it make greater sense to manage our remaining essential riparian habitat in a little more progressive manner, so that we can continue to have functional examples of this critical ecotype in our children's future, rather than wait for the habitat to be degraded and then engage in a pseudo-recovery of habitat that makes the heart feel good but has relatively little success, all at a very high dollar cost? We have the means and ability to meld development with reasonable habitat protection, but that process begins with recognition, followed by engagement in problem solving, ultimately resulting in taking steps to achieve success. The process is moving people from awareness to action, the fundamental resource management pathway, stewardship of lands and waters.

This is what watershed Coalitions should be about: caring for lands/waters, recognizing and defining issues, engaging in dialog, assembling collaborative partners, implementing and testing remedies for success, engaging the community in meaningful stewardship of waters and lands. It's somewhat hackneyed but Joni Mitchell said it well in the lyric "you don't know what you have till it's gone." Let's not let low elevation cottonwood-willow riparian habitat slip away!

Once again, sorry I couldn't make the meeting. Please keep me in mind for the future, or if I may be of service. My phone/text number is 970-666-0484 and I may be emailed at lrogstad@greeleyschools.org

Thanks and best to you all! Larry Rogstad