Group see progress on managing Bighorn water

2 years of talks - some of them contentious - yield set of guidelines

By RUFFIN PREVOST
Gazette Wyoming Bureau

LOVELL, Wyo. - After two years of meetings, including some early gatherings marked by bitter disagreements, a diverse group of administrators, analysts and advocates have drafted guidelines for managing water flows and elevations on Bighorn Lake and the Bighorn River.

With a little luck from Mother Nature and careful work by the Bureau of Reclamation, the guidelines offer a good chance of meeting the minimum needs of lake and river advocates.

"This, I think, is a major milestone for this group," said Lenny Duberstein, head planner at the Bureau of Reclamation Montana Area Office.

"Two years ago, it was questionable that we could reach this point," he said, recalling a March 2007 meeting during which partisans were barely on speaking terms and emotions ran high over scarce water to be shared between lake boaters and river anglers.

Thursday's meeting was a markedly more harmonious gathering of nearly 50 planners, politicians, biologists, sportsmen and agency managers.

The guidelines target minimum river flows and lake elevations at key times for fish spawning and summer recreation. But dam managers were careful to point out that drought conditions can always force changes in plans.

"We're making some real progress," said Ken Frazer, fisheries biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Frazer said the 10 or 12 meetings the group held in the past two years "have really done a lot to help everyone understand the system."

The "system" includes the very complex relationships among river and tributary flows, snowpack, runoff, rainfall, electric power generation, irrigation, sediment, fish biology, local economies and other interconnected variables.

The process has allowed each group to learn about the needs and constraints affecting every other group and made it easier for possible solutions and changes to be discussed without hard feelings, Frazer said.

But the ultimate goal remains not to continue the meetings but to develop workable rules for managing the system, he said.

"We'd like to get a set of rules so we can anticipate the changes coming down the road," said Doug Haacke, a fisherman and member of Friends of Bighorn River.

Haacke said that enabling "reservoir management by a set of rules, rather than political pressure" was a goal he had in attending the meetings.

Frazer and Haacke said that closer coordination between separate BuRec offices in Wyoming and Montana would allow better management of the reservoir.

Bob Croft, a director of Friends of Bighorn Lake, said there has been better cooperation between groups and agencies as a result of the meetings.

"With the two diverse water years we have had the last two years, you can see how better management of the reservoir has resulted in improved conditions, with Bighorn River and Bighorn Lake better off," he said.

"Nobody is backing away from it, and we are working through these tough issues."

Croft said he hoped the group would continue to meet "because the issues won't get any easier."

Meetings are likely to become less frequent as the guidelines are implemented, possibly on an interim basis, as soon as October, Duberstein said.

The early findings of a draft report on sedimentation show that there appear to be no affordable, effective solutions for managing the steady accumulation of silt and sand along the riverbed, particularly around the Horseshoe Bend recreation area, near Lovell.

Trapping sediment upstream or building a silt dike at Horseshoe Bend are options that would each cost millions of dollars, said Dan Pridal of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Dredging silt from Horseshoe Bend would also costs millions, and the high level of existing silt and its rapid accumulation "would essentially result in perpetual dredging," making the solution impractical, Pridal said.

Increased reservoir levels could actually produce more sediment along Horseshoe Bend in the long term but also keep summer boaters higher above the rising riverbed, he said.

Decreased levels could help create swifter currents through the area, flushing silt and sand farther downstream, but might interfere with meeting minimum Bighorn River flows, Pridal said.

Travis Yonts, also with the Corps, is studying whether higher reservoir levels can be safely maintained without impairing the dam's flood control capabilities.

A proposal to raise the normal water level by 5 feet, reducing a 20-foot flood control buffer to 15 feet, may turn out to be safe but would still require a lengthy and costly environmental review.

"But if five feet doesn't work from a safety standpoint, it doesn't mean that two feet wouldn't work," Yonts said, adding that his study should be finished by summer.

"I'm pretty encouraged that we'll come up with something that will let us store a little more water," Duberstein said.

Contact Ruffin Prevost at rprevost@billingsgazette.com or 307-527-7250.