



Report to Crescent H Stream and Trail Committee

Assessments of Fish Creek, Teton County Wyoming and their implication for management and restoration efforts.

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Contents

Introduction 2

Analysis of scientific reports concerning Fish Creek – methods results and conclusions. 2

 Were methods used sound and regionally appropriate? 2

 Were the conclusions of the USGS reports appropriate or could they have been stronger? 3

 Can one infer a timeframe for a potential “tipping point” for the system? 4

Interpretation of the USGS report’s results and conclusions in a national context 5

 Identify other communities/watersheds with similar nutrient issues and sources. 5

 Discuss what these communities did about their problem and subsequent results. 5

 Define restoration goals..... 5

 Design assessment process..... 5

 Conduct Assessment..... 6

 Summarize assessment results 6

 Compare these communities and strategies with the Fish Creek Watershed. 6

Recommend the next steps and possible solution. 7

 Outline practical next steps that should be taken to improve water quality 7

 Setting a Goal 7

 Outline possible regulatory mechanisms for implementing Best Management Practices 8

 Recommend any additional studies necessary to strengthen selection and performance of proposed BMPs. 9

 Comments regarding Best Management Practices (BMP) and their Implementation 9

Final Comments 10

Literature Cited 11

Introduction

The initial steps in the remediation of any environmental problem involving biological systems include gaining a clear understanding of the ways in which the target resource integrates and expresses environmental stresses. Streams, such as Fish Creek, are notorious for the complexity of their ecology and are impacted by processes that occur in a wide range of temporal and spatial scales that are difficult to quantify and evaluate. Most stream ecologists have come to believe the axiom that no two streams are alike.

Because of the need to protect stream resources on a broad scale and develop evaluation criteria, resource managers have needed to develop tools for assessing the environmental status or “health” of individual streams. Many states including Wyoming¹, Montana² and Idaho³ have embraced the concept of evaluating the environmental status of streams by comparing them with streams thought to have little or no adverse impact. In brief, this process involves compiling percentile ranges of various and combined metrics (nutrients, periphyton, chlorophyll-a, macro-invertebrate indices etc.) in undisturbed streams and comparing these values with streams being evaluated. Various percentile comparisons are then used as a basis for stream classification^{1,2,4}. This system of classification is regularly reviewed and revised to account for new research and differences in regional geology, soils, climate, and vegetation⁴.

Stream characterizations like those described above are used by most states to focus resources and policy on those areas considered impaired. Under section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act, states are required to develop lists of “impaired” waters. These are waters that are too degraded to meet the water quality standards set by the individual states. Despite the use of this evaluation system, it has long been realized by ecologists and resource managers that individual streams sometimes defy simple classification and resist many generalized approaches to management. In short, some streams won’t fit neatly into the classification scheme and the accepted metrics may not tell the whole story. The “whole story” in Fish Creek includes observations by the United States Geological Survey during four research efforts that collectively suggest not only present impairment of the resource but cause for concern that early warning signs may signal increased impairment in the future. In context of the questions posed by the Crescent H Stream and Trail Committee below is summary information from the documents that support this contention.

Analysis of scientific reports concerning Fish Creek – methods results and conclusions.

Were methods used sound and regionally appropriate?

When evaluating methodology of any effort, it is important to focus on the objectives of the study. The two major studies to date are titled “Characterization of Water Quality and Biological Communities, Fish Creek, Teton County, Wyoming,...”^{5,6}. The purpose and goals within the studies restate the survey-nature of the efforts. The studies are significant additions to the understanding of the stream itself, and combined with seepage studies^{7,8} represent the establishment of an important baseline from which to determine impacts of prevention and/or mitigation efforts. The reports describe correlations between

nutrient levels and biological communities at lower trophic levels (bacteria-algae, macro-invertebrates and plants). Because the collective study periods spanned some of both the seasonal ranges and the more disparate year-to-year extremes, the studies collectively may offer the resolution to detect long term effects of environmental degradation. The methodologies used are appropriate to use both as an assessment tool and in time-series analyses for examining changes in the environment of Fish Creek.

