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Conservation touted at water workshop

Litigation no longer the way to deal with problems, some say

By Deborah Frazier, Rocky Mountain News
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GUNNISON - Colorado's water czars should stop spending millions on futile lawsuits to take water from other users and instead invest in conservation incentives, Rick Cables, the U.S. Forest Service's regional director, said Wednesday.

"If we'd invested the money we spent on litigation in incentives for creative solutions, we'd be ahead today," Cables said at the 30th Annual Colorado Water Workshop at Western State College in Gunnison.

The traditional focus on increasing water supply has drained dollars and creativity from the real solution - conservation, said Cables.

"The old slogan goes that 'whiskey is for drinkin' and water is for fightin'.' We need a new ethic," said Cables. "We need to see water not as something to be fought over, but as a precious natural resource to be sustained for the future."

The drought of the last few years induced conservation far beyond the dreams of water providers, including Denver Water, whose customers cut consumption by more than 25 percent, said Cables. However, water bills did not go down, he said.

"Why can't we look for ways to reward people for conserving water? Are there incentives that will make conservation work?" he said. "I think the answer is yes. There's a lot of water to be saved."

At the workshop, which drew a crowd of 220 water providers, engineers, environmentalists, attorneys, lobbyists and pundits from many perspectives, conservation has always been a tough sell - especially for those who make a living from water conflicts.

Bennett Raley, a water attorney involved in some of those suits before he became assistant interior secretary for water between 2001 and 2004, said that as much as he enjoyed the water wars, the era of titanic court fights is over.

"It's very different now. We have real consequences that affect economies," said Raley.

Thirty years ago, when the workshop started, there were 2.5 million people in Colorado, compared to 4.5 million now and a projected 6 million by 2035.

Colorado's once pristine water quality will also bear the consequences of the population growth, said Paul Frohardt, director of the Colorado Water Quality Commission.

In the 1970s, the state's streams and rivers were tainted by raw sewage and mining wastes that turned the water orange, he said. The Clean Water Act and other environmental laws remedied many of those problems, he said.



George Kochaniec Jr. © News

Garbage floats in the South Platte River near Santa Fe Drive and Union Avenue on Wednesday. The area is popular for tubing and kayaking. At a workshop on Wednesday, the head of the Colorado Water Quality Commission said the state's water quality will suffer from population growth.

But technology now can detect a new range of pollutants, including both over-the-counter and prescription drugs, detergents, caffeine and chemicals that alter gender in fish. And with more people in the state, those impacts will increase, he said.

Frohardt said some states have already banned phosphorus-based detergents, and other commonly used products could be banned or their disposal regulated.

"The only thing we can be certain about is the uncertainty," he said.

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