

# UYWCD Assessment: Summary of Themes

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CBI conducted nearly 30 confidential stakeholder interviews in early February 2019, consistent with the 360 Assessment proposal approved by the Upper Yampa Water Conservancy District Board at its January 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting. The themes below reflect key or consistent topics from the interviews. They are not intended to be comprehensive, nor were any of the topics below expressed uniformly. *Options for addressing and/or exploring the issues below will be discussed at, and following, the Board's February 20<sup>th</sup> Work Session.*

## District Strengths

- Resources – water, infrastructure/storage, financial resources
- Significant opportunities/ability to be strong player because of these resources
- Position as a unique and significant water institution in the Valley
- Important representation of Basin needs at State level through deep knowledge and strong advocacy; strong representation of the District within the Basin
- Knowledgeable Board members who are well connected/involved in the community
- Professional, skilled, extremely competent admin/field staff
- Thoughtful, committed constituents with a strong stake in District and its success
- Recognition of accomplishments in past 10 years, operationally and organizationally
- Strong relationship/partnership with CO Parks and Wildlife at Stagecoach
- Appreciation of recent efforts toward increased transparency/engagement – e.g., making Board packets available, conducting this Assessment and follow-up
- Willingness to offer expertise at events; skilled presentation of issues
- Transitioning to a more public-facing office in town
- Participation in Basin water technical efforts in a detailed technical manner
- Augmentation plans
- Mini-grant program with user-friendly process\*
- Provision of releases to support late-season flows\*
- Participation/partnership in other water efforts – e.g., UY watershed, IWMP\*
- Website with useful info\*
- Some recreation opportunities – e.g., Stagecoach State Park as a little-known asset\*
- Appreciation of the District's broad mission and complex, challenging role

\*Also described as an area for improvement or expansion (see below).

## Areas for Improvement

### Approach to Working with District Stakeholders

- Strong interest in seeing the District develop a more 'public service' or 'customer service' oriented approach. Many commented that that the District projects a sense of existing for its own sake. Stakeholders would like to see the District expressing more interest in working with constituents and customers to try to meet their and

Basin-wide needs. Many commented they would like to see the District supporting District needs with tax revenue, e.g., preserving agriculture in South Routt County by keeping prices low.

- Overall encouragement to listen more, with less ‘talking at’ people, in various settings. This style can come across as defensive, overbearing, and/or off-putting. In the context of Board meetings, it can also be intimidating.
- Sense that the District as a whole often projects a reluctant, defensive, and/or antagonistic attitude with respect to customer issues, negotiations, or other efforts. This can lead to an erosion of trust, frustration, and/or unnecessary project delays.
- Desire to see contract negotiations as less combative or positional – including more communication regarding the specific needs the District is balancing, and more sense of appreciation of specific pressures facing South Routt producers. Contract holders share an interest in the District being financially stable and understand the need to raise prices. They don’t want to feel the District is profiting at their expense.
- The District was described as ‘lacking empathy’ and as seeming to ‘undervalue relationships,’ both with landowners and partners.
- Repeated encouragement to find ways to make price structure work for District’s Ag producers, together with win-win solutions that benefit the river and rec interests.

### Transparency, Inclusion, and Communications

- Strong desire for more transparency from the District, as taxpayers and interested stakeholders – from posting meeting packets and summaries (which many described as recently improving), to sharing District information and activities. Interviewees reported finding it challenging to get involved with the District, in part because meeting information/materials are not always shared or accessible.
- Upper Yampa has ‘low visibility.’ This is seen as a missed opportunity to educate water users, highlight the role and activities of the District, and demonstrate accountability to taxpayers. Combined with the possibility of new storage project, a lack of visibility can also create concerns or mistrust. Otherwise it can appear as lack of organization and/or as though communicating with constituents is a low priority. Many constituents and partners felt they should understand the District’s goals and/or activities but do not feel adequately informed.
- Website updates should include clear District priorities, activities, partners, etc. This information should be actively shared with constituents/partners in other forums.
- Overall, there was strong encouragement for more transparency, communication and collaboration with stakeholders.

### Input on District Activities and Priorities

*Some of the points below may also be considered ‘areas for improvement.’*

#### Clarifying District Objectives and Priorities / Developing a Strategic Plan

- Clarify to what extent District goals include providing value to District-wide water users in addition to core function of storing/delivering water to customers.
- Strong support, including in lower Basin, for the District’s emphasis on developing new storage. The ability to retime releases will take pressure off Ag in late season.

- Strong encouragement for the District to develop a Strategic Plan that translates into the District's pricing and business model.
- Encouragement to engage entities such as the Upper Gunnison Water Conservancy District for useful models for supplying and delivering water to customers while seeking to creatively meet other Basin water needs (and building trust in doing so), as well as the Colorado River District.
- Consider engaging local experts as a focus group in the strategic planning process.

