**Platte River Recovery Implementation Program**

**North Platte Chokepoint Planning Workgroup**

**Virtual Meeting – April 13, 2021**

**DRAFT MEETING NOTES**

Attendance:

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| * Kevin Werbylo, EDO * Seth Turner, EDO * Justin Brei, EDO * Jason Farnsworth, ED * Jesse Bradley, NDNR * Jeremy Gehle, NDNR * Jim Ostdiek, NDNR * Tom Econopouly, USFWS * Matt Rabbe, USFWS | * Brock Merrill, USBR * Tyler Thulin, CNPPID * John Shadle, NPPD * Matt O’Brien, NPPD * Jojo La, CWCB * Michelle Koch, NGPC * Erica Gnuse, Ducks Unlimited * Rich Walters, TNC * Jacob Fritton, TNC |

Discussion Notes:

* Turner presented a history of the North Platte chokepoint capacity issue and reviewed the studies, modeling analyses, and project development efforts by the Program to increase capacity and/or raise flood stage. This included flood-proofing projects (two were implemented: Whitehorse Creek drainage project and State Channel rehabilitation), property buyouts and/or flood easements, engineering the North Platte River channel, and engineering ways to route flow around the chokepoint.
* Regarding phragmites, Walters said that they treated the chokepoint pretty hard around 2012, started with mechanical removal but have continued only with spraying. Mechanical removal was difficult with getting stuck, etc.
* In respect to the 2010 SEH study, Koch asked how the phragmites removal and higher flows were tested, and Walters and Turner clarified that natural flows provided high flows to test effectiveness of vegetation removal. Increased capacity and/or decreased flood stage was not realized.
* Shadle asked about channel widening in this reach. Walters said that he has not observed any significant widening. Widths have been stable.
* Econopouly asked about the 100-year flood flow and extent of the 100-year floodplain. Farnsworth stated that several neighborhoods are within the floodplain. Brei and Farnsworth clarified that even areas of the town that are not within the floodplain still have issues during high flow events, especially on the South Platte River.
* Econopouly asked why the Program abandoned projects like channel improvements (dredging, etc.). Brei and Turner clarified that it was issues like permitting, landowner permissions, etc. that likely made these alternatives as “pie in the sky” items.
* Koch asked about effects of highway and railroad bridges (i.e., needing to widen, etc.). Turner said that the HDR/Tetra Tech (2011) study looked at widening the channel (not the bridge), and that widening actually slowed down the flow and increased sediment deposition. Brei added that the railroad bridge is plenty wide, the alternative considered would have involved removing accumulated sediment. Widening the Highway 83 bridge was not looked at. Widening the bridge is likely a non-starter due to costs.
* Farnsworth pointed out that problems of this magnitude are typically handled by political subdivisions (governments and agencies) that can exercise the power of condemnation, which the Program cannot do. Given the number of landowners, etc. that would need to sign off on engineering solutions, the Program likely could not do any of those.
* Fritton asked if other agencies like the city, railroad, etc. view the chokepoint as a problem. Brei said not really, as long as railroads are running, bridges are passable, etc. If anything, the city is the most concerned, but mostly with regard to Cody Park, etc. Farnworth said that people were worried after the 2011 floods but have cooled off on solutions as time has passed. Bradley said that the State hasn’t been too involved because there hasn’t really been a local solution that has been pushed.
* Shadle said that we’re probably wasting time without support from the USACE and large amounts of funding, some of these solutions are not possible.
* Turner asked for guidance about what to do next. Rabbe suggested that the chokepoint is still a problem that needs addressed to achieve Program goals because we likely need to push water through during dry times when the channel is already at capacity with irrigation water.
* Econopouly reminded the group that there are two parts to the relevant requirements in the Program Document: 5,000 cfs pulse flows during the non-irrigation season and 800 cfs flows during the irrigation season (particularly during drought). Econopouly added that the Program Document also says that if solutions to the chokepoint capacity can’t be found, then other means to achieve the Program’s objectives should be identified.
* Farnsworth said that the things/tools we need now are not really in the Program’s toolbox (like condemnation), which is the challenge with how to move forward. He clarified that we likely exhausted what we can do, structurally. It’s a big problem, and likely needs to be dealt with on a scale that is larger than the Program. A big challenge is also that minor flood impacts are things like basements with water, septic systems not draining, etc. All of the water is now in the channel but there are these other impacts.
* Econopouly said that violating flood stage could be a path forward. Merrill said this would likely be a non-starter with the GC. Walters agreed. Group agreed that this is not a solution that should be pursued.
* Rabbe said that before the meeting he was thinking mechanical removal, spraying, dredging, etc. was the path forward, but even this is more difficult than he realized. Asked about other ways to deal with sediment. Farnsworth suggested that there might be outside of the box solutions to investigate such as depositional reaches upstream, etc.
* Brei and Farnsworth said that the low hanging fruit is likely vegetation removal, etc. and this would not hurt anything but certainly would not get us to the needed capacity. Walters said that all new agreements would be needed, and several landowners will not want trees killed.
* Rabbe said that going forward with vegetation removal is probably a good option, and that big engineering solutions would be well into the future.
* EDO committed to developing vegetation removal concepts for reaches extending a few miles upstream of the Highway 83 bridge. Workgroup to meet again in 4-6 weeks (mid- to late-May) to review in advance of potential discussion with GC in June.