

# Residents: Proposed pipeline would affect industry, quality of life, fish

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By JEFF GEARINO  
Southwest Wyoming bureau

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GREEN RIVER -- Tap your own rivers in western Colorado if you need water and leave our Green River alone, southwest Wyoming residents emphatically told a Fort Collins entrepreneur Tuesday night.

Businessman Aaron Million attended the meeting. He hopes to build a 560-mile pipeline to move Wyoming's unallocated water from the Green River Basin to the Front Range.

"We want our river to be a river, not a pipeline to Colorado," Kemmerer resident Cal Lundgren said.

It was a sentiment echoed time and again during a meeting attended by an estimated 200-plus in the Green River High School gymnasium.

"I'm not happy with this project at all," Lundgren said. "This is a bad project that needs to be stopped."

The locals said the unique, privately funded water diversion project will have no real benefits for southwest Wyoming. They claimed it would hurt industry, curtail future growth, threaten a world-class fishery and impact the livelihoods of cities such as Green River and neighboring Rock Springs, which depend on the Green River for their very existence.

"Why does Wyoming have to suffer for (Colorado's) difficulties?" said Reid West of Rock Springs. "Why tear up all our ground for a pipeline to help Colorado? Why can't you take it out of the Ox Bow (in Colorado) instead? We don't trust your intentions."

Green River Mayor Hank Castillon said his city is opposed to the project.

He said drawing water from the river could hurt the city's long-standing, multimillion-dollar tourism and recreation efforts that have been constructed around the river as it traverses through the city.

"We need water for these projects, for industry, for growth ... and if you take water (from upriver) it will affect the city, it will affect recreation and our future growth," Castillon said.

Rock Springs Mayor Tim Kaumo agreed.

"The effects on our socioeconomic quality of life is of great concern to us," he said, noting the trona, coal and gas industries rely on water from the river.

"People need to keep an eye on this one ... because it's not for us," he said.

Sweetwater County Commission Chairwoman Debby Boese said the county and its communities rely on a dependable supply of water from the Green River to attract and sustain agriculture, residential, recreational, commercial and industrial development.

"I hope you don't think this is a done deal ... but I think you do," Boese told Million. "We value the water like we value our lives. We have to get together and fight for our land. We may have to wage battle."

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The pipeline would draw water from intake points located on the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and upstream on the Green River in Sweetwater County just below the Seedskaadee National Wildlife Refuge and Fontenelle Dam, according to plans.

The pipeline's five proposed routes mostly run from the reservoir on the Wyoming-Utah border, then follow Interstate 80's southern transportation corridor across the Continental Divide to Laramie. From there, they head south along U.S. Highway 287 into Colorado.

Million envisions diverting about 250,000 acre feet of water per year from the reservoir to Colorado's bustling Front Range near Denver.

In Wyoming, about 25,000 acre feet of the water would be delivered annually to users in the Platte River Basin, with

the rest being delivered to the South Platte River and Arkansas River basins in Colorado.

An acre foot is the amount of water needed to flood one acre of land with one foot of water. One or two families can consume an acre foot of water on average annually.

Flaming Gorge Reservoir is operated by the Bureau of Reclamation and begins a few miles south of the city of Green River.

The sprawling, 91-mile-long lake runs across the Wyoming/Utah border and is held back by the 45-year-old Flaming Gorge Dam.

The reservoir can store approximately 3.8 million acre feet of water, but the lake is far from full now, according to agency data. The Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area attracts more than two million visitors annually.

### **Slightly reduced levels**

Million said the funding is secure for the pipeline project. He estimated it could take five or more years to complete and cost as much as \$3 billion.

The project is spearheaded by a private water development group, Million Conservation Resource Group, which has filed for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permitting.

Million's firm has retained Cheyenne lawyer Steve Freudenthal, Gov. Dave Freudenthal's brother, and former Wyoming state engineer Jeff Fassett to help develop the project.

Million admitted the project could lead to slightly reduced water levels in the river and reservoir over the next 40 years.

But he said BuRec and other modeling studies have shown there should be plenty of water to meet the Flaming Gorge Dam's original mission -- to create a reservoir to provide water for hydropower, recreation and federal endangered fish species -- while also helping to meet Colorado's future water supply needs.

"We're looking at (tapping) some surpluses above those needs ... which would allow those (hydropower, endangered species and recreation) issues to be met and this project to move forward," Million said.

"If the water is not there, this project will not move forward," Million told residents.

Million said he developed the idea as a graduate student at Colorado State University and put together the best "water team" he could find three years ago to plan the project.

"Their one directive was to find any fatal flaws ... or any snakebites to this project," he said, adding that thus far in the process, they haven't.

The project aims to tap the unappropriated water in the Colorado portion of the Green River for the pipeline. The water would be obtained under Colorado's rights under the existing Colorado River Compact.

Colorado law allows anyone to take unappropriated water and put it to use in the state. And the Colorado River Compact allows water to be diverted from one state to another as long as water allocations under the compact are met.

Million said there has been some interest from water users on the eastern side of Wyoming, including agricultural and municipal.

"Whether we move some of that water to Wyoming ... is up to Wyoming," he said.

### **Kokanee salmon**

Of particular concern to sport fisherman Ron Carey of Green River is the project's potential effect on the kokanee salmon populations in Flaming Gorge Reservoir.

"We have a world-class kokanee fishery, which is really a unique deal here," Carey said.

Carey said the reservoir's kokanee populations could be threatened if the lake's current water levels were to be significantly altered.

He noted the trophy lake trout and brown trout that inhabit the reservoir depend on kokanee salmon as their main food source.

"Kokanee is a shore spawning fish that likes shallow water," Carey said. "They spawn in October through November and then swim upriver through the middle of May ... and they only spawn" when the fish are 3 to 4 years old.

"Between that October and May, the water level can't fall much or it will impact those kokanee ... and if we have four years of (low levels), there will be no kokanee left," he said.

"I don't know what this water is worth to Million, but I know what those kokanee are worth to me," Carey added.

Rena Brand, project manager for the Corps of Engineers in Littleton, Colo., said Million's permit application begins the agency's "highest level of review" of the proposed project: the more-detailed environmental impact statement, which is expected to take up to five years to complete.

*Contact southwest Wyoming bureau reporter Jeff Gearino at 307-875-5359 or gearino@tribcsp.com.*