

Water pipeline foes organize

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GREEN RIVER -- It's time to organize and bring in some heavy hitters to help Sweetwater County fight two proposed projects that would divert water from the Green River Basin to Colorado's thirsty Front Range, local officials have decided.

Municipal and county officials agreed Tuesday night to form a coalition -- and perhaps hire a public relations firm -- to "wage battle" against the proposals that aim to take water from the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and move it to Colorado.

Officials decided that there's strength in numbers -- if the opposition can be organized into a "united front."

Municipal leaders thought a little PR might not hurt, either. They agreed to launch some sort of "proactive, aggressive campaign" against the projects as soon as feasible.

"We need to look at how best to tackle this big elephant facing us. ... This is a complex and unique struggle we're in," Green River Mayor Hank Castillon said in his endorsement of the coalition idea.

Neighboring Rock Springs Mayor Tim Kaumo said it's critical for the county and cities to join forces with any other entities that oppose the projects "and get started with this."

"We don't need to reinvent the wheel ... but I don't think we can wait any longer," Kaumo said. "We need to stick together and see just how successful we can be."

Green River Councilman Jim Boan agreed.

"We're way behind on this, and we need to take the fight to them," he said. "We need an outside, non-government agency to spearhead this for us."

Officials with the public relations and marketing firm Wyoming Inc. made their pitch for the job during a presentation. The Lander-based company provides marketing and public relations services, crisis communications, research and media planning, among other services.

"You've got to roll up your sleeves and fight the good fight here. ... A whole bunch of people (stand) to make a lot of money at Green River's expense," Wyoming Inc. President and CEO Bill Sniffin told officials.

"Time is of the essence ... you need to catch up and catch up fast," Sniffin said.

"You have to figure out ways to best fight this thing and find all the reasons why it's wrong for your region," he said. "You need to take the fight to the people with good science and good information ... and that's what our company can give you."

Not cheap

Colorado developer Aaron Million has proposed building a private, 560-mile-long pipeline that would run from Flaming Gorge Reservoir, along Interstate 80 and then south to Colorado's Front Range to Denver and on to Colorado Springs.

The private water development group, Million Conservation Resource Group, has filed for a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the approximately \$3 billion project.

The pipeline would deliver about 250,000 acre feet of water to water-strapped Front Range users each year, according to project plans.

The Corps has begun an environmental impact study that is expected to take three or more years to complete. The agency held a contentious public hearing in Green River on April 14 before a huge crowd of people to unveil the proposal, where it was met mostly with outrage by local residents.

Million told those at the meeting that 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. But he admitted the project could result in slightly reduced water levels in the reservoir and river over the next 40 years.

Sniffin estimated it would cost between \$75,000 and \$150,000 for his firm to carry the coalition's fight against the pipeline projects for the first year.

"We know it's not going to be cheap," agreed Councilman Boan. "But it's really something we need to get on. We can't just keep putting this off from one meeting to the next."

Sniffin said the company has been working on a strategic plan for the coalition that could be ready for review in days and has already conducted numerous interviews and some research on the project.

Second proposal

Officials at the meeting said they were particularly concerned about another, little-publicized proposal to divert water from Flaming Gorge Reservoir and move it to the Parker Water and Sanitation District near Denver.

Parker District Manager Frank Jaeger discussed his proposal with area officials during a meeting of the state engineer's Green River Basin Advisory Group last month. Parker is a small community of about 40,000 in the southeast corner of the Denver metropolitan area.

Jaeger told water officials his project differs from Million's pipeline proposal in that the district's project would be sponsored by a public entity, rather than a private company.

Jaeger said the trans-basin diversion project would attempt to capture the unused water allotted to Colorado as part of the seven-state Colorado River Compact.

Sweetwater County officials noted that under the Million pipeline project, about 25,000 acre feet of water would be delivered annually to users in Wyoming's Platte River Basin. County Commissioner Paula Wonnacott noted Jaeger also promised to deliver some water from Flaming Gorge to the eastern side of the state as part of his project.

"I think the Jaeger project ... is probably much more of a threat," Wonnacott said.

"It could pit us against southeast Wyoming," she said. "They're apparently buying into the idea that Jaeger is here to help them. This is very critical for us."

Biggest litigation ever?

County and city officials said that under Wyoming's Constitution, any water in Wyoming is the property of the state. They said that Wyoming law may pose obstacles to the projects, as water is considered state property.

Wyoming's state statute concerning applications for use of water outside the state says that an application for trans-basin diversion of water must first be approved by the Wyoming Legislature before the applicant can transfer any water out of the state.

The statute recognizes that any transfer of water outside the boundaries of the state may have a significant impact on water and other resources in Wyoming.

Green River City Attorney Ford Bussart stressed the importance of securing a highly qualified legal team, with specific water law expertise, to help the new coalition chart the complex legalities that will be involved with challenging the projects.

"Get yourself some warriors. ... This may turn out to be the biggest litigation in the history of the Western states," Bussart said.

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