In general, survey-type studies are not designed to investigate specific sources of contamination, but rather intend to characterize the subject area, compare its characteristics with reference sites of accepted status (impaired or not impaired), and make broad recommendations for further studies that might clarify the source of contaminants in the case of impaired areas. The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality made note of the general conclusions of the USGS reports from Fish Creek¹ however did not list Fish Creek under the classification of impaired waters in the 303(d) listing.

One particularly interesting aspect of the USGS study was the inclusion of nitrogen isotope analyses that lead to the conclusion that groundwater sources of nitrogen into certain reaches of Fish Creek were of wastewater and animal waste origin. An additional report on the stable isotope data for hydrogen and oxygen⁹ for Fish Creek contained no interpretation of the data presented but might offer useful information regarding the age of the groundwater entering Fish Creek and hence might be used to clarify the extent and timing of release of nitrogen from wastewater disposal sites in the watershed.

Were the conclusions of the USGS reports appropriate or could they have been stronger?

The primary purpose of the USGS reports on Fish Creek was the characterization of the water quality and biological communities, but this constrained format usually precludes in-depth specific conclusions regarding impairment causes. The facts that emerge from the reports and their attending documents are meant to provide information from which the reader or resource manager can draw conclusions. For instance, a Fact Sheet on the project (Fact Sheet 2013-3036 September 2013)¹⁰ combined with the reports themselves^{5,6} make the following statements:

- The stream has a number of reach areas that have nutrient inputs that are indicated to be of sanitary wastewater and animal origin;
- The 2010 report⁵ states “Almost all of the chlorophyll-a concentrations from Fish Creek were in the range of or exceeded the range of 100 to 200 milligrams per square meter, which is suggested as an indicator of nuisance algal conditions by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency”;
- Although nutrient concentrations in Fish Creek generally were low, the standing crop of algae in Fish Creek was high compared to other streams in the region and was within the range of nuisance conditions (Interestingly, it was the notion that Fish Creek was experiencing increased macro-algae growth that started investigations in the first place – thus the lay persons’ observations were quantified by a credible source);
- The seasonal succession of Ephemeroptera-Plecoptera-Trichoptera (EPT) seen in Fish Creek varies from other streams in the area;

- The closing statements in the 2013 report question the impact of increased human population in the area of Fish Creek and the effect on macro-invertebrates and macrophytes.

The reader is left to make conclusions based on the facts stated. This reader concluded the following debatable points:

Fish Creek exhibits certain biological anomalies normally associated with degradation compared with other streams in the area. These anomalies were evident in the primary (high algae biomass) and secondary (invertebrate index shifts different from comparable streams in the area) trophic levels. The nutrient data from in-stream measurements seem inconsistent with the resulting primary production measures which lead me to question this parameter as a meaningful indicator of trophic state. The groundwater source to the stream is quantified; however the complete source area is not. The reports indicate that a tilt in the valley floor compels groundwater beneath the west bank of the Snake River to discharge into Fish Creek. This information compels concern about the present nutrient loading to Fish Creek from this groundwater drainage area. Data presented suggest the present nutrient loads are anthropogenic⁶. Given that in 1992 there was an estimated 1670 residential dwellings in the west bank of the Snake River, and there were an estimated 640 added between 1992 and 2007⁹, groundwater modeling should be conducted to determine present and future nutrient loading.

