



**STAFF REPORT**

To: Summit County Council  
From: Janna Young, Deputy County Manager  
Scott Morrison, General Manager, Mountain Regional Water Special Service District  
Jessica Kirby, Open Space Management Supervisor, Snyderville Basin Special Recreation District  
Date of Meeting: October 28, 2020  
Type of Item: Update on the Weber Watershed Conservation Financing Project with United States Forest Service and Other Partners  
Process: Work Session

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**Requested Council Action**

None.

**Background**

Summit County is involved in many public lands issues, ranging from serving as a cooperating agency with the federal government on regulatory matters involving the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service (USFS), to developing management plans required by the State, to partnering with stakeholders on watershed protection efforts, to working on state and federal legislation.

The County’s interest in these issues stems from being in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Summit County is home to a unique wealth of scenic and wild, high-alpine natural landscapes, including mountains, rivers, forests, lakes, basins, plateaus, and wilderness areas, many of which lie within public lands. Nearly one-half of the County is mountainous and much of the High Uintas Wilderness area is located within its boundaries. Public lands provide immense value to Summit County’s local economy and quality of life, providing extensive public recreational opportunities.

Additionally, within the County’s boundaries are the headwaters of four of the five major rivers in Utah (Duchesne, Provo, Weber and Bear) and numerous tributaries that supply critical drinking and irrigation water to Summit County and communities downstream, such as major population centers in the Salt Lake Valley.

As such, the Summit County Council takes stewardship of these waters very seriously and has tasked Staff with working with the USFS and other partners on watershed protection projects. Staff have been focusing on conversations around catastrophic wildfire mitigation, prevention and preparedness, and modeling debris flows and sediment transfer, so that partners, such as Mountain Regional Water and the Weber Basin Water Conservancy District can plan for and mitigate the downstream impacts of fire, specifically in the Weber River watershed, which supplies the majority of the drinking water to the Snyderville Basin, Summit County's largest populated area.

Most recently, Summit County has started a partnership with USFS leaders of the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest and project managers in the National Office in Washington, DC to explore leveraging private funding to plan for, scope, and implement fire mitigation treatments to preserve critical watershed within Summit County.

### **Updates Since the Last Council Presentation**

In February 2020, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache Forest Supervisor, Heber-Kamas District Ranger and members of the USFS national office presented to the Summit County Council on innovative conservation financing strategies implemented in other forests across the United States that have been effective in leveraging private investment to complete critical watershed protection projects outside of the normal federal appropriations process.

These strategies have allowed local governments and environmental investors to both, move projects up the USFS priority list, and complete them more quickly than the typical timeline.

After that presentation, Council expressed an interest in pursuing a similar strategy in Summit County and requested Staff to work with the USFS team on an initial feasibility study.

### **Collaboration with USFS**

Since February, Janna Young, Deputy County Manager, Scott Morrison, General Manager of Mountain Regional Water Special Service District, and Jessica Kirby, Open Space Management Supervisor at Snyderville Basin Special Recreation District have partnered to lead this project. Several meetings have occurred with the USFS, members of the state Department of Natural Resources, Weber Basin Water Conservancy District, and others to identify the project scope and potential stakeholders.

This work has involved identifying priorities, goals, constraints, and opportunities, as well as mapping out areas with the most consequential impacts on the County's water systems.

Collectively, the group has decided to focus on the Weber River watershed due to its importance to both Summit County and the Weber Basin Water Conservancy District, and because it is not as far along in the USFS planning and programming processes as the other watersheds in Summit County due to its challenging terrain and myriad property owners, which complicate a project planned for this particular drainage.

### **Collaboration with Utah State University**

During the course of this work, Scott Morrison was introduced to Dr. Patrick Belmont from Utah State University (USU) who is leading a research team looking at reservoir vulnerability to wildfire with a core component of debris flow modeling based on various ignition points, intensities of burn, and intensities of post wildfire rainfall; and the efficacy of fuel mitigation techniques in reducing damage in high risk watersheds. Dr. Belmont was interested in including the Rockport Reservoir in his study.

Mountain Regional and Summit County have engaged with Dr. Belmont and his team and have held a number of meetings to better understand their research, to facilitate collaboration with the USFS, and to include them in a growing stakeholder group whose goal is to identify, prioritize, and scope research based, yet practical wildfire mitigation projects in the Weber River watershed to improve life safety and public property protection, and to mitigate the severity of impacts to the receiving waters and downstream users including the Park City community.

