

Environmentalists oppose Denver project to divert more water from Western Slope

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Denver has hit turbulence in its biggest water-supply project since the 1960s — a \$225 million effort to prevent future shortages.

Denver Water proposes to divert enough for 45,000 families from mountain rivers on the western side of the Continental Divide, then pump it through tunnels to Front Range reservoirs, including an expanded Gross Reservoir above Boulder.

But the plan requires federal approval, and at public hearings, opponents concerned about environmental harm have argued that Denver must rely more on using less water — not pump more from the mountains.

"We need a paradigm shift. We need to start living within our means," said Steve Paul, president of a Grand Lake homeowners group on the Western Slope and one of dozens who have testified before federal engineers.

Denver Water officials counter that their 1.3 million customers already have been cutting consumption — currently 87 gallons a day per person — by about 18 percent a year since 2005. They say nearly half the annual water-supply shortfall they project by 2030 — 34,000 acre-feet — will be met through further cuts.

"We're doing everything we can with conservation," supply project manager Travis Bray said.

Failure to approve Denver's proposed diversion of 18,000 acre-feet a year through the existing Roberts and Moffat tunnels would create "an unacceptable risk," Denver Water spokeswoman Stacey Chesney said.

"And we would have to begin the entire environmental-impact-statement process again with a different alternative, which would be more expensive," Chesney said.

The battle promises to intensify in coming months as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a federal agency that oversees water projects, reviews public testimony and Denver's submissions.

Denver has not managed to push through a project on this scale since construction of Dillon Reservoir in 1963. The Environmental Protection Agency's 1990 veto of Denver's proposed \$1 billion Two Forks Dam still looms in water-authority boardrooms. That project, backed by developers and opposed by environmentalists, also was aimed at preventing shortages.

The \$225 million cost is already covered by a recently approved rate hike for Denver Water customers, which will raise typical water bills by about \$40 a year.

Denver already owns rights to the water it would divert from the upper Colorado River basin — from the Blue River in Summit County and from the Fraser and Williams Fork rivers and dozens of streams in Grand County.

But Trout Unlimited sportsmen's advocates said that stream flows there already are dangerously low, threatening aquatic life, with algae increasing and once-clear Grand Lake turning cloudy. Boulder-area residents warned of harm to wildlife and lifestyle disruptions during construction to raise the dam and clear trees in expanding Gross Reservoir.

Some 350 advocates and community leaders have attended hearings in Boulder, Denver and Granby. The Army Corps of Engineers is now accepting public comments.

Learning how to live on less water "is a reality we're going to have to face," said Becky Long, water-caucus coordinator for the Colorado Environmental Coalition. "So why keep putting it off? . . . While Denver deserves credit for what they've done on conservation, we have a lot farther to go."

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