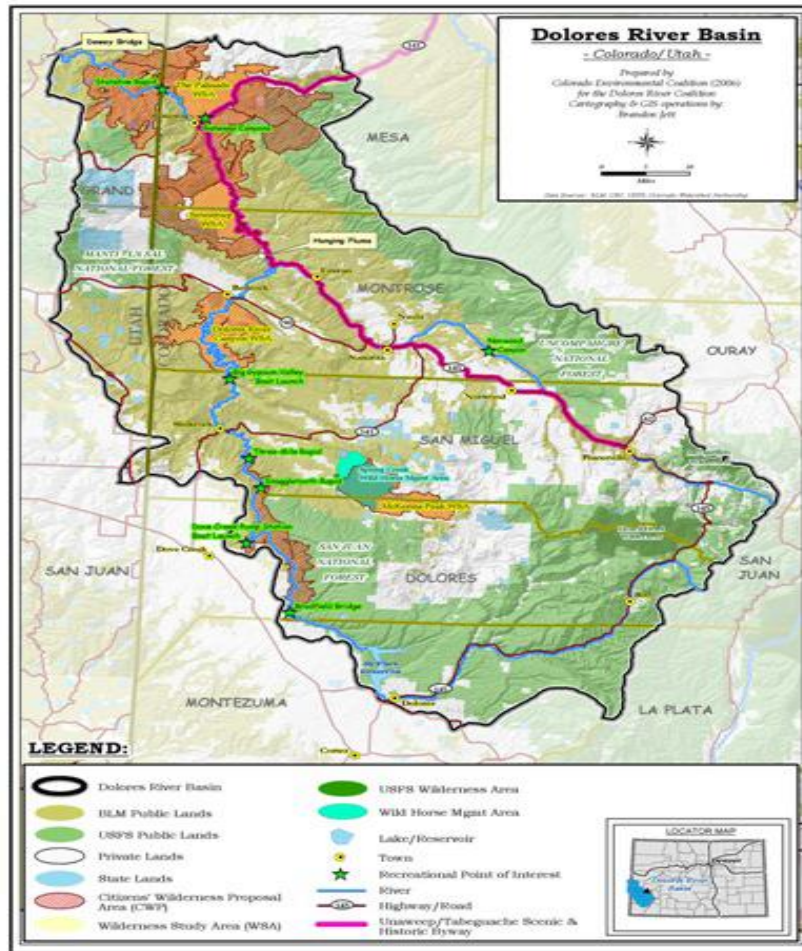


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Dolores River Restoration Partnership (DRRP): A collaborative, community-based approach to watershed restoration Southwest Conservation Corps

Project Summary - Part I. Description

Participating organizations and geographic location of the project



Dolores River Basin Map.jpg

- Bureau of Land Management (Dolores, Montrose, Grand Junction & Moab Offices)
- State of Colorado
- Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife

- Colorado counties of Dolores, Montrose, San Miguel, Mesa & Grand (in Utah)
- The Nature Conservancy
- Tamarisk Coalition
- Walton Family Foundation
- Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory
- Southwest Conservation Corps
- Canyon Country Youth Corps
- Western Colorado Conservation Corps
- Natural Resources Conservation Service and Conservation Districts
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
- Colorado Department of Highways
- Unaweep Tabeguache Scenic Byway
- Department of Energy
- Partners for Fish and Wildlife -Colorado and Utah

Geographic Location:

The Dolores River is a testament to the diversity of riparian ecosystems found on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains. Flowing north from its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains of western Colorado, the Dolores winds through deep canyons, broad valleys, and beneath the breathtaking topography of Gateway to join the Colorado River in Utah. Highly valued by recreationalists, especially during the release of high flows that support a lauded whitewater float trip, a journey along the Dolores River is traded among outdoor enthusiasts as a tale of beauty and unparalleled appreciation for the wonders of nature. The Dolores River is also heavily used by the agricultural community, both within and outside the watershed. Its waters support the production of several valuable crops such as alfalfa and corn.

Background or problem statement

Like many dammed rivers in the West, the Dolores River has been degraded by altered flow regimes, which has led to a host of ecological issues including tamarisk infestation. Today the health of the Dolores River in southwest Colorado is imperiled by the invasion of tamarisk and other aggressive invasive plants.

