



STATE OF THE SAN MIGUEL ANNUAL REPORT 2006

OVERVIEW

The 2006 field season started with a below average winter. Snowpack in the San Miguel watershed was 60-70% at the end of the ski season, and continued to drop to below 50% of the 30 year average as April, May and June were warmer and drier than usual. The river reached a peak near 800 cfs at the Specie Creek gauge on 5/27, and another peak above 800 on 6/9. The river running season lasted until early July. Both July and August were quite wet, with above average amounts of monsoon moisture, making for mudslides in Royer Gulch and on Keystone Hill. A couple side drainages between Specie creek and Norwood Bridge had debris flows which reached the river channel and changed rapid formations. Kayak classes and training for local youth were able to run the river into August due to the rains. Fires were more limited than in several years.

HEADWATERS AREAS

The headwaters of the San Miguel consist of the Wilson, Sneffels, and Trout Lake/Ophir ranges. Wilderness designation protects portions of the Lizard Head and Mt. Sneffels ranges. Public ownership in the high country areas above Telluride grew, with the transfer of many acres of mining claims formerly owned by Idarado/Newmont Gold to the USFS, through a Trust for Public Land partnership.

The county, USFS, and town of Ophir, are cooperating to develop a management strategy for summer recreational use of the three high country passes, Imogene, Black Bear, and Ophir. Below the peaks, the mesas surrounding Telluride continue to be developed, especially Turkey Creek, Deep Creek, Hastings, Specie, and Wilson Mesas. The mesas traditionally have provided wildlife habitat and migration corridors, as well as an arena for agriculture and ranching. Efforts continue to protect wildlife habitat and migration corridors, as development continues.

HOWARDS FORK

This tributary drainage is a narrow steep valley which holds the town of Ophir. Heavy impacts from mining contaminate the stream to the point that no fish survive. The town has worked for many years to preserve open space in the valley and its main side canyons, Waterfall and Swamp. Another TPL deal is proposed for the Ophir valley high country, but funding was not available this season from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Efforts to purchase the Pauls claims in the Ophir high country will continue into the future.

A diversion just above the Ophir Post Office feeds water to the Ames hydroelectric plant. The Silverbelle tailings, below the highway, have been revegetated, and recontoured, reducing mineral leaching to the Howard Fork. A proposed cleanup of the Carribeau tailings, about a mile up the valley, have been postponed due to lack of fill and other complications. A cleanup of the Carbonero tailings is scheduled for summer 2007, and preliminary work is currently underway to prepare for the project.

LAKE FORK

The dams on Hope Lake and Trout lake were created to feed the Ames power plant. Currently, a fair amount of residential development is occurring in the Trout Lake and San Bernardo areas. Acid mine leaching may be occurring from the Matterhorn, San Bernardo, and Butterfly mine sites. A large, unstable landslide area overhangs the river just below the confluence of the Lake Fork with Wilson Creek. Directly across the river from that confluence a gravel pit sits on private property along the old railroad grade. Immediately below the Lake Fork drops over two waterfalls and into the Ames end of the Ilium valley.

SOUTH FORK

Just below the small subdivision of Ames, and the confluence of the Lake Fork and Howard Fork, the river goes through a relatively pristine area, consisting of a mix of USFS lands, private lands, and a preserve protected by the Nature Conservancy. Good wildlife habitat, with spectacular view of the Ophir Needles and Ames wall, is relatively free from recreation and mining impacts.

Further downstream former Forest Service camping areas have been converted to day use areas, to mitigate heavy grazing and recreation impacts over the years. Road closures and revegetation efforts are allowing riparian vegetation to start healing from heavy impacts in the past.

A mudslide draining from Turkey Creek sometimes overflows in the river, and can create sedimentation problems. Extensive beaver dams have thrived in the area. Further downstream, cottonwoods in the old Mary E and Sheep Corrals camping areas have been damaged by fluctuating/decreasing water table levels, possibly caused by gravel mining in the confluence area. Both campgrounds are closed until further notice. Gravel mining has also caused stream channel undercutting to move both upstream and downstream from the confluence. Grant money from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has matched Forest Service funding to work towards revegetating and removing weeds from previously mined areas at the confluence.

Also of note in the South Fork are ice flows which are being studying by BLM hydrologist Dennis Murphy, and taken into consideration in the FERC license renewal process of the Ames Power Plant. The ice flows may be affected by water temperatures influenced by the release of flows from the Trout Lake Dam. Studies continue.

MAINSTEM

The mainstem of the San Miguel is formed by Bridalveil and Ingram falls. The Idarado mine site, at the head of the valley, is currently in the post-construction monitoring phase of a Superfund cleanup project, administered by the State of Colorado, and designed to reduce impacts created by high country mining and tailings located along the main stem. The long-term goal is to improve the water quality to the point that zinc levels have been reduced to the point that brown trout can survive. This summer a major mudslide came down Royer Gulch, covering the river trail highway with tons of mud and debris.