Currently, the team's research timeline includes having the results of sediment transport load modeling in mid-2021, with fuels mitigation results in the year 2022. The timeline of this research is well aligned with the USFS' planning efforts for Weber River watershed mitigation projects. The USFS' planning efforts are ongoing and are expected to progress over the next 12-18 months for project identification and scoping.

### **Field Trip to the Weber Watershed**

Daniel "Dano" Juaregui, District Ranger, Heber Kamas Ranger District, Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest led a field day with our growing stakeholder group in the upper Weber River watershed. Attendees included representatives from USFS, USU, Summit County, Mountain Regional, Basin Recreation, Weber Basin Water Conservancy District, and the Utah Div. Forestry, Fire, & State Lands.

Three sites were visited: an area where thinning work was completed in Holiday Park which crossed National Forest and private land boundaries; South Fork of the Weber, showcasing the extreme difficulty of access and fire suppression in steep, narrow terrain; and the Weber Basin intake structure and Mountain Regional pump station, which provides ~6,500 acre feet of water to the Park City community (~13,000 rooftop equivalents).

The field day was a productive outing to showcase the types of fuel mitigation work that has been successfully completed, the impracticality of mitigating all areas, and the water supply infrastructure that we are trying to protect. The field day was also successful in building the relationships of the stakeholders which has continued the momentum of this project and focus on Weber River watershed projects.

### **Current Approach and Next Steps**

Summit County's goal in this effort is to convene and facilitate a coalition of stakeholders to work together to advance the shared interest of property protection, forest health, and watershed preservation focused on the entire watershed. This holistic approach is important since fire does not stop at the borders between federal, state, and private land. We must bring all these players together to develop a plan for the entire watershed that will be effective in mitigating the impacts of wildfire and ultimately, protect our community. A broad coalition also increases the opportunity for attracting private investment to the project.

Due to the complication of the Weber River watershed because of its steep terrain, accessibility issues, and various landowners, the team decided to wait to identify a project scope until the USU team has completed Phase I of their study, at minimum.

The objectives of the USU study are to identify the areas that pose the greatest threat to the watershed if hit with catastrophic wildfire, and what treatments if done in those areas will be the most effective in mitigating those threats and protecting the river from debris flows, sediment transfer, and other pollution post-wildfire. The team would also like to survey the Rockport Reservoir to better understand current sediment level to estimate how much more the reservoir can handle in a wildfire event. These objectives present the exact information that we and the USFS need to help us define a project scope.

The current team of stakeholders believes the most prudent and appropriate course of action is to allow the results of the USU team's modeling and fuel treatment recommendations to be obtained and provided to the USFS, before moving forward with project scoping and funding source

identification. Once the scope is defined, we can better identify stakeholders, impacted landowners, and potential investors.

### **Conclusion**

The Weber River watershed is perhaps the most consequential water system to Summit County. It is also a very complicated watershed due to its terrain, accessibility challenges, and mix of landowners from federal, state, to private. It will take several years and significant money and manpower to implement treatments and strategies that will have a meaningful impact on protecting and preserving this water system from catastrophic wildfire.

As such, it is important that we start focusing on it and start the planning process now.

With that said, we also want to be thoughtful and deliberate in our approach so that we do not waste money or resources on efforts that make the community feel we are accomplishing something but in reality, have no positive impact on the watershed.

We expect that our plan will be multi-faceted and include several phases, starting with the simplest actions first, then moving toward the more complex.

The USU research team is performing critical modeling and research that will help inform our overall plan for the Weber River watershed, and most importantly, where to start.

Sometime mid-year 2021, we will see the first results of Phase I of the USU study and will be able to begin our planning process.

In the meantime, Summit County's team is working to identify larger stakeholder groups to start engaging and bringing into the project, as well as mapping out the ownership of all the land located within the watershed so we can begin critical conversations with potential partners who can help us attract investors, or at least work with us and not against us.

The County Council can play a pivotal role in helping us bring stakeholders and landowners on board once the project scope is identified. It is important that these stakeholders are included in the planning process, so they can help develop, and ultimately support the specific treatments prescribed by the research that are then included in the USFS planning process.

We will continue to keep the Council updated on our progress with this project.