One hundred and seventy-five miles of the Dolores River corridor are impacted by tamarisk and other invasive plants that adversely affect the biodiversity and function of riparian habitat. Tamarisk trees in particular out-compete native vegetation; reduce the diversity of wildlife habitat; increase the risk of wildfire intensity and spread; armor river banks; increase soil salinity; and decrease access for wildlife and recreationists to the river. Tamarisk removal and restoration of riparian areas are known to directly benefit water resources in a number of different ways by increasing river protections, reducing hazardous fuels to mitigate wildfires, adapting to climate change, and contributing to instream flows and water savings.

A one-paragraph general description of the project

The DRRP completes yearly implementation plans in collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) offices and private lands in the watershed. These plans are vetted with the

available funding to identify yearly project work for corps crews and contractors. The three conservation/youth corps that collaborate within the DRRP then employ recruitment staff that begin outreach to local and Native American communities for filling crew leader and member positions on a seasonal basis. Applicants are screened, interviewed, selected, and placed on an eight-person crew (comprised of 2 leaders and 6 members) during the spring and fall of each year. Crews begin their experience with chainsaw training and an orientation to this specific project that includes partnership scope and history, plant identification, invasive species issues, herbicide application, safety and hands on project practice.

Crews then mobilize on the project work identified, typically for 10 week spring and fall seasons, when temperatures are appropriate for this rigorous work and for proper herbicide application. General project duties include the completion of specific prescriptions for tamarisk treatment with chainsaws and herbicide sprayers. Tasks extend to include activities such as riparian fencing, active planting, biomass treatment, pesticide use reporting, GPS inventory, secondary weed treatment and protection of priority species such as cottonwood trees, based upon DRRP implementation plans.

Brief description of outcomes and follow-up

In 2012 and 2013, the Dolores River Restoration Partnership (DRRP) implemented significant project work utilizing conservation corps crews. Eight separate eight-person crews completed 154 acres of initial tamarisk treatment, planted over 1000 native species, constructed 5,500 feet of riparian fencing, inventoried 734 acres of secondary weeds, re-treated 21 acres of tamarisk, seeded 107 burn pile scars, caged 125 cottonwood trees, and treated 64 acres of secondary weeds in the Dolores Watershed. Eighteen leaders, 54 crew members, and 11 interns were engaged to complete the above tasks over 94 weeks of project work. Of these leaders and members, 37% were Native American, 78% at-risk, 60% from the local area. The project work generated \$475,828 in wages/stipends and seventy-two percent (39 individuals) of the crew members received AmeriCorps education awards totaling \$47,350.

Project Summary - Part II. Analysis

Successes

In these challenging economic times when many government agencies have limited funding due to the government sequester, the DRRP has been able to continue significant project implementation without expected contributions of the BLM. Garnering almost 4 million dollars to-date, the broad-based collaboration has reached out to multiple varied funding sources to continue to find financial support for watershed restoration and youth engagement. Corps programs in this project have benefitted by having more consistent project work through this partnership than would have been possible otherwise. In particular, NAPECA funding helped keep corps crews on the ground during the government shut down in 2013. The generalized success is the broad flexibility that private and public fundraising allows, and that the collaboration and problem solving of the partnership lent to solution-based efforts during a challenging time this fall.

As a partnership, we are succeeding at this project. Our recent updates to the 2009-13 progress report highlight successes in multiple objectives. Initial treatment of 59% of prioritized sites

within the watershed is complete! Since inception, the partnership has supported over 185 seasonal positions for contractors, corps members, leaders and interns.

The DRRP is emerging as a model for other partnerships to follow. The partnership has been recognized two years in a row as a model for the America's Great Outdoors River Initiative. The DRRP was a finalist in the Colorado Collaboration Award. The Dolores River-Riparian Action Plan is being utilized as a template for other partnerships. Monitoring protocols have been adopted by others. Funding tracking and strategy are shared and utilized by other groups.

