

Colorado River Storage Project
Flaming Gorge Working Group
Meeting Minutes
August 27, 2025

Participation

This meeting was held Wednesday, August 27, 2025, from 12:00 pm to 3:00 am MT, in Vernal, UT and via Microsoft Teams virtual meeting. Attendees are listed on the last page.

Purpose of Meeting

The purpose of these working group meetings is to inform the public and other interested parties on Reclamation's current and future operational plans and to gather input from the public and interested parties regarding resources associated with the dam [Flaming Gorge].

Introductions – Alex Pivarnik (Bureau of Reclamation)

This is the final Flaming Gorge Working Group meeting this year. Earlier meetings were held in March and April.

Green River Research and Endangered Fish – Tildon Jones (Recovery)

Tildon started with a background on the listed fish, the threats to those species, the Recovery Program, and the native fish lifecycle in comparison to idealized flow and river temperatures.

The Recovery Program's request for this year (which has been in the average below median or drier classification from the Recovery Program Flow Request) prioritized 1) the smallmouth bass (SMB) flow spike, 2) the Colorado Pike Minnow (CPM) base flow, and 3) the Larval Trigger Study Plan (LTSP).

SMB Flow Spike

There are three invasive fish species that Recovery focuses on, with SMB being one of the highest concerns. SMB have better success in average to drier years. The SMB flow spike request focuses on temperature and flow. The SMB flow spike began on June 16 and consisted of 72 hours of Flaming Gorge release at power plant capacity.

CPM Base Flow

The CPM base flows are intended to improve survival and recruitment of young CPM by targeting flows at Jensen, based on hydrologic classification, through the end of September. CPM base flows were initialized on June 28 and are ongoing as of this meeting.

LTSP

The LTSP is intended to shift flows from the Yampa peak to being timed based on the presence of Razorback Sucker, with the intent to push larvae into wetlands. Due to hydrologic conditions, the LTSP was not implemented this year. Spring peak operations were implemented per Muth.

Review of Experiments

Review of the experiments is ongoing. Onsite monitoring is expected to continue through September, especially on CPM and SMB. In addition to the sampling over the next month, time is needed to analyze the data, including determining SMB age by counting the rings on a small bone called an otolith. More complete data is expected next year.

Questions

Bryan Englebert – Asked about the volume of the CPM experiment. Michael Callahan's (USBR) response: The actual volume depends on how much the Yampa contributes. While the experiment is ongoing, it has been an unusually high volume year due to poor conditions on the Yampa.

Current and Forecasted Hydrology – Brenda Alcorn (Colorado Basin River Forecast Center)

Brenda presented on the Water Year (WY) 2025 hydrologic conditions to date and forecasted conditions.

Brenda reviewed the previous fall's soil moisture conditions. The soil conditions can impact runoff efficiency in the following spring but are not as important as the amount of precipitation and the rate of runoff. Fall soil moisture conditions in both the Green and Yampa basins are below average. In the Green, conditions are worse than last year, but in the Yampa, they are similar to last year.

For precipitation, the Upper Green fluctuated a lot; when this meeting was last held in April, precipitation was near average, but runoff was already forecasted lower due to the poor soil moisture conditions. Brenda showed information from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Western Water Assessment to highlight that this year has been unusually dry and hot, with several locations in the Upper Green and Yampa Basins at or near record low flows.

Modeled Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) is also tracking below normal. Large storms contributed heavily to overall snowpack. Melt had completed 2 weeks earlier than normal on the Upper Green.

Observed April-July runoff above Fontenelle was 63% of average; this was the 10th driest in the 35 year record. Observed April-July runoff at Flaming Gorge was 517 thousand acre-feet (kaf), which is 54% of average and the 9th driest. All locations in the Yampa Basin were in the 10th driest, with the Deerlodge gage seeing 51% of average which is the 5th driest.

Brenda presented the water supply forecast evolution plot. Forecasts at Flaming Gorge started much below average due to the poor soil moisture conditions and below average snowpack. Forecasts were highest in April after two months of above average precipitation. The observed April-July volume was below the 90% exceedance forecast for April and May and right on the June 90% forecast, which is an expected result given that the April-July precipitation was below the 10th percentile. The forecast at Deerlodge saw a similar trend, but since the observed volume was less than the early forecasts, there may have been an issue with model starting state (snow and/or soil moisture).

The peak flow on the Yampa at Deerlodge occurred in mid-May. Cooler weather occurred after this initial peak, slowing high elevation snowmelt and causing a secondary peak in early July.

Streamflow on the Green and Yampa rivers have been below normal this summer, with the Green-La Barge being at or below the 5th percentile for the last month and Yampa-Deerlodge being around the 10th percentile throughout the summer. These flows are affected by irrigation; when that ends in the fall, the baseflows will be more distinct.

Questions

There were no questions on current and forecasted hydrology at this time.

Flaming Gorge Reservoir Operations – Michael Callahan (Bureau of Reclamation)

Michael Callahan reviewed Flaming Gorge operations, starting with a background of the project.