Bear Creek was purchased many years ago by the San Miguel Conservation Foundation, and is managed by the Town of Telluride, to protect resource values. Extensive development in and around the town of Telluride continues to impact the main stem through town. In recent years, the Town of Telluride has received Natural Resource Damages funding, matching with other grant funds, to do two river restoration projects within the town limits. These projects worked to restore a more natural channel, and regenerate more native vegetation. Extensive storm water management work within the Town helps reduce impacts to water quality from storm water runoff. Water diversions for snowmaking and golf course watering deplete watershed stream flows on an annual basis. Tailings and channel diversions remain on the valley floor. Remediation work in the Prospect Creek area of the valley floor has been completed by Telluride Ski and Golf. Tailings near Lawson Hill have been constructed into a ball field. Keystone Gorge remains relatively pristine, providing important wildlife migration corridors, and riparian vegetation. In late September, a parcel containing the riparian corridor of the Keystone Gorge was acquired by the Nature Conservancy, which will protect riparian values long-term!

MAINSTEM BLOW CONFLUENCE WITH SOUTH FORK

Impacts from recreation, mining, grazing, and development threaten the mainstem of the San Miguel as it winds its way through San Miguel and Norwood canyons, and eventually to its confluence with the Dolores.

Mile 0-The Telluride Gravel plant near the confluence has caused sedimentation and stream channel alterations in the past. Ongoing revegetation and weed controls efforts continue. Telecam's affordable housing complex may be expanded in the future.

Mile 1-The Telecam industrial park thrives on the south facing hillside. Trash from a garbage transfer site often impacts the river corridor here. Private property owned by Alexanders has been impacted by residential and recreational use. It is closed to camping, with day use allowed.

Mile 2-A limited amount of residential use continues just above Deep Creek, on Alexander's lands. Near Deep Creek and the highway barn, the old river road, now closed to camping and vehicular use, and BLM lands start. During August 06 a significant storm event caused Deep Creek to flash flood, ripping out a section of the bank behind the highway barn, and knocking a large spruce tree across the river channel. Deep Creek, one of the best cut-throat habitat tributaries in the watershed, continued to run muddy and turbid into October.

Mile 3-6-The river road (M59) continues past Silverpick road to just above Sawpit. The old road was closed in 95. Ten years of day use and non-motorized use only has allowed riparian vegetation to recover. Mudslides have impacted this area repeatedly. At Silverpick, BLM has installed a new trail register to track use of the river road, and boat launches. Just below the end of the river road, a bulletin board marks BLM lands. This pullout has been continuously abused, littered, and used as a human waste repository.

Mile 7-12-From Sawpit to Placerville, BLM and private lands intermix, with extensive riverside development. Public access is available at BLM's historic tram site, and the new county park below Fall Creek. There is also river access below the park in Placerville.

Mile 12-14-Below Placerville, a mix of BLM and private lands line the river. A developed campground called "Caddis Flats" was opened in 2006 at RV Corner, a site which has been used for camping for many years. It includes a toilet and a boatramp.

Mile 14-Near Specie Creek, a boat ramp and picnic facility sees extensive use by commercial outfitters during boating season, which lasted from May into early August in 2005 due to excellent snowpack.

Mile 15-The Middle Nature Conservancy preserve protects a section of river, limiting recreational use to day use only. It is popular for fishing. The Specie creek gauge, which measures flow levels, is near here.

Mile 16-20 Prime riparian vegetation and classic rapids make this beautiful section popular with boaters and fishermen. Saltado creek enters below the large power lines.

Mile 21-24-Private and BLM lands intermix, with extensive recreational use at the Beaver Creek boat ramp, near the mouth of Beaver canyon. An additional campground opened at Lower Beaver Creek, which includes a restroom and boat ramp, A day use area provides toilets and a picnic cabana near Norwood Bridge.

Mile 24-27 For three miles the Sanborn Park Forest Access road parallels the river, with limited recreational impacts in a few scattered camps, and private ownership limiting river access near the Cascabel ranch.

Mile 27-35 The river leaves all roads through Norwood Canyon, dropping into ponderosa, then pinyon-juniper and cottonwood forest. A diversion wier near mile 32-33 poses a potential hazard to boaters during boating season. Prime wildlife habitat and limited recreation co-exist. Horsefly Creek enters on the right near mile 30.

Mile 36-39 A BLM/county road parallels the river for the "Ledges" section, wher rock ledges form large holes and rapids during high water. An additional campground constructed by BLM opened in 06, in an effort to manage increasing recreational impacts from boaters and hunters. It includes a restroom and boat ramp.

Mile 40-46 The river flows through another roadless section between the Hwy. 90 crossing and the power plant. Irrigation water spills back into the river, forming waterfalls down rock faces visible from the road above. Another diversion weir forms a hazard around mile 43-45. Portage on the river right, with land-owner's permission.

Mile 47 Power plant location.

Mile 47-52 The river flows through mostly private lands in the Naturita area. Public access is available at the Naturita town park. Watch for man-made river hazards.

Mile 53 The stream channel is altered by the Naturita gravel plant.

Mile 54-67 The river flows through a mix of private and BLM lands below Naturita. The Nature Conservancy has preserved a section of the high desert ecosystem in the Tabeguache preserve-610 acres and 6.5 river miles.

Mile 67-69 The Uravan mine site stores uranium mining waste near the river shores.
Private land.

Mile 70-72 A BLM/county road parallels the river through a slickrock canyon down to the confluence with the Dolores. Remnants of the hanging flume provide visual reminders of extensive mining history in the area