



April 19, 2011

Press Release

CRD Board acts to abandon large transbasin West Divide Project storage rights

The Colorado River District Board of Directors voted April 19, 2011, to abandon most of the Crystal River conditional water rights associated with the West Divide Project, a water development project envisioned in the 1960s that would have been a transbasin diversion moving water from the Crystal River to the West Divide area north of the Colorado River for irrigation and oil shale development.

The limited rights that the Colorado River District seeks to retain will change the focus of the project from one that would have benefitted the Colorado River Valley to one focused on potentially helping the Crystal River drainage with late season flows and create the potential for hydropower development.

The West Divide Project also contained many components located in the West Divide area. These water rights will be maintained to benefit the original West Divide service area, but using in-basin water supplies. All the rights in question that were subject to a vote are held on behalf of the West Divide Water Conservancy District, which would be the sponsoring entity if there was to be a federal Bureau of Reclamation project.

Crystal River components of the original water rights included two large reservoirs on the Crystal River, the 128,728.27 acre-foot Osgood Reservoir which would have inundated the village of Redstone and the 58,009 acre-foot Placita Reservoir farther upstream. Under today's Colorado River District Board direction, water rights to Osgood Reservoir will be abandoned completely. At the same time, the River District will seek to maintain conditional rights for a small, 4,000 acre-foot Placita Reservoir that could in the future help with in-basin, low-flow issues in the Crystal River in late summer.

In the Colorado water rights system, conditional water rights act as priority system placeholders for projects to be developed in the future. Conditional water rights holders must prove to the water court every six years that progress is being made to develop a project, a process known as diligence. The West Divide Project water rights face a diligence filing on May 31. The moves today were made in concurrence with the West Divide Board.

The original West Divide Project was approved by Congress in 1966 as part of the historic Colorado River Storage Project Act that led to the construction of the Animas-LaPlata Project and Ridgway Reservoir, among others. But the Bureau of Reclamation subsequently judged the West Divide project unfeasible on a cost-benefit basis, and it was never granted federal funds. Despite the promise of federal funding, the Colorado River District reconfigured the project and its water rights over the years in anticipation that one day it could be valuable to the Crystal, Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys.

The Colorado River District filed for the project's original water rights in 1957. They were adjudicated by the water court in 1958 and 1965, dating to a River District era where one of its main roles was to file water rights that would later become Reclamation projects and to help create water conservancy districts to be beneficiaries of those projects.

Two large dam sites were originally decreed on the Crystal River: Osgood and Placita. Most likely, only one would have ever been built. Each was associated with an alternate route to deliver water to the West Divide mesa and areas west in western Garfield County. From Osgood, a canal system was to deliver water down the Crystal and Roaring Fork River valleys then through a tunnel to the West Divide area. From Placita, a series of tunnels and canals would have conveyed water to the west side of McClure Pass into the Muddy Creek drainage in the Gunnison basin and then tunnelled to the West Divide area. But only the conveyance elements for Osgood were ever decreed.

Here is what the River District Board approved:

- Abandon the 128,728.27 acre-foot Osgood Reservoir
- Abandon the 1,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) Osgood Power Plant
- Abandon the 830 cfs Fourmile Canal and Siphon diversion point on the Crystal River
- Reduce the 62,009 acre-foot Placita Reservoir to 4,000 acre feet
- Reduce the 1,000 cfs Placita Power Plant to 150 cfs
- Reduce the 1,000 cfs Avalanche Canal and Siphon to 250 cfs
- Reduce the 13,695 acre-foot Yank Creek Reservoir to 5,000 acre feet
- Maintain the 85 cfs Fourmile Canal associated with Yank Creek Reservoir
- Reduce the Fourmile Creek diversion to the Fourmile Canal and Siphon to 50 cfs
- Reduce the 200 cfs Threemile Creek Diversion to Fourmile Canal and Siphon to 50 cfs

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