The Official April forecast for Flaming Gorge indicated an Average, Below Median classification, but based on the observed April-July inflows, Flaming Gorge ended up in a lower Moderately Dry classification. The Yampa saw an even worse situation, dropping from a Moderately Dry condition to a Dry condition.

In the Flaming Gorge Operations Plan, the Moderately Dry classification would target Muth et al. spring peak and implement the SMB flow spike. Summer flows for CPM would be implemented. Autumn flows would use the lower end of the baseflow range. Winter flows would be at the higher end of the range.

Actual operations have been on the drier end of what was described in the Flaming Gorge Operations Plan. The Spring Peak was the minimum allowed by Muth et al. and timed with the initial (highest) Yampa peak. The SMB flow spike was implemented as planned. Low contributions from the Yampa have resulted in higher releases from Flaming Gorge, despite targeting the lower end of the baseflow range.

Michael also covered current and future operations. September 2-3 Utah will be conducting fish monitoring, so there will be pattern changes in the nighttime hours. Through the end of September, Reclamation will continue to target ~1,800 cfs in Reach 2 as part of the experimental CPM Summer baseflows. Reclamation is expecting to target ~1,100 cfs in Reach 2 October-February. During the transition period in March and April releases will be dependent on hydrology as Reclamation targets a reservoir elevation below 6027' (or lower depending on hydrologic classification).

Questions

Bryan Engelbert (UDWR) asked if there was a chance that Reclamation would be below 6027' at the end of April. Michael noted that this was a possibility and, that in the August 24-Month Study, released earlier this month, current projections under the most probable forecast shows that we do not reach 6027' at the end of April.

Questions/Comments

There was a question from the room on if DROA would impact the end of April elevation. Alex Pivarnik (Reclamation) explained that the DROA planning trigger was recently hit, however, the initial DROA actions will be changing the timing of releases out of Powell. Any impacts to the Upper Initial Units would be speculation at this point as there is a lot of consultations that are done prior to any action being taken.

Follow-up question in the room asked about projected operations, including storage on October 1, as it has the potential to impact Kokanee spawning. The results of the August 24-Month Study were shared and a link provided via chat. Michael noted that August has been drier, so actual results may be slightly lower than what were projected in the 24-Month Study.

There was a series of questions about the DROA process. Alex Pivarnik (Reclamation) explained that the process is laid out in the Drought Contingency Plans (and links were shared with the group) and begins with consulting the DROA parties (including the states). DROA will start with adjustments to release at Powell to protect elevations there and information related to that will be disseminated as decisions are made. After that, potential releases from Upper Initial Units may be considered and information related to that will be shared as decisions are made.

Chris Brown (Wyoming) weighed in from a state/DROA party perspective. Chris noted that the next few months will be important; if dire conditions continue at Powell, there are increased chances of Upper Initial Units contributing. According to Chris, Flaming Gorge is considered “low hanging fruit” for contributions. If it looks like additional releases are needed, outreach is baked into the DROA parties’ processes, but, generally, a decision would be made after the April 24-Month Study.

Chris Brown (Wyoming) noted that this year will be a balance between DROA and 6E. 6E could allow Powell releases to drop as low as 6 million acre-feet. Alex Pivarnik (Reclamation) clarified that DROA and 6E are separate process, though they potentially overlap. Depending on hydrology, it could be an interesting year.

No other questions were received.

Next Meeting

April 2026 Date and Time TBD

Attendees

Alex Pivarnik-Reclamation
Amanda Becker-Reclamation
Becki Bryant-Reclamation
Bob Schelly-NPS-Dinosaur NM
Brenda Alcorn-CBRFC
Brian Hines-Reclamation
Bruce Lavor-OARS

Bryan Engelbert-UDWR
Bryan Seppie-JPWB
Cary Asper
Chris Brown-Wyoming
Christina Noftsker-NMISC
Christopher Eaton
Colleen Cunningham

Danny Rasmussen
David Graf-Recovery
Derek Fryer-WAPA
Jared Marquis-Reclamation
Jeff Cowley-WYSEO
Jen Valdez
Jerry Taylor
Jessica Lockwood-WGFD
Jill Taylor
John Walrath
Jordon Detlor-UDWR
Julie Stahli
Kathleen Callister-Reclamation
Kent Wright-WAPA
Kevin Bestgen-Colorado State University
Koreen Zelasko

Liam Gilmartin
Lisa Wilson-USFWS (Refuges)
Lucerne Valley Marina
Michael Callahan-Reclamation
Michelle Garrison-Colorado Water Conservation Board
Mike Partlow-UDWR
Natalie Boren
Nicki Gibney-NPS
Noe Santos-Reclamation
Phil Akers-NPS-Dinosaur NM
Rob Young-JPWB
Suman Chitrakar-WYSEO
Tildon Jones-Recovery
Valerie Deppe-Reclamation
Woody Bair-Flaming Gorge Resort