

The Pueblo Chieftain

Your print and online news source for Southern Colorado

Wednesday, May 13, 2009

Western Slope taking a dim view of exports

Print Page

Water coming into Arkansas River basin seen as a negative by Roaring Fork folks.

By CHRIS WOODKA
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

May 13, 2009 12:00 am

BASALT - While the Arkansas River basin celebrates its supplementary supply of water now being imported in sheets, the basin where that water chiefly comes from is raising concerns about its own water supply.

Water users in the Roaring Fork basin staged a summit of sorts Tuesday to consider the state of their watershed, an aspen-leaf shaped area of 1,453 square miles that, coincidentally, has Aspen at its heart.

“Water is our greatest liquid asset,” said Dave Kanzer, an engineer with the Colorado River District, which is hosting meetings of watersheds along the Colorado River. “Our future is not controlled by the oil and gas as we feared last year. . . . Our economic assets are nothing without a reliable supply of water.”

Through the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project and Twin Lakes Co., the Arkansas River basin brings over nearly 100,000 acre-feet of water each year from the Roaring Fork.

While water managers on the eastern side of the Continental Divide fret about the ability of the Boustead Tunnel - which takes water from the Fryingpan River drainage into Turquoise Lake - to bring over trainloads of water every year, the Roaring Fork bemoans the loss of every drop.

“The water that goes through the Boustead Tunnel is 100 percent consumptive,” Kanzer said. “That’s one drop we’ll never see again. . . . There is less water for use in the (Roaring Fork) basin.”

A commonly cited truth about Colorado water is that 80 percent of it falls west of the Continental Divide. So why all the crocodile tears?

The Roaring Fork is feeling pressure from other directions as well, Kanzer said in describing a new report that combines more than 50 studies of water quantity, quality and use in the basin.

There are the diversions from the Roaring Fork mainly for use in Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Aurora and agriculture. But the Roaring Fork also supplies a large chunk of water for meeting Colorado's obligations under the 1922 Colorado River Compact, water for endangered fish on a stretch of river closer to Grand Junction and for its own growing needs.

Kanzer acknowledged there have been benefits from the Fry-Ark Project as well. The major storage in the Roaring Fork basin, Reudi Reservoir, was a part of the

project, and in flood years the water taken off the river reduces flooding for towns like Basalt.

But the Western Slope gets concerned when Arkansas River water managers start talking about enlarging Lake Pueblo, the largest reservoir in the Fry-Ark Project, he added.

The residents of Pitkin County were so alarmed, in fact, that they passed a 0.1 percent sales tax last year to protect water, said County Manager John Ely. He said the new fund was popular with voters because of the past success of county land-preservation and trail initiatives that have grown to be one of the largest parts of the county budget.

Commissioner Rachel Richards said the county is in the process of appointing a seven-member panel to figure out how to best spend the \$700,000-\$1 million the tax is expected to raise each year.

“We have no firm proposals so far,” Richards said, emphasizing that Pitkin County will try to form partnerships, protect habitat, defend itself against drought and encourage conservation.

In January, Pitkin County approached the Colorado Water Conservation Board with a proposal that would donate the use of water rights it purchases to the state’s in-stream flow program until the time the county needs the water for other uses.

Those who spoke at the meeting emphasized that leaving water in the river for recreational purposes is an important benefit to the Western Slope.

“We have to change the mindset we have in Colorado that water left in the river is a waste,” said Ken Neubecker, president of Colorado Trout Unlimited.

cwoodka@chieftain.com