*Some discussion needs to be made at this juncture regarding the term “tipping point”. In this context, this author assumes that the committee means “that point at which no reasonable person would agree that the stream is environmentally degraded”. In any restoration efforts, part of the process is to define in precise terms the subject area’s “tipping point”. In one sense, the complaints that have been increasing since the year 2000 regarding large beds of *Cladophora* and aquatic plants indicate that someone’s concept of tipping point has been already been reached. I have suggested within this document that if we assume that the atypical algal biomass and chlorophyll-a, and the deviance of the EPT index seasonal succession from other streams in the area are at least initial indicators of degradation, then the stream is already at its tipping point.*

Can one infer a timeframe for a potential “tipping point” for the system?

Although the USGS reports were detailed in their description of existing conditions, there are noticeable gaps in the information regarding Fish Creek that preclude inferring a tipping point that extends beyond the present conditions (see sidebar).

Foremost, the unique character of Fish Creek confounds a simple analysis. USGS states that the creek is atypical in the amount of its flow comprised of groundwater. Due to a tilt in the valley floor many of the wastewater discharges from increasing development on the west bank of the Snake River enter into the alluvial aquifer and travel toward Fish Creek. Legacy nitrogen¹ from these sources may also become a factor by inducing pulses of nutrients into Fish Creek along its gaining reach areas, however there are many variables that have simply not been examined. For instance, nitrate may be reduced in the hyporheic zone (that interface between the stream water and the groundwater)^{11,12}, however the extent of this “benefit” would have to be clarified. This phenomenon may be the reason USGS investigators noted significant differences between the groundwater and stream water during certain seasons. In short, despite detailed

¹ Nitrogen in transit through groundwater on its way to Fish Creek but that was discharged to the groundwater in the distant past.

in-stream and some near-stream investigations, determining the “tipping point”, however that might be defined (see sidebar), requires additional watershed analyses be completed.

Interpretation of the USGS report’s results and conclusions in a national context

Identify other communities/watersheds with similar nutrient issues and sources.

Nutrient management issues are universal, from gross eutrophication resulting in the “dead zone” of the Gulf of Mexico,¹³ to the more subtle impacts that have plagued nearly every community in the United States. By definition, the common theme is misplacement of nutrients. The sources of the nutrients are varied. In the Chesapeake Bay Region, it is a combination of wastewater and agricultural runoff. In the area of Cape Cod, Massachusetts the primary source of nitrogen to the marine embayment and phosphorus to freshwater ponds is wastewater discharging through the groundwater to sensitive receptor sites. In the Great Lakes the issues are point source and non-point sources of phosphorus. In addition to large multi-watershed areas that discharge to nutrients into estuaries, all 48 contiguous states report nutrient issues in streams and rivers¹⁴. The listing of all impaired streams in Wyoming¹ is a testament to the pervasive nature of eutrophication effects even in rural settings.

Discuss what these communities did about their problem and subsequent results.

The common theme in all cases where mitigation efforts are conducted is the examination of issues at watershed scale. A watershed is by definition the total area of land that impacts the water resource. Depending on the geological setting, different strategies are indicated. In most areas that involve aquifers that are contiguous with the surface water resource, the first steps involve an assessment *in the groundwater watershed*.

Nearly all restoration projects across the country progress in the following sequence: define restoration goals, design assessment process, conduct assessment, summarize assessment results, and identify restoration opportunities.

Define restoration goals

All restoration projects begin with a clear definition of a target or goal. For instance, in each estuary on Cape Cod, the target nutrient maximum nitrogen load (TMDL or Total Daily Maximum Load) is based on the goal of *restoring eelgrass beds* (a general indicator of good “health” in the system since eelgrass is used as a nursery area for fish and shellfish).

Design assessment process

The assessment process in this example is being carried out in each of the 89 estuaries. Tools and appropriate methodologies were chosen to calculate the present nitrogen loads, calculate the hydrodynamic interactions (dilution dispersion, tidal lens exchange etc.) and account for attenuating factors.

Conduct Assessment

Computer models were run and calibrated based on monitoring data. Load reductions necessary to achieve eelgrass restoration were calculated.

Summarize assessment results

Results were summarized that provided the information for restoration and reduction in nitrogen load opportunities.

