

Removing Dams from the High Uinta Wilderness

Thirteen dams were constructed 50-70 years before the designation of the High Uinta Wilderness. The dams enlarged natural lakes for water storage and release into streams when needed for downstream agriculture. The Central Utah Project Completion Act authorized the Uinta Basin Replacement Project to develop new water storage, to expand water supplies and improve environmental conditions. Major features of the project included: 1) enlargement of an existing reservoir outside the wilderness to provide a longer, larger, and more reliable supply of water, closer to the location of water use to improve access and lower operational and maintenance costs; and, 2) improve wilderness character, fisheries, and wildlife, by removing 13 dams made unnecessary by the newly enlarged reservoir.

The 13 dams were simple, earthen-filled structures with head gates that required significant maintenance in order to sustain their integrity. The original construction, operation, and maintenance practices were no longer economically feasible. Without continued maintenance, the dams would be at risk of failure that would cause severe damage to the wilderness, and catastrophic downstream harm. The decision was made to alter and stabilize the reservoirs as close to natural as possible in a no-hazard condition posing no flood risk greater than natural conditions, requiring no maintenance, and requiring no inspections.

Water rights were transferred from the dammed high mountain lakes downstream to the enlarged reservoir. Headgates were removed and dams breached so as to leave a broad outlet, and the lake at or near its natural level. Outlet pipes were removed or plugged. Non-functioning representative and historically significant parts of each dam were left in place to preserve historic values. Stabilized at the lakes' near natural levels, the lakes returned to their natural hydrologic flow, thus improving wilderness character.