Statements from 2016–2018 Conference Planning Committee Members

Catherine T. Ortega Klett, NM WRRI (retired)

It was a privilege to help coordinate the first three conferences associated with the Animas and San Juan Watersheds that took place in 2016, 2017, and 2018. After the Gold King Mine spill in August of 2015, there was a clear need to hold a public forum that would bring together academics, agencies, local representatives, and community members to discuss the issues surrounding the spill and ongoing monitoring efforts.

A very active and dedicated planning committee was put together and worked throughout the year to design conference programs that addressed the data and research focused on impacts of the spill. Each year the program included a session open to the public at no charge that encouraged people to voice their concerns and questions. In 2018 the open session, referred to as a Teach-In, took place at the Navajo Shiprock Chapter House. The public turnout at all of these events showed the keen interest of the community and their desire to learn from the researchers and technical staff involved in the ongoing research.

The conferences included field trips with guided tours focused on the geology, mining, agriculture, and water resources issues in the watersheds of northern New Mexico and southwestern Colorado. I will always remember these tours fondly as a true learning experience that included spectacular views of this gorgeous region. These proceedings provide background information, project summaries, and several papers that were presented at the conferences. It is my hope that the proceedings contribute to the understanding and communication of the impacts of the Gold King Mine spill and other relevant water quality issues that continue to be studied.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

EPA appreciated the opportunity to participate in the planning committee because these conferences provided a forum for discussions amongst a diverse suite of entities. Opportunities for real world demonstrations prove to garner consistent interest among participants (e.g., field trips and water quality collection demonstrations).

Paul Montoia, City of Farmington

The 2015 Gold King Mine release caught everyone in the Animas River watershed completely off guard. This event raised questions by citizens, local/county governments, and the Native American community about the quality of water from the Animas River and how long this event would continue. There was a deep concern by the public and local governments to know all sides of this event.

One avenue to keep the public and local officials informed during the dark period of this event was through the education that these annual forums provided. The experts addressed the issues in a way easily understood by all. The stakeholders may not have agreed with the analysis but were given an opportunity to address their concerns. It is quite amazing the varied, and valuable, information these forums provided from local, state, and federal experts and how willing they were to share this information and to answer questions.

There is no question the successes of these forums were the result of stakeholders working together with federal, state, Native American, and local governments to address this issue.

Stacy Timmons, NM Bureau of Geology & Mineral Resources

New Mexico faces numerous water challenges in having enough water for our myriad of uses, being the state with the least amount of water in the country. Therefore, when water quality concerns arise, with possible impacts to this very limited resource, we pay attention. When the Gold King Mine spill occurred in 2015, visibly changing the quality of the water flowing through the Animas River in New Mexico, questions arose about potential impacts to people, plants and animals, as well as potential longer term impacts to water resources and the environment. While this region had some basic research and monitoring in the area, little scientific knowledge was available about the water and its basic interactions as it moves through the region. This event, while very emotionally disturbing and economically impactful, also provided an opportunity - the opportunity to raise awareness and understanding of the Animas River water and its importance and interconnections through the watershed.

Through the research projects undertaken with various grants funded through the NM Environment Department and others, and the collaboration with NM WRRI, many of the biggest water questions were able to be addressed. Most importantly, the research conducted was made available to the community through workshops and presentations held in the area. This is how applied research projects of this nature should be done, and brought back to the communities impacted. The presentations provided through the NM WRRI leadership continues to be a valuable resource to the regional body of scientific knowledge.

Johanna Blake, U.S. Geological Survey

The Animas and San Juan Watersheds Conference has provided an excellent opportunity for scientists, regulators, and community members to share information about issues in these watersheds. These issues have included biogeochemical water quality and sediment quality, sediment concentrations in water, and the effects contaminated water has on plants. Efforts at monitoring and scientific investigations since the Gold King Mine release in 2015 have identified further questions in the Animas and San Juan Rivers that go beyond the release of metals from a single spill. For example, the Navajo Nation EPA has identified areas of elevated metal concentrations along the San Juan River not associated with the Animas River. In addition, the conference has helped to build new collaborations that continue to move forward in understanding issues in these watersheds. The Animas and San Juan Watersheds Conference has been an important contributor to furthering ongoing collaboration and understanding these two important watersheds.

Kevin A. Lombard, New Mexico State University

Northwest New Mexico has 150,000 irrigated acres held within three watersheds: the Animas, La Plata, and San Juan. These river systems irrigate a diverse array of crops and nurture livestock, supporting the diverse livelihoods and cultures of gardeners, farmers and ranchers of all scale, from backyard to the largest contiguous farm in North America, the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI), at over 70,000 acres. The Gold King Mine Spill of 2015 was a turning point in interagency cooperation in northwest New Mexico. The unprecedented collaboration between multiple agencies, colleges and universities, state and tribal entities, citizen scientists and the body of research held herein examining the Animas River, post spill, is helping to broaden our understanding of the greater San Juan River watershed and the interconnectivity of upstream and downstream users.
