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Water

Western Slope has it, Front Range needs it

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When it comes to water supply, Western Slope residents are the haves, while the rapidly growing cities of the Front Range chafe at their role as have-nots. The Pueblo Chieftain reported recently that members of the Arkansas Basin Roundtable (which represents Pueblo and the southeastern corner of the state) have asked the state to "look at the potential water that could be gained by drying up Western Slope agriculture." The Metro and South Platte roundtables submitted similar letters to the Interbasin Compact Committee last month.

One wonders what they intend to eat after they have dried up agriculture. Each large drainage in the state has its own roundtable. That makes sense, especially in the rural areas where people may feel more loyalty to the land and its water supply than with state politics. When it comes to water, Westerners do not identify themselves, first and foremost, as residents of their state, nor do they feel any particular kinship with people clear across that state who covet their water for urban development.

Reed Dils, who represents the Arkansas basin on the Colorado Water Conservation Board, told the Chieftain, "(The Western Slope roundtables) are still saying 'not one drop.' I still see a strong split between the East and West Slope."

Is it any wonder, when water interests on the other side of the Divide talk not about sharing but about drying up the Western Slope? Front Range communities have been gazing longingly across the mountains for quite some time. They are thirsting for Gunnison water now stored in Blue Mesa Reservoir, and projects are being considered to tap water from the Yampa River, from the Colorado near Grand Junction, and from Flaming Gorge Reservoir on the border of Utah and Wyoming.

Water in Southwest Colorado already is scarce and closely allocated, and it is a long way to the Front Range. The fact remains, however, that demand on the other side of the mountains is growing rapidly, as it is in states downstream. While Colorado water law is specific and strong, money talks, perhaps loudly enough to make water run uphill and over the Continental Divide. In other words, drying up the Western Slope is not an idea that those who live on that slope can afford to dismiss as impossible.

Josh Penry, a Republican candidate for governor, says Colorado needs to quit talking about water projects and start building them. Large water projects traditionally have required large infusions of federal funding, so that is not something the governor can accomplish on his own, but it is instructive to hear Penry say, "We study too much. We analyze too much."

Sure. Part of that analysis serves to determine what the basins that have water should demand before they start piping it eastward.

Penry knows where the votes are concentrated, and it is not on the Western Slope. Neither is the money. The water is – for now.