

Western leaders struggle with water demands

With the climate changing and our population growing, experts gave their opinions to western governors on how to preserve our most precious resource: water.

By Michelle Dynes
mdynes@wyoingnews.com

PARK CITY, UTAH -- Fights over water rights are nothing new for the governors of the Western United States.

"Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting" is a familiar expression for a majority of the region's residents, said Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter.

But the scarce resource holds new importance today. And managing water in a changing world opened the discussion during the first day of the 25th annual meeting of the Western Governors' Association in Park City on Sunday.

Part of the problem is that political boundaries and watershed boundaries don't match, said Dr. Peter Gleick, co-founder and president of the environmental research group Pacific Institute in Oakland, Calif. For example, the Colorado River stretches across seven states and into Mexico.

He added that today's policy makers have another problem to tackle: climate change. An increase in temperature impacts water demand. It also affects water management as snow pack shrinks even further.

Western leaders must look to innovative communities for ways to add more residents and grow more food without increasing water use, he said.

Gleick added that most water sources should be managed locally. But the federal government needs to step in so that there are not 50 separate sets of standards for water quality and 50 separate benchmarks for appliance efficiency.

Western leaders also can look to the Middle East for solutions in cross-border collaborations, said Professor Eilon Adar from Zuckerberg Institute for Water Resources at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. Water quality will drop along with the amount that's available without management strategies that take every user into account.

He said unlike the United States, leaders in the Middle East classify water as a national commodity for public use. No one pulls water without considering the potential impacts further downstream.

Adar added that the maze of U.S. regulations often gives surface water rights to one individual and underground water rights to another. But it's easier to manage dwindling resources or create a multi-state management authority with regional coordination.

"Is (decreased water) a trigger for conflict or a catalyst for collaboration?" Adar asked.

Technology also isn't used enough to track water, said Cameron Brooks, director of Solutions and Business Development for IBM Corporation's Big Green Innovations initiative.

There are 50,000 water agencies in the U.S. but none of these groups share data. He added that the lack of communication doesn't make sense. If he can track city traffic above ground, he should be able to identify where water flows below ground.

"A lot of these challenges can be addressed with the tools already available," Brooks said.

He added that the governors of the Western United States should take the lead on water management before water fights become a common part of life for the rest of the country.