Finding Of No Significant Impact
for the
Lower Gunnison Project
Colorado

Introduction

The Lower Gunnison Project is a federally-assisted action authorized under Public Law 83–566, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, as authorized by Subtitle I of Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by Section 2401 of the Agricultural Act of 2014. These acts authorize the Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide technical and financial assistance to local project sponsors. The local sponsor of the Lower Gunnison Project is the Colorado River Water Conservation District (River District).

As part of the federal action, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the watershed plan. This assessment was conducted in consultation with local, State, Tribal Governments, and Federal agencies as well as with interested organizations and individuals. The Watershed Plan-EA is available for public review at the following location:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Denver Federal Center, Building 56, Room 2604
Denver, CO 80225-0426

Recommended Action

The Proposed Action consists of irrigation water efficiency upgrades as requested by the River District and, as available, to eligible ditch companies, water conservancy districts and Water User Associations located within the four approved project subwatersheds: North Fork, Crawford, Bostwick Park, and the Uncompahgre. The four subwatershed boundaries were delineated by the River District. The four subwatersheds encompass native soils with relatively high levels of naturally occurring salt and selenium. Additionally, the area is characterized by highly variable hydrological conditions that often cause water supply shortages.

The overall objective of the Lower Gunnison Project is to support agricultural sustainability by comprehensively improving water use efficiency thereby improving water supplies and water quality. This is to be performed by converting off-farm, open, earthen irrigation systems to enclosed, pressurized pipe, where appropriate, in order to reduce seepage and deep percolation into saline shale-derived soils thereby reducing selenium and salt loading to the Colorado River Basin. The goals of the project are to support irrigated agriculture while accelerating water-quality improvement and endangered species recovery goals under programs such as the Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program, the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program and federal Gunnison Basin Selenium Management Program. Through improved water use efficiency, the project meets several of the identified Critical Conservation Area (CCA) needs of the Colorado River Basin by addressing issues of insufficient water, water quality degradation, soil quality degradation, and inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife.

In general, the project would replace existing open, earthen canals with pressurized pipe, where appropriate, which would allow for the conversion from flood irrigation practices to high efficiency irrigation practices such as sprinklers, micro spray and drip systems. The project would improve water use efficiency by coordinating, expanding, and integrating off-farm irrigation conveyance systems improvements with on-farm water application efficiency. Specific components of the Proposed Action

include the conversion of approximately 45,000 feet of open, earthen canals and ditches to enclosed pipe (pressurized where appropriate), and incorporation of smart headgate diversion control structures, re-regulation facilities and SCADA systems, where appropriate.

Effect of Recommended Action

The recommended action would improve irrigation practices, water availability, water quality, agricultural productivity and environmental conditions in the Lower Gunnison Basin. The Proposed Action will take steps to reduce seepage and deep percolation of agricultural waters to decrease associated salt and selenium loading and system water loss. Additional effects of the recommended action include better managed river diversions for farm use, increased agricultural production, improved flows and riparian habitat improvements.

The Proposed Action will result in long-term loss of artificial wetland and riparian habitat adjacent to improved irrigation structures, as ditch seepage would no longer provide wetland hydrology to adjacent areas and ditch channels and banks would no longer support a riparian environment. However, no compensatory mitigation will be required for the Proposed Action. For the known project components, NRCS will not require direct habitat replacement for the loss of artificial wetland and riparian habitat wetlands created by irrigation infrastructure. The long-term loss of artificial local wetland and riparian habitat resulting from ditch conversions will be offset by gains in water quality and habitat function in the project area's natural riverine systems.

It is anticipated that the Proposed Action will encourage and promote agricultural sustainability in the watershed through improved efficiency. As such, the action may reduce economic pressure to convert productive farmland to other uses, such as residential development.

A cultural resources inventory of the Area of Potential Effects (APE) was undertaken. Based on the results of the inventory, the NRCS has determined that should the Proposed Action be implemented, it will adversely affect three historic properties. The NRCS consulted with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the River District, the Bostwick Park Water Conservancy District, the Needle Rock Ditch Company, and the Grandview Ditch Company. The NRCS has developed a Memorandum of Agreement, specifying treatment measures, to mitigate the adverse effects. If cultural resources are inadvertently discovered during implementation, NRCS will follow procedures as detailed in the Prototype Programmatic Agreement between the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation and the Colorado NRCS.

