

MYSTIC LAKE PROJECT

Recreation, Land Use and Aesthetics Resource Group Final Conference Call Summary

Conference Call Date: June 19, 2006

Note from Jon Jourdonnais: The summary discussions presented below are a work in progress and do not reflect formal decisions made by PPLM or any agency or public group.

Participants via conference call:

PPL Montana – Jon Jourdonnais
PPL Montana – Lance Elias
PPL Montana – Bob Covington
American Lands – Nancy Johnson
American Lands – Jeff Frost

USFS – Jeff Gildehaus
American Whitewater – Kevin Colburn
Beartooth Paddlers – Ian McIntosh
Beartooth Paddlers – Ron Ladders

Nancy Johnson facilitated the call. The purpose of the call was to provide updates on whitewater information for the Mystic Project and West Rosebud Creek: the status of installation of the new USGS gaging station, the West Rosebud runoff forecast, and an experimental flow release by PPLM.

The meeting began shortly after 1:30 and group members introduced themselves. Nancy reviewed the agenda. There were no items added to the agenda. Participants discussed the following items.

Installation of a USGS gaging station at the bridge near Emerald Lake Campground.

Jon provided an update on installation of the new gaging station. He stated that the USGS had installed an aqua rod on June 8th. Data collected by the aqua rod will be available as flow history when the new station is operational and providing near real-time flow data to the USGS website. Jeff Gildehaus noted that full gage installation was likely later this summer, pending completion of an environmental assessment and issuance of a permit from the FS Supervisor. No public comments on the new gaging station were received during scoping.

Ron Ladders noted the critical 1 to 2-month period during early summer for measurement of whitewater flows. Jon indicated that a flow record could be created by the USGS for these months from the information they recorded. Kevin Colburn noted that this USGS flow data could be downloaded at some future point. Bob Covington noted the remaining steps to create this flow record, including formulation of stage readings and cross sectional stream measurements.

Jeff Gildehaus stated that the USGS looked at an alternative gage location immediately below the re-regulation dam, but selected a location at the bridge into the Emerald Lake Campground. The initial proposal to mount the station on the bridge with a satellite antenna was revised to have the antenna location in a shed away from the bridge. FS resource specialists were analyzing effects of

ground disturbance associated with shed construction. Jon Jourdonnais asked whether completion of the cultural resources review by a sub-contractor would provide any time savings for completion of studies. Jeff Gildehaus said it would not.

Bob Covington noted that the upstream USGS gage below the powerhouse is currently reporting stream flow in West Rosebud Creek, but Ron stated that historic readings from this gage have not been useful for measuring whitewater flows. Following more discussion on gage operation, Ron indicated that he would call USGS to check on what type of data display could be done at the new gage location, and to learn an estimated time when flow data from the new gage could be correlated with historic data.

Runoff forecast for West Rosebud Creek.

Lance Elias reported that the forecast inflow for Mystic Lake provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was 43,000 acre-feet, but actual lake inflow as of June 19th stood at 14,000 acre-feet, and inflow was now falling below 300 cfs. The rapid drop in inflow to the lake and measured stream flow has surprised many people. Ron Ladders reported other streams in the area with rapidly dropping stream flows. Other members of the group reported that Billings' precipitation for the month of June was 23 percent of normal. Lance noted that the NRCS runoff forecast is based on normal precipitation occurring.

Given the low stream flow conditions, Lance predicted that there would not be enough lake inflow to provide a whitewater flow release this year. Group members discussed whether additional snowmelt or a change in weather patterns could provide desired stream flows of greater than 300 cfs below the re-regulation dam. Jeff Gildehaus characterized remaining snow pack as very low, and a change in weather pattern as not promising. Bob Covington noted that Mystic Lake was currently 6.6 feet below full pool, and current inflow would be used to fill the lake.

Ian McIntosh asked for the number of days this year when lake inflow was above 300 cfs. Lance reported that from June 5th to 16th inflow was over 300 cfs. Ian noted that for 11 days of lake inflow greater than 300 cfs, no days would be available this year for whitewater flows over 300 cfs below the re-regulation dam. Ron noted that most area streams peaked three weeks earlier than typical, and that stream flow in West Rosebud Creek seemed to peak between 200 and 230 cfs this year. Ron also said that although we had had only a short period of stream flow at 230 cfs and unusually low snow pack for this year, historical experience indicates that stream flow would come up to at least that level for a couple of weeks. With current stream flow at 150 cfs, boatable flows had not been present to date for this year.

Kevin Colburn questioned where Snotel sites were located upstream of Mystic Lake, given that predicted snowmelt exceeded what actually occurred. Jeff Gildehaus reported that there were no Snotel reporting sites in the West Rosebud drainage, and that the runoff forecast for the adjacent drainage on the Stillwater River used Snotel sites on the west fork of the river and Red Lodge Creek.

Experimental flow release for 2006.

Given the remaining low snow pack, low stream flows, and low likelihood of any increase in precipitation, the group concluded that an experimental flow release to provide whitewater flows was not feasible this year. Bob Covington noted that the powerhouse would be running at less than full generation due to low flows.

It was noted that PPLM has scheduled development of the whitewater flow plan from 2007 to 2009, and will work with stakeholders and agencies to develop the plan and conduct experimental flow releases in these years. The plan will be filed with FERC in December 2009.

Jon reported the request of MFWP to monitor effects on fisheries during any flow release. Ron Ladders stated that he thought it would be difficult to distinguish, from a fisheries perspective, any difference between a 50 cfs increase in flow for a whitewater release that is moderated through Emerald Lake, and the even more dramatic changes in flow that have occurred at Mystic over the last 40 years. Jon replied that the Mystic drainage was a flashy system with natural high variability in flows.

Jon noted that PPLM would continue to monitor lake inflow, and that elevation of Mystic Lake would be reported on the Mystic Lake website. Nancy indicated that with any substantial change in current conditions, emails would be sent to the group.

The call ended at 2:20.