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Fish catch a break from water users

New agreement part of a larger program to help four endangered species.

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There are tales of 80-pound squawfish being hauled out of the Colorado River near Grand Junction more than a century ago.

There are photos of 20- to 40-pound fish that were caught many decades ago.

In fact, the squawfish - along with razorback suckers, humpback chubs and bonytail chubs - were such good eating that they hardly exist today. They were fished nearly to extinction.

Why is this important to the Arkansas River basin?

Because if they don't thrive, nobody gets to bring over water from the Colorado River basin.

On average, about 130,000 acre-feet is moved from the Colorado River to the Arkansas River each year through the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project, Twin Lakes, Homestake and smaller diversions.

That doesn't happen unless water is made available for the four endangered species on the other side of the Continental Divide.

"It's water that's beneficial for the fish," Jim Broderick, executive director of the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District, told the district board last week. "Anyone who diverts gets to play the game."

That includes water users on the Western Slope as well as the Front Range, in both the Arkansas and South Platte river basins. The load is shared equally by the diverters and annually puts back 30,000-90,000 acre feet of water - or the amount used by a city the size of Pueblo on the low end or Colorado Springs on the high end - into the Colorado River for the fish.

From 2000-08, 500,000 acre-feet of water was delivered to the critical 15-mile stretch of the Colorado River east of Grand Junction, according to Tom Pitts, who coordinates the fish recovery program.

The deliveries were made through cooperative efforts of the Bureau of Reclamation, Colorado River Conservation District and Denver Water, with assistance from the Grand Valley Project.

Right now, the Western Slope and Front Range are in agreement on a program that will provide a portion of that water, 10,825 acre-feet to be exact, to supplement flows from July to October.

The stress to the fish in that reach of river is most commonly felt during late summer as diversions increase and rains taper off.

Under an agreement reached 20 years ago, the water has been provided from various sources with costs shared by all diverters. On the Front Range, that includes the Northern and Southeastern conservancy districts, Denver Water, Aurora, Colorado Springs, Twin Lakes and the Pueblo Board of Water Works.

Ruedi Reservoir, a compensatory storage vessel of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project, has been the sole source of the 10,825 acre-feet of water since 2003, using water that has, so far, found no buyers on the Western Slope.

Under a new agreement that water users hope will be in place by the end of the year, only half of the water will come from Ruedi in the Roaring Fork watershed, while the other half will come from Lake Granby, a reservoir located in the Eagle River watershed. The option was chosen from among several in the latest study.

At a meeting of water interests in the Roaring Fork basin last week, the new plan was generally supported because it would reduce the releases from Ruedi. Users on the Eagle River should favor the plan because it puts the water in the river for a longer reach before it reaches the Colorado River near Grand Junction, Broderick said.

“This alternative had the most benefit to the headwaters areas, particularly Grand County, by putting more water in the stream,” Broderick said.

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