These efforts have prompted a number of towns to form and implement a Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan that includes hard (infrastructure) and soft (regulation) means to achieve the target nitrogen concentrations in the embayments.

In addition, environmental monitoring usually continued in the impacted resource and was sometimes increased in spatial and temporal scope so that the system could be better characterized (i.e. long term “natural” changes could be documented), and the response to any mitigation efforts such as Best Management Practices or the application of pollution treatment technologies could be assessed.

Environmental assessments can be iterative processes where the initial investigations lead to subsequent ones until the actual causes of the impact are delineated. Without a clear indication of the *cause*, mitigation activities usually fail. In many cases involving watersheds in which groundwater is a conveyance of nutrients, the use of various computer-assisted tools are used. Geographic Information Systems have been variously used to depict the entire watershed boundary. Following this rudimentary step, all land use data and information is overlaid onto the map so that potential nutrient sources can be depicted. In its more sophisticated application, housing density, demographic and population, septic systems, road drainage, water use, soil drainage classification and other indicative data can be displayed. These data are often also used as inputs to various groundwater models that predict nitrogen loads or contributions from the various sources to a sensitive receptor site. The level of detail and sophistication of the groundwater modeling is usually dependent on a combination of factors such as the geological complexities in the area, the amount of development or of other sources in the area such as agriculture, grazing and wastewater discharge and others. In areas where nutrients discharge to surface waters, a linked hydrodynamic model, which factors in dilution and export (via tides or stream flow) of nutrients is generally used.

Compare these communities and strategies with the Fish Creek Watershed.

The Fish Creek Watershed shares elements with countless projects across the country. Fish Creek is a resource that offers a number of desirable qualities for the fisherman, the naturalist, the wildlife and the economy. Although at this point in time, there is no wholesale agreement that it is being impacted or impaired (it is not on the state 303(d) Impaired Waters List¹) the data presented in the USGS assessment reports and other reports compel a reconsideration of this point. The watershed supports many uses and activities which hold the potential for impacting the stream in a manner that reduces some of the desirable values. Similar to many communities across the country it is those individuals who are most intimately familiar with the resource that first notice the signs of its altering.

In many communities, organizations like the Crescent H Stream and Trail Committee have evolved in their advocacy to take the lead in efforts to protect resources.

Recommend the next steps and possible solution.

Outline practical next steps that should be taken to improve water quality.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step Lao-tzu

Setting a Goal

Restoration and preservation in Fish Creek will be a process. The first step in that process is the identification of specific, measurable and achievable goals. This may seem simple and fundamental, but it drives the process forward. Derived from the RFP and the information requested to be reviewed, I propose that the goals for the protection/restoration project could be:

“To preserve and restore the ecological integrity of Fish Creek and restore areas of macro-algae to pre-year 2000 levels”

Following this very first step, a number of activities and tasks can occur in parallel. Very early in the process of advancing the goals, your committee should communicate with groups and organizations that can support your goals. This would include discussion with governmental agencies with jurisdiction in the area of Fish Creek and the watershed. If time and resources are constraining, the committee may consider integrating a social network component to maintain communication with stakeholders. It should be understood that consensus building and public input is an essential part of a preservation and restoration project. Every regulation and every Best Management Practice involves some member of the public. Without a campaign of some sort to enlist the support of an educated public there is little hope of success. Some advocacy groups, where the anticipated restoration efforts will affect a broad section of an uninformed public, have actually hired public relations consultants to develop and get their message disseminated.

With assistance from membership in the committee, government officials and interested stakeholders, some tasks regarding the watershed assessment need to be compiled. The Assessment Reports^{5,6,10} point to unknowns in the watershed that need to be investigated. Primarily the actual source area for the groundwater that supplies base flow to Fish Creek requires clarification. The basic questions to be answered include:

- What areas between Snake River and Fish Creek contribute to the groundwater flow into the creek?
- What is the timescale of the flows?
- What are the major uses in the area that might contribute nutrients?
- What is the nutrient load of these sources?
- What factors in the groundwater passage would attenuate these sources?

