

Rocky Mountain National Park

Fact Sheet

June 2006

Title: Grand River Ditch Failure

Status/Background:

- Construction of the Grand River Ditch began in the 1890s, prior to the establishment of the park, and is one of Colorado's oldest trans-mountain water diversions. It is located at an elevation of 10,250 feet in the northwest corner of the park along the Never Summer Range within Grand County.
- The Grand River Ditch is nearly 14 miles long, up to 20 feet wide and six feet deep and is owned by the Water Supply and Storage Company of Fort Collins, Colorado, which has a state decreed water right and a federal right-of-way to operate within the park.
- On May 30, 2003, Water Supply & Storage Company officials notified the park that a breach of the Grand River Ditch occurred approximately two miles southwest of La Poudre Pass, within the park boundary.
- The breach measured 100 feet wide, eroding away the side of the ditch, associated maintenance road and mountainside, causing significant damage to a lodgepole pine and an old growth riparian spruce/fir forest, Lulu Creek, the Colorado River and associated wetlands and park visitor infrastructure.
- Approximately 105 cubic feet per second (cfs) of water from the Grand River Ditch spilled into the park for several hours at a location where a natural water drainage was not already present, causing a large amount of rock, soil, sediment and trees to be removed and transported downstream.
- The breach occurred at a time when the Colorado River was experiencing typical high water levels adding additional stress to downstream road and foot bridges. The bridges were closed to the public for safety concerns.
- Much of the upper Colorado River watershed within the park was closed to park visitors and employees until water levels receded and an accurate assessment of the trail conditions could be made and determined safe. Many trails, bridges, campsites and historic sites were also closed to public entry.
- A temporary 24-inch culvert was installed to span the breach site and carry residual flow across the breach. This culvert was later replaced by two 60-inch culverts, which has allowed the ditch to operate for the past two seasons at normal levels. More permanent structures are pending.
- The Water Supply and Storage Company holds a right-of-way for the Grand River Ditch, granted by the Secretary of the Interior, under the provisions of the Act of March 3, 1891. On March 21, 1907, the Water Supply and Storage Company entered into stipulations with the United States Forest Service regarding the operation, maintenance and other activities on the right-of-way. The National Park Service is a successor-in-interest to that agreement. As part of the stipulation, the Company agrees: *(6) To pay the United States for any and all damage sustained by reason of use and occupation of said forest reserve by the company, its successors and assigns, regardless of the cause and circumstance under which such damage may occur.*
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is a cooperator providing inventory information about park fish populations.
- Due to the extent of damages to federal property, the NPS is pursuing a claim as defined by 16 U.S.C. 19jj and the 1907 liability stipulation. Injuries to park resources including wetlands, stream channels, vegetation, wildlife, cultural values and trail infrastructure are currently being assessed. A restoration determination will then be identified on how to feasibly restore the injured area. Park officials have complied with the FOIA request submitted by the Water Supply and Storage Company, and the two parties have agreed to meet and discuss the opportunities to cooperatively restore the injured area.
- The NPS has compiled a complete injury assessment and preliminary restoration plan to restore the resources injured by the breach and the services they provided. The case has been referred to the U.S. Department of Justice through the U.S. Department of Interior, Solicitor's Office.