### **Strengthening Involvement in and Support for Basin Water Needs**

- Support for enlarging the grant program in near term to help meet urgent needs for improved Ag diversion structures and metering devices.
- Desire to see the District pursue a more proactive, solution-oriented approach to Basin water challenges in ways it is uniquely situated to do and that protect Ag. Examples included: expanding matching grants to support other water efforts; exploring options to offset prices by allowing unused contract water to augment late-season flows; pursuing creative arrangements with other buckets of water to meet Basin water needs and take pressures off Ag; proactively working with partners on late-season releases where consistent with District priorities and protective of agriculture. Looking for win-wins.
- Idea of the District as a 'steward' of water it releases – e.g., helping to ensure cold water makes its way downstream, continue to mimic natural hydrograph.
- Encouragement to develop non-consumptive pricing policy in ways that keep the District whole – e.g., tie pricing to length of contract terms.
- Finding additional ways to bring the District's water expertise to the broad community the District serves.
- Recognition that District will be important player in efforts such as IWMP, Water Fund, DCP/demand management and new storage to address growing water pressures.
- Emphasis that all of the above will be important to developing education and support for a new storage project, which would require significant local support.

### **Stagecoach Firming (and/or Other Potential Storage)**

- Emphasis on 'going overboard' in communicating about this, given sensitivities around storage. Many mentioned not having heard anything directly from Upper Yampa about Stagecoach Firming or Morrison Creek Reservoir.
- Widespread acknowledgement of potential importance and value of new storage for the Valley for meeting multiple needs.
- Interest in more transparency and openness around potential project goals. Suggestion that doing so can lead to opportunities and partnerships, in addition to building trust with constituents.
- Concern that the District is not making the case it could and should be for storage in a way that doesn't focus on wet water but on other benefits to Ag, river health, and recreation components.
- District should not gloss over the downsides – e.g., hydrograph impacts, wildlife pressures/sensitive areas, local impacts. Need to have the hard conversations.

- Need creative thinking and collaboration with others to find legitimate, broadly supportive uses, including innovative ways to meet non-consumptive uses.

## Input on New District Staff Position

*Note: While the Assessment asked about an 'Outreach' position in particular, stakeholders had varied suggestions about useful functions and roles for new staff, as discussed below.*

### Preliminary Comments: Be Strategic and Provide Sufficient Direction

- Widespread input that, if new staff is hired, this should be after the District has clearly articulated policy priorities to guide and inform their actions.

### Function/Roles/Responsibilities/Skillset

- Some excitement about the prospect of District staff whose focus is to improve relationships, develop partnerships, make the District's work more visible, and implement joint projects – e.g., matching grants, Upper Watershed plan, help translate studies into action.
- Functions could include increased communication/education about District activities and functions – e.g., reservoir operations, effects and benefits of releases, potential benefits of new storage, river hydrology – through website updates, newsletter articles, presentations at other entities' meetings.
- Emphasis that, to be effective on the above, this position would need authority and ability to speak/act on behalf of the District and should not simply be a 'friendly face' at water meetings.
- Apart from the educational role, some concern that the functions above should be the General Manager's, and that this position should be answerable to the Board.
- Some input that a GM position should be sufficient to accomplish these functions for an organization of the District's size.
- Alternative suggestions included someone to help the District translate its policy priorities into business planning and/or manage the business end of the District's water by understanding current and potential needs of District constituents.
- Useful to bring new skills to the District in areas of communication, collaboration, and negotiation – not just 'public relations' but creative thinking, communication, and listening skills, to help achieve positive, concrete outcomes.

## Internal Governance and Operations

*The comments below are based on input from external parties and Board members.*

### Board composition, role(s) and expectations, and meetings

- Strong interest in balancing Board members' institutional knowledge with more diversity. Ideas for structural changes include: term limits, publicizing Board application/selection process, elections rather than judicial appointments.
- Sense that Board meetings can be dominated by a few strong voices. Encouragement to make Board meetings more inclusive of diverse perspectives.
- Interest in having Board members serve as ambassadors to the different Basin water efforts, possibly even making this a condition of Board service.

- Being aware of perceived conflicts of interest, in light of the small community and the many hats that Board members can wear.
- Desire to see Board members model and encourage a ‘public service’-minded, proactive approach to helping meet needs of customers and constituents through actively listening to constituents, being transparent and open about District needs, and looking for creative approaches/solutions.
- Need to clarify the District’s governance model, including respective roles and expectations of Board members, President and/or Executive Committee, and District Manager; communications and decision-making protocols; and addressing areas of conflict or concern as they arise. This should also include clarifying the role of Board members in activities such as external affairs or negotiations.
- Sense from external stakeholders that District leadership receives conflicting messages or directives from Board members, leading to confusion with staff and stakeholders. Important to have a strategic plan and clear Board direction.
- Exploring ways to focus (and shorten) Board meetings – e.g., use of subcommittees; shorter, more streamlined reports, use of succinct policy briefings prior to meetings.
- Need clear process for bringing policy proposals to Board for consideration, including on annual basis.
- Interest in hearing more from staff at Board meetings.

### Internal/Staff Operational Issues

*Internal issues to be further discussed with the staff and Board at an internal level.*

- Would like to see staff increasingly empowered by District leadership on substantive matters, internally and externally.
- Observation that staff, at times, do not seem to receive clear direction and communication from leadership.
- Observation that stressed communications and/or lack of clarity at the District leadership and Board level lead to strained internal communications.
- Sense that many of the areas for improvement discussed above have applicability to the internal environment/operations – and that for District to be successful moving forward, these will need to be addressed as well.