A Biological Assessment (BA) was prepared for the Proposed Action. The BA included a preliminary determination for all potentially impacted federally listed or candidate species of either "no effect" or "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect". In a Biological Opinion dated November 30, 2017, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the effects determinations that threatened or endangered species in the subwatersheds are not likely to be adversely affected by the Proposed Action, except through water depletions on four endangered Colorado River fish. These water depletions have been fully addressed in Recovery Agreements prepared under the Recovery Implementation Program for Endangered Fish Species in the Upper Colorado River Basin. Should consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the Proposed Action need to be reinitiated for any reason under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the NRCS will retain jurisdiction for this consultation.

One of the primary objectives of the project is to improve water quality. Water impacts will be major, long-term, and beneficial. Implementation of the project components will result in a reduction of both salinity and selenium in the Lower Gunnison Basin. It is anticipated that indirect moderate, beneficial, long-term impacts to wetlands, riparian and fish habitat will occur from improvements in water quality, thereby off-setting the anticipated direct reduction in irrigation-induced wetlands.

Approximately 21.4 total acres of soil will be disturbed during construction. Soil impacts are anticipated to be minor, short-term and adverse during construction activities. Moderate, long-term and beneficial impacts to soil resources are anticipated to occur from reduction of erosion and sedimentation issues associated with the current irrigation systems. Approximately 21.4 total acres of vegetation will be cleared during construction of project-specific components. Construction impacts to vegetation and wildlife will be minor, adverse, and short-term. No long-term impacts are anticipated to occur as a result of re-vegetation activities.

With implementation of compliance and best management practices, impacts to other environmental or social resources would be minor to negligible. All compliance and best management practices apply to project components receiving funding from the Public Law 83–566 program only, and would not apply to on-farm activities, supported by the NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Alternatives
No significant adverse environmental impacts will result from implementation of the Proposed Action.

The Proposed Action is the most practical means of protecting the watershed and improving water quality. Because no significant adverse environmental impacts will result from installation of the measures, the only other alternative considered was the future-without-project alternative.

Consultation—Public Participation
Formal agency consultation began with the mailing of the notification of scoping in November 2016 to federal, state and local agencies, as well as land owners and area non-governmental organizations. Advertisements announcing the scoping period and associated scoping meeting were also placed in five local and regional newspapers. The Colorado Governor's Office was also notified of the application for Federal assistance.

A scoping meeting was held December 1, 2016, in Montrose, Colorado, and interdisciplinary coordination and outreach efforts were used in all cases. During the scoping phase, seven comments regarding the project were received. These comments were received from four individuals, one federal agency (BLM), one tribe (Ute Mountain Ute) and one state agency (Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment [CDPHE], Water Quality Control Division). Commenters generally supported the Lower Gunnison Project.

Specific consultation was conducted with the State Historic Preservation Officer and with Indian Tribal Governments, to maintain the NRCS' government-to-government relationship between Native tribes. Input from the State Historic Preservation Office, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Southern Ute Indian Tribe was incorporated into the planning process.

The environmental assessment was transmitted to all participating and interested agencies, groups, and individuals for review and comment from July 5, 2017 to August 7, 2017. A public meeting was held on July 17, 2017, in Montrose, Colorado, to obtain public input for the plan and environmental evaluation.

Agency consultation and public participation to date have shown no unresolved conflicts with the implementation of the selected plan.

Conclusion
Based upon a review of the Watershed Plan-EA and supporting documents, I have determined that implementing the Proposed Action will not significantly affect the quality of the human and/or natural environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the area. No environmental effects meet

the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined at 40 CFR 1508.27. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required for the Lower Gunnison Project. This finding is based on consideration of the context and intensity of impacts as summarized in the Lower Gunnison Watershed Plan-EA. With these findings, NRCS therefore has decided to implement the Proposed Action Alternative.

Clint Evans (signature) 4-17-2018 (Date)

Clint Evans, State Conservationist