

MINUTES
Bureau of Reclamation / National Weather Service/
Umatilla County Board of Commissioners
Meeting of May 15, 2019
1:00 p.m., Room 114, Umatilla County Courthouse
Pendleton, Oregon

Commissioners Present: Chair George Murdock, Vice-Chair John Shafer and Commissioner Bill Elfering

Guests Present: John Turner, Mayor-Pendleton; Carolyn Chad, Deputy Area Manager-BOR; Dawn Wiedmeier, Area Manager-BOR; Marc Austin, Warning Coordination/Meteorologist-National Weather Service; Marilyn Lohmann, Hydrologist-NWS; Sean Kimbrel, VFO Manager (McKay Dam) –BOR; Mark Mulvihill, Pendleton citizen/homeowner; Tucker Billman, Field Rep for Senator Walden; Robb Corbett, Manager-Pendleton; Jessica Keys, Field Rep for Senator Merkley; Kathleen Cathey, Field Rep for Senator Wyden; Courtney Crowell, Regional Solutions-Governor’s Office

CALL TO ORDER at 1:00 pm by Commissioner George Murdock. Introductions were made around the room (listed above). He turned the meeting over to Commissioner Shafer since he is “all things natural resources”. The agenda was developed by Kathleen Cathey.

1. Commissioner Shafer asked Marilyn Lohmann, NWS, to go over the report of weather before the flood event. Ms. Lohmann explained weather systems from March 25 through early April. The pattern was more like February, causing flooding county-wide. This event was record setting as far as she knows. In turn, with snowmelt during the 24-hour period in question, caused huge inflows; McKay filled quicker than it ever does. She also talked about SNOTEL information.

2. Commissioner Shafer then asked Sean Kimbrel, BOR, McKay Dam Manager, to continue from the BOR point. Mr. Kimbrel agreed the weather system and predictions were used. Operationally, they were in great shape and prepared with the forecast. However, Apr 9-10-11 all the rain continued and they knew space was not sufficient. At that time, Emergency Manager Tom Roberts was called upon. It was a hard decision about water releases -- public safety was considered.

3. Marc Austin then added as meteorologist about warning systems and preparedness. This is climate prediction center as part of NWS. He looks at 5-7 days’ impact; SNOTEL measures water content in snowpack. Measurement is taken by gauges and information is relayed. Ms. Lohmann also talked about comparisons made for volume forecasts and discussions were had due to high volume – modeling was adjusted for a better prediction.

Mayor Turner talked about potential flood warnings – Mr. Austin said they were “flood advisories”. Mayor Turner continued about prediction and asked why wasn’t water released based on that? Mr. Kimbrel advised releases were made. There was more discussion about input and releases by numbers -- CFS.

4. Metrics to Use for the Future. Mark Mulvihill is concerned about the dam; he has lived downstream three years; has been in Pendleton since 1977 and was here for the 1991 flood. He hopes we look at the dam and the authority. He knows it is for west-end irrigation, then water for fish runs; however, he believes downstream land-owners should have a voice – we do not want this to happen again. Metrics and dam capacity during inflows must be addressed. The dam was not made for flood control. Question is how it is determined when water is released, how much – changing the numbers – how is that considered?

Mayor Turner said he's being blunt about fixing the problem -- there are flood events about every 10-15 years. He referenced an April letter from BOR about all coming together after the fact to work at it. That is unacceptable to him; this group needs to solve the problem moving forward.

Dawn Wiedmeier noted the BOR worked as best as possible to give advance notice – but if they held back water, the dam structure could be compromised. What can we do in the future? A large part is the big rainfall event – what about more stream gauges and snow gauges? Also better emergency notifications. Mayor Turner felt we must take reasonable, prudent and common sense measures moving forward. It is not acceptable legally or morally to address the community who has been damaged.

Kathleen Cathey wants to change the focus – we have what we have now. What can be done to help solve the problem? She reiterated that the law that governs the dam. Courtney Crowell added floods happen. Mr. Kimbrel talked about the authority (law) to the BOR, which sets exclusive flood control at 6,000 acre-feet.

Ms. Wiedmeier went back to gauges and warnings. Mr. Kimbrel suggested more downstream work would be useful (the channel). Mr. Mulvihill added the bank is no longer capable of 1500 cfs since the water control district has not been able to work on it. He asked about flood storage capacity (of the dam) could it be changed /increased? Ms. Wiedmeier suggested speaking to congressional representatives in the room about that.

Mr. Corbett talked about the website that shows water in the dam and basin water amount – right before the event he saw it reaching the reservoir capacity. Reservoir levels were low enough to capture snow that was coming – this seems to have allowed what was predicted. Ms. Wiedmeier responded there was ample room for that; the problem was the rain in a huge amount on top of it. 61,000 acre feet in a whole month came in the three days -- no one expected that. There was more discussion about BOR management and uncertainty. She noted temperature also plays into the uncertainty. Mr. Corbett also had heard about gauges for inflow being inaccurate.

Mr. Kimbrell noted 1) upstream gauge (OWRD manages) showed at that stage was measured accurately, but in relation to discharge there was uncertainty. 2) downstream gauge above 2000 cubic ft. flow was going around the device (weir) and not getting an accurate discharge. BOR asked OWRD to take onsite measurements to better understand the discharge release going out of the reservoir.

Ms. Cathey talked about importance of having more notice prior to release (like 1 hour).