- What are the projected increases in these loads into the future (at full build-out)?

What is described directly above is a groundwater study. These studies are generally conducted by hydrogeological consultants. There is a range of complexity to these studies. The cursory type of study generally maps broad groundwater contours in coarse scale and gives general information on groundwater direction. At the other end of the scale, refined groundwater models allow the user to predict flow paths of plumes and allow the adjustments of variables. Layered on top of these models can be nutrient loading data that can predict nitrogen concentration of groundwater at various locations. Eventually, since the Snake River levels are controlled, and these levels subsequently control the hydraulic head in the area between the Snake River and Fish Creek, a more complex hydrographic model may be required, particularly if there is an opportunity to control nutrient plume paths by controlling the proximal hydraulic head. Initially, some hand-driven wells at the groundwater stream interface could be installed and monitored for nitrogen and phosphorus in the areas of high *Cladophora* growth as an exploratory study to see if the nutrient values are in scale with the Assessment Report values. This should be done in consultation with USGS scientists to validate the worth of the exercise.

Early in the overall process the efforts should identify how the progress on goals will be measured. For this task I would suggest contacting the authors of the original reports and other professionals at USGS and request assistance in quantifying success. For instance, what measure would have to be made and how often would it have to be completed in order to document success? In a success scenario of the proposed goal, the amount of *Cladophora* is reduced. It is likely that a series of samples will be needed at various intervals and at such a frequency as to allow statistical comparison of before and after effects. The EPT index may be another measure of success that can be evaluated. In each instance, there should be agreement on these measures and commitment to make them or have them conducted by a qualified entity.

Outline possible regulatory mechanisms for implementing Best Management Practices

Any scenario where the restriction of activities or the expenditure of funds is indicated to achieve goals requires a comprehensive campaign of education, outreach and public discourse in context and compliance with state and local regulations. This is particularly important in the area of Fish Creek since the conclusion regarding environmental impact is not supported by the creek's present status (it is not on the Wyoming 303(d) Impaired Waters List). It appears from our examination of the information that activities that produce or deposit nitrogen or phosphorus in the watershed might be appropriate candidates for controls. This would include but not be limited to regulation of onsite septic systems (requiring advance treatment), fertilizer use (application rate and timing regulations), domestic animal controls (manure and bedding storage and handling), road drainage modification (drain re-direction/redesign), buffer strip modification, riparian vegetation regulations in all ditches and streams entering Fish Creek, and modification of discharge permits for larger wastewater discharges. In addition, irrigation return water issues may require further investigation.

Recommend any additional studies necessary to strengthen selection and performance of proposed BMPs.

Although the selection of BMPs is premature, we would recommend the following areas of research are necessary to support the selection of BMPs mentioned above.

Foremost, the study and document that supports nitrogen and phosphorus controls is the nutrient loading model. It is true and generally accepted that concerning nutrients in groundwater, “less is better”. There are few controls however that won’t cost either money or convenience. Without some evidence that a BMP is both necessary and will offer an appreciable environmental benefit, their successful implementation either by mandate or volunteer is unlikely. The pivotal study that strengthens and supports all regulatory and volunteer BMPs is the groundwater nutrient loading model.

