

A river's many uses



By CHRISTINE ROBINSON
Star-Tribune staff writer Friday, September 21, 2007

The North Platte River is more than a strip of water cutting through Casper, flowing east and irrigating crops.

It is more than a gutter for spring run-off and rain.

Casper and the cities and towns downriver use the year-round flow for drinking water, fishing and recreation.

"All of our drinking water comes from the North Platte River either from the surface water treatment plant or shallow alluvial ground-water wells," said David Hill, Public Utilities Manager with the city of Casper.

People organizing a Saturday river cleanup are keeping the North Platte's many uses in mind as they plan to pick up litter, stabilize the banks and remove chunks of debris.

Some of the bigger pieces of debris may not be removed until next year. It's a delicate process because removal can disturb the river bed, and towns downstream need to be prepared to filter the extra sediment out of the water.

Casper's drinking water comes from wells in the winter and requires little processing and cleaning. But between May and September, the water is pulled from the river. Sediment is removed and the water is filtered, chlorinated, ozonated and mixed with a corrosion inhibitor before it is pumped into the city's water supply and out your kitchen tap.

"We meet all of the EPA standards for safe drinking water," he said.

Hill said the biggest problem with the river now as far as drinking water is concerned is the turbidity caused by thunderstorms, which stirs up sediment in the water.

"We are blessed that we live at the head of the river," he said.

The pollution Casper used to produce is a thing of the past.

Margaret Teevens, the infrastructure and maintenance coordinator for the city, considers the river's recreational use one of the most important that it can offer to the city of Casper.

"It has become a larger area where the kids can play and tube the river," Teevens said. "Our kids are drawn to water and need to be able to keep playing in clean water."

To have a stretch of uninterrupted river roughly 100 miles long is the envy of many other cities in the U.S., said Anne MacKinnon, an adjunct professor with the School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming.

MacKinnon showed an economist from Oregon the river and was explaining its history when he told her it is a strip of water other cities would "kill for."

He was impressed not only that water flows steadily for 12 months of the year, but also by the bank-side availability and public lands access.

She said the city recognizes the importance of the North Platte as an amenity and applauds its efforts to keep the water clean and the area appealing to recreationalists.

The river is used for irrigation in eastern Wyoming and Nebraska. But when the series of dams on the North Platte were built -- Pathfinder, Alcova, Glendo and others -- MacKinnon said it was the downstream farms and ranches that were productive enough to help finance the projects.

It is also because of the dams and effective water management that the river is able to provide habitat to a successful trout population, she said. The North Platte in the 1800s was a wide, dirty river, flowing heavy in the spring and drying up to almost nothing in the late summer.

"Because they have these two reservoirs they have been able to manage for instream flow, keeping the minimum every month," MacKinnon said. "That has been an added management approach and has made the river even more attractive."

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