Commissioner Elfering asked about minimum amount allowed by Congress. The purpose of reservoir is irrigation – under contract is by water rights holders. 71,534-acre ft. is total acre capacity. 65,000 is under contract and the rest is for flood control. Mr. Mulvihill noted a silt study was done in 1971. From 1998 to 2018, calculation needs to be redone. Again, metrics are being played so close. He also pointed out how fast it fills – it is too close with water. The dam must deliver the water – this flood is going to happen again soon. Ms. Wiedmeier felt “soon” is too much. However, others in the room talked about floods in each of 10-15 years apart. Mayor Turner asked about violation of their contracts and not delivering water -- is there allowance for non-delivery? Ms. Wiedmeier answered, yes. Mayor Turner felt this needs to be a legislative fix – he suggested opening the amount of reserve. Mr. Mulvihill agreed. Nothing would avoid the flooding this year; however, if you have 10,000 acre feet you may have avoided other events. It needs to be viewed logically.

Mr. Mulvihill asked about diversion upstream with huge amounts coming in. Is it a possibility? He suggested talking to those that had experienced previous events.

Commissioner Murdock talked about upstream possibilities. Ms. Wiedmeier agreed looking at safe channel capacity as well as development. Reminder regulatory entities must be consulted.

Mr. Mulvihill talked about the water control district which would address the creek bed – he felt a bond measure may fall on the homeowners, but the BOR is part of that equation.

Commissioner Shafer went back to agenda – what is capacity of the streambank? 1,200 cfs backs up water into people’s homes – right now there is flooding. Before the event, they were at 1,500 cfs in banks prior to the large release (per Mulvihill). The bottom line now after damage is he believes 800 cfs would flood.

Tucker Billman talked about better systems need to be in place to be reactive also better gauges – and now comprehensive management.

Mr. Corbett added there needs to be assurance of accurate snow moisture. Ms. Wiedmeier reiterated just a general idea to use for comparison. More SNOTEL sites would help; SNOTEL is the best information at this time. 61,000 cfs went through the dam in April – the highest amount ever. There was more discussion about historical capacities.

Mayor Turner pointed out action possibilities – four -- to help mitigate or reduce risks. 1. How to dredge McKay Creek to handle more water (and fortify it, added Mr. Mulvihill). 2. Need better instrumentation (ORD, BOR, whomever). 3. 6,000 acre feet is not good enough for flood reserve, which needs legislative change. They will still have enough for their contracts. Flood reserve must be increased. 4. Finding upstream diversion sites. Those would be major potential action items.

Commissioner Shafer has talked to Ray Denny at the CTUIR regarding McKay Creek – but he would have to talk to Mr. Burke. Mr. Mulvihill noted the water control district wants to be part of the McKay Creek bed discussion – they are knowledgeable. He will take information back to the homeowners and note they must follow rules for building in flood zone/areas. Also, may be more taxes (i.e. bond) to fix McKay Creek for the future. Discussion about agencies to include: Department of State Lands, National Marine Fisheries, DEQ(?), ODFW, Corps of Engineers. Mayor Turner suggested a working group on better instrumentation (National Weather Service).

Mr. Mulvihill went back to federal/state/local officials; Mayor Turner added it would be a good idea to form a group(s) to focus on specific/certain items outlined previously.

Commissioner Murdock noted OWRD was at a meeting that morning regarding flooding assessment. Commissioner Shafer will be that contact as well as with the CTUIR. County would work on instrumentation. Mr. Mulvihill’s team would work on streambed.

Mr. Corbett wanted to add to Mayor Turner’s four items – that is global warming / climate change. This is about historical weather and patterns. Mayor Turner agreed about climate change and suggested the County group might make sense for this item.

Jessica Keys will work with NOAA since she worked there in the past. Commissioner Elfering suggested an irrigator would be good to include in discussions.

Mayor Turner asked about increasing reserve – is there merit? Ms. Wiedmeier reiterated that Congressional authorization would be needed. In addition, she will look at allotments to irrigation and maybe someone else could “buy” it – internal discussion would be had first.

Mr. Mulvihill talked about common sense solutions. The Lower McKay Creek Control District is and will be very helpful moving forward.

Mr. Corbett needs to engage with water group for safety to the City. He and Mr. Mulvihill will work together. Courtney Crowell will get in contact with all state agencies and maybe help with federal groups. Mr. Billman will help.

Regarding item 3, the County will go to Congressional representatives with a proposal. There was discussion about a flood frequency analysis being needed. Who would do that? BOR cannot handle item #3 (it

must come from someone else). Item 4 – maybe a diversion should be part of flood frequency analysis? Ms. Cathey felt we should see if other groups have done something like this – those ideas could help us to move forward.

Ms. Lowmann talked about Emergency Management has after-event grants available for mitigation (i.e. Canyon Creek fire).

Mr. Mulvihill feels this is a holistic approach and must try all efforts. He added the Water Control District can help with item #4.

Commissioner Murdock noted the importance of continuing discussions of this group and the focus groups need to come back and report.

Mr. Kimbrel will attend future meetings to provide BOR constraints. Ms. Cathey suggested he talk to his group. Ms. Wiedmeier voiced support of Mr. Kimbrell and noted she can consult, but she does not need to attend future meetings since he will be present (and keep her posted).

Next Meeting

June 27, Thursday, 1:00 p.m., Room 114, Umatilla County Courthouse.

Minutes will go out to the group – all is public information.

Adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

/Melinda Slatt