Comments regarding Best Management Practices (BMP) and their Implementation

The staff at Applied Environmental Design and Research (AEDR) admits little knowledge of the regulatory framework that supports local regulation in Wyoming. A consideration of BMP implementation in our experience is usually associated with a robust body of information that supports their use and promises to advance specific environmental goals. For this reason suggestions in this report begin with recommendations for determining present loads in the watershed and evaluating flow paths for the major load areas. In the absence of a clear mandate as might be issued if Fish Creek were listed under Impaired Waters, a tiered approach to implementing BMPs is indicated. BMPs that require no expenditure of funds and little required change in society habits or conveniences are in the first tier. These include an examination of the practices for landscape and crop fertilization for recommendations regarding volume of application and timing. Some of the most egregious abuse of fertilization in some areas comes from landscape practices. To address this issue, BMPs once developed to reflect regional land use, must be accompanied by public outreach campaign regarding the subject that includes lists of native plantings (that generally require less fertilizer and pesticides), and recommendations regarding the correct timing and amount of fertilizer to be applied. These informational resources originate from County Extension Services in many parts of the country. The University of Wyoming has created a number of documents addressing various nutrient issues¹⁵⁻¹⁷ and should be contacted for advice or forming educational elements of a program for nutrient control in the Fish Creek Watershed. Other soft measures include a review of stormwater drainage practices in the area to look for improvement opportunities. A major pathway for phosphorus into an aquatic system is overland flow. In some instances merely diverting direct flow across buffer areas can result in marked reductions of phosphorus inputs. In some areas, development practices should be reviewed to include stormwater diversion techniques that minimize overland flow. These soft measures and others generally can be implemented without difficulty because they require very little modification of behavior and in some instance can be shown to have a distinct advantage.

When BMPs involve costs to an individual or municipality, the logical questions arise: How much will it cost? Will it fix the problem? Is there really a problem to be fixed? How do we know....? Since these questions dominate a discussion of implementation, we suggest herein that the problem in Fish Creek

be addressed in a comprehensive manner that includes further study to document the sources of nutrients, a monitoring plan that can detect improvement, a public process that conveys the need in appropriate terms, and a clear focus on the goal to restore the macro-algae and rooted vegetation levels in selected reaches of Fish Creek to pre year 2000 levels. It is only under the compulsion of good data that one could expect a homeowner to embrace the concept of advanced onsite wastewater treatment (conservatively adding \$6,000- \$10,000 to the cost of a septic system) or a treatment plant to enhance their nitrogen removal or for a municipality to engage in infrastructural costs of nutrient reduction. The Clean Water Act and its attending documents was created to facilitate the restoration of the nation's waters and has incorporated into the process a series of checks and balances (particularly in regard to the proper determination of nutrient loading cases) that add to the force of law to correct environmental degradation. The committee is advised to emulate in most detail the processes that are proven to resolve environmental impacts and are summarized herein. While AEDR stands ready to assist the Crescent H Stream and Trail Committee in completing the survey aspects of the Fish Creek Watershed, we believe that the best use of resources would be a groundwater modeling effort by a qualified hydrogeologist to determine at minimum those areas providing the source of groundwater entering those reaches of Fish Creek that have demonstrated the anomalies associated with degradation.

Final Comments

In this report we have hope to guide the membership of the Committee to some conclusions regarding Fish Creek that will allow you to continue the process of protection and begin the process of restoring Fish Creek to the pre-year 2000 conditions. What begins as anecdotes about algae growth, made by individuals who love the resource, often are just the early signal of more substantial changes to come. Our strongest urging is to enlist USGS or a competent hydrologist to delineate the watershed, establish flow path and timeframes, and identify the variables affecting these elements. This process has proven itself time and again in preparing the way for defensible BMPs. While some BMP recommendations can move forward under the general principle that less is better concerning nutrients, when higher costs or significant behavior changes are indicated it is of paramount importance to have credible data to support the requirements.

We have outlined a process that we believe will serve to prevent further degradation. It does not necessarily require our initial input. You have asked us to develop BMPs. We are advising that proper preliminary steps, if made, will result in more robust support for nutrient controls in the watershed. Frankly, in our area nearly every recommended BMP concerning nutrient reduction is questioned as to the data that support it. That being said, we are prepared to help you in any way move toward your goals. If you have any questions regarding the report, please feel free to email them to me at gheufelder@capecod.net.

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