Challenges

At the onset of the project many challenges existed when it came to connecting with private landowners in the watershed. At the time of our grant application to NAPECA, only 3 property owners had agreed to work with the partnership and a number of attempts to engage landowners had been unsuccessful. As the DRRP Private Lands subcommittee gained momentum and membership, a strategy emerged for connecting with landowners. Our strategic approach included engaging local Conservation Districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, BLM range staff, and others. This challenge was met head-on, and now the DRRP has worked with 26 of the 46 landowners in the watershed! The partnership has a goal of contacting 15 more landowners in the watershed by 2015.

A challenge that the corps programs have had is in retaining Native American hires. While many Native American young adults have great need for employment, there are some significant challenges to address in working with this population. To summarize, Native American members generally have significant distances to travel from remote locations to get to work. Transportation is often a problem. Communications can be difficult as phones and computers are not always readily accessible. Family life and religious obligations represent strong ties and commitments that can be difficult for Native American young adults to substitute with commitment to the corps program. Corps programs require significant time away from home which may be difficult for this population.

SCC is addressing these challenges in hopes to continue to engage this population in a broader fashion. A Native American needs assessment was recently conducted. Specific tribal programming in and around reservations is being developed, specifically at Acoma Pueblo and on the Navajo Reservation. Partnerships and relationships are being built at local levels to improve understanding and resource needs.

Lessons Learned

As one BLM partner put it, "We would never be getting this work done if not for the Partnership". The first and perhaps most obvious lesson is that the scope of this project and amount of work accomplished has only been possible through collaboration. Partners value multiple goals in this project. This group seeks not only to benefit riparian ecosystems threatened by invasive species, but to do this in a way that provides opportunities and training for local and under-served young adults-and financial contribution to local communities. This multi-faceted approach to conservation has allowed for a broad range of financial and political support, both private and public. The internship model developed between corps, agencies and the partnership has proven to be a boon for completion of follow-up restoration, inventory,

monitoring activities; and is proving to be a benefit to participants. The Southwest Conservation Corps is currently working on developing a comprehensive internship model for watershed partnerships that will make possible the efficient transference of this model to other groups in the region.

An exciting example of an on-the-ground lesson learned comes from the Uncompahgre BLM field office. Four pilot plots of tamarisk were divided into four, 1/2 acre areas delineated for separate treatment types including hand crews, mechanical mulching equipment, fire and tamarisk leaf beetle (a bio-control agent in the system). The sites were treated and follow-up planting of native species initiated and monitored for success. Analyses of success rates indicated that overstory shading was an important component for planting success. Lessons from these pilot projects have been carried forward to implement a partial treatment methodology in dense stands of tamarisk. Conservation corps crews have been initiating this treatment in specific locations in the watershed in 2013.

What next?

Looking back to 2008, when the partnership was merely an idea and 175 miles of riparian habitat called for restoration, we have come a long way in what we have accomplished and learned. Most of the acres of tamarisk prioritized for active control have been initially treated. As we plan for the future, we will continue working across public and private boundaries to target tamarisk re-sprouts and secondary weeds as well as to build on initial active re-vegetation efforts. Concurrently, we will take thoughtful steps to foster and maintain this sustainable partnership: initiating long-term funding processes, building on existing relationships, and planning for ongoing monitoring and maintenance to protect our collective investment in the Dolores River Basin.

The most recent full partnership meeting took place November 21st, 2013. The focus of this meeting was to report on progress and disseminate partner survey results evaluating a holistic range of outcomes and impressions from all partners. This information, along with recommendations gathered from break-out sessions proved useful in strategizing the final two years of initial treatments; prioritizing funding efforts; planning monitoring and maintenance transitions; preparing public awareness events; and invigorating the partnership as we enter year six. The Core-Team of the partnership will be taking these recommendations and incorporating feedback as we move forward. Our ecological progress reporting has hit a benchmark where simple reporting from each BLM manager and private lands work can be uploaded to a single GIS file that identifies each treatment site and the associated restoration actions--past and future. With this tool, the partnership can effectively track our accomplishments, plan follow up treatments and essentially formulate a more complete process for the transition to monitoring and maintenance anticipated to become the focus after 2015, when the initial treatment phase is complete.

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