

Pipeline plan takes shape



The blue waters of Flaming Gorge Reservoir in southwest Wyoming lie beneath the Uinta Mountains to the south in this photo from November. A Colorado entrepreneur wants to build a pipeline from the reservoir to Colorado's Front Range. (Jeff Gearino, Star-Tribune)

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GREEN RIVER -- An ambitious plan to build a 560-mile-long pipeline to pump water from southwest Wyoming's Flaming Gorge Reservoir to southeast Wyoming and the Front Range in Colorado is moving forward.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials said this week the agency is beginning work on an environmental impact statement that will analyze the impacts of the proposed regional water supply project.

Army Corps project manager Rena Brand said the agency has scheduled public "scoping" meetings in Green River on April 14 and Laramie on April 16 to discuss the project.

Colorado businessman Aaron Million has been quietly shopping the idea around for almost four years. The private water development group, Million Conservation Resource Group, has filed for permits to start the approval process.

Million envisions building the pipeline -- which would draw water from intake points located on Flaming Gorge Reservoir and upstream on the Green River in Sweetwater County -- at an estimated cost of \$4 billion.

The route would run from the reservoir on the Wyoming-Utah border, following Interstate 80 across the Continental Divide to Laramie. From there, it would head south along U.S. Highway 287 into Colorado.

The pipeline would deliver about 250,000 acre feet of water to points as far south as Pueblo, according to project plans. The pipeline would operate on a perpetual basis through 2030 and beyond.

The water would be obtained from the Green River Basin as part of the unused portion of water allocated

to the state of Wyoming and Colorado under the Upper Colorado River Compact, according to plans.

In Wyoming, about 25,000 acre feet of water would be delivered annually to users in the Platte River Basin. The remaining 225,000 acre feet of water would be delivered annually to the South Platte River and Arkansas River basins in Colorado.

The most conservative estimates predict it would take five years or more to permit and build the pipeline once it overcomes significant political and logistical hurdles.

The 45-year-old Flaming Gorge Dam is located about 70 miles south of the city of Green River just across the Utah border. The dam created the 91-mile-long Flaming Gorge Reservoir, a world-class fishery, and the Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area, which attracts more than 2 million visitors annually.

Two intake points

Drawing water from Flaming Gorge -- which can hold up to 3.8 million acre feet of water -- and the Green River would affect few irrigators and other water users, Million contends.

An acre foot -- the amount of water needed to flood one acre of land with one foot of water -- is about the amount of water consumed by one or two families annually.

The potential water users for the proposed project would include agriculture, municipalities and industries in southeastern Wyoming and Colorado's Front Range, according to an Army Corps notice in the Federal Register.

Two water withdrawal facilities would be constructed as part of the project. One would be located on the east side of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and the other on the east bank of the Green River, about 200 feet downstream from the boundary of the national wildlife refuge.

A water treatment storage reservoir would also be constructed near the Green River intake system, according to plans.

The water pipeline system would be about 560 miles long and would feature three water storage/flow regulation reservoirs along the route, including one in Wyoming at Lake Hattie west of Laramie. Officials said 16 natural gas-powered pump stations would also be constructed.

Brand said the agency will examine a full range of reasonable alternatives as part of the environmental impact study, including alternatives with different withdrawal points or only one withdrawal point, and alternative storage reservoir locations.

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