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Colo.-Wyo. coalition unveils water study

A different approach is developing for Flaming Gorge pipeline project.

By Chris Woodley, March 26, 2010 10:00am

BY CHRIS WOODLEY - THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

DENVER — A two-year feasibility study of a pipeline from Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Wyoming to Colorado's Front Range was announced Thursday by a coalition of water users in both states.

The pipeline could reach into the Arkansas River Basin, as the Donala Water District north of Colorado Springs is one of the sponsors of the study.

Other water providers representing a population of more than 500,000 include Parker, Castle Rock, the South Metro Water Supply Authority and Douglas County in Colorado; and Cheyenne, Torrington and Laramie County in Wyoming.

"This would develop the compact rights of two states. Those Colorado River rights have not been developed much for municipal and industrial uses," said Frank Jaeger, Parker Water and Sanitation District manager at a press conference at the state Capitol Thursday. "This is the first move of the group to see how we develop the water for two states."

The Flaming Gorge was constructed on the Green River to meet the needs of upper basin states as part of the 1922 Colorado River Compact, the 1948 Upper Colorado River Compact and the 1956 Colorado River Storage Projects Act, Jaeger explained.

The water providers are funding the study to see if the pipeline can be built to serve their needs. Each participant will pay \$20,000 toward the study, and Jaeger said others are welcome to join. Parker already has paid \$190,000 to lay the groundwork.

The Colorado users are almost entirely dependent on water from the Denver Basin aquifers which have been depleted as Front Range communities have grown. They are looking at new sources of water,

including buying agricultural water rights in the Arkansas River Basin. For example, Donala last year purchased a Lake County ranch for the water rights, and the South Metro district included a possible pipeline from the Arkansas basin in its long-range water supply plan.

"We are looking at the project and other alternatives," said Rod Kuharich, manager of the South Metro District, which encompasses 14 water providers serving 300,000 people. Of the coalition, he said: "This is an unprecedented level of cooperation."

Wyoming has looked at developing water from the Green River Basin since the 1970s. Bringing water to the eastern part of the state would address water quality and supply issues. It also would alleviate pressure on the state from Nebraska under a North Platte River compact with Nebraska, said Torrington Mayor Leroy Schafer.

"Although our supply is now adequate, it may not be sufficient in the future," Schafer said.

The pipeline concept is similar to Aaron Million's plan, announced in 2006, and now being evaluated as the Regional Water Supply Project by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Million proposes a 560-mile pipeline that he says could be developed for about \$3 billion.

Last year, he accused Jaeger of trying to "steal" the project. Although Million and Jaeger tell the story differently, it nearly came to blows outside a meeting last year — Million says he was threatened, while Jaeger claims he was provoked.

Jaeger brushed aside a question from the media Thursday about whether the coalition's project is in competition with Million's plan.

"I don't like to hear 'competition,'" Jaeger said. "We are end users with a need for the water. . . . How's he going to build it without end users?"

Jaeger said the issue should not be about personalities, but whether the water can be brought in to meet the needs of Colorado.

“What it does is keeps us from having to dry up farms,” Jaeger said. “That’s what should be important.”

The coalition’s plan could differ in details from Million’s, said Bruce Lytle, president of Lytle Water Solutions, the lead consultant.

“This is the first phase. We don’t know the size, type of structures or feasibility,” Lytle said. “We’re talking to member agencies to understand what their needs are.”

The project will be developed with the Bureau of Reclamation to address needs for the environment and power at Flaming Gorge. It would look at exporting variable amounts of water, more in wet years, less in dry, Lytle said.

The project could use three existing reservoirs on the North Platte River, new off-channel storage in the South Platte and existing structures like Parker’s Rueter-Hess Reservoir, a 75,000 acre-foot vessel just beginning to fill and designed to accommodate new water brought into the South Platte Basin.

“The ultimate purpose of the feasibility study is to provide enough information to providers so they know how much it costs,” Lytle said, noting that work will begin immediately and will take 18-24 months to complete.

A phalanx of Colorado lawmakers from the South Metro area were on hand Thursday to support the study.

“This is a major project. Colorado is in desperate need along the Front Range,” said Sen. Ted Harvey, R-Douglas County. “This will be a landmark program.”

Douglas County was among those expressing a conceptual interest in Million’s project, but also wants to be involved in the coalition.

“We are in favor of any project to bring a renewable water supply into Colorado,” said Douglas County Commissioner Jack Hilbert. “None of us can afford to have any water system anywhere in Colorado fail.”

While Million has spent the last four years pitching his project around the state, major water suppliers have been cautious about supporting it. Earlier this month, the Arkansas and Metro basin roundtables agreed to ask the Colorado Water Conservation Board for funding to study setting up a task force proposed by the Pikes Peak Regional Water Authority to look at both projects.

At its meeting last week, the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District agreed with that approach, rather than endorsing either project.

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THE DURANGO HERALD

South Denver utilities look to Wyoming reservoir for water

by Joe Hanel

Herald Denver Bureau

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DENVER - Water utility officials are looking to a pipeline from Wyoming's Flaming Gorge Reservoir to help solve shortages in Denver's southern suburbs.

The Colorado River Compact was set up to develop water for the entire state of Colorado and the entire state of Wyoming, so I don't think we're out of bounds in investigating it.

- Frank Jaeger, manager, Parker Water and Sanitation District

The idea could affect the whole Western Slope because it would use water from Colorado's share of the Colorado River Compact.

"This is a major project. Colorado is in desperate need of water on the Front Range," said state Sen. Ted Harvey, R-Highlands Ranch.

Harvey was one of five state legislators at Thursday's announcement, all from the Front Range.

For now, the idea is only a study. Officials from five utilities south of Denver and three in Southeast Wyoming will examine the idea over the next 18 to 24 months.

Aaron Million, a private entrepreneur, has proposed a similar pipeline. Million has been promoting his project for about five years, but he is not part of the study announced Thursday.

Million's route would run about 400 miles from the reservoir in Southwest Wyoming, along Interstate 80 and south into Colorado.

The study announced Thursday is at an early stage. Planners have not developed details or a project cost. However, they know they will need help from the state and federal governments if they ultimately build such a large pipeline, said Frank Jaeger, manager of the Parker Water and Sanitation District.

Western Colorado water officials have been skeptical about the Flaming Gorge plan, because it would use water from Colorado's share of the seven-state Colorado River Compact.

Jaeger said there's nothing wrong with studying the option.

"The Colorado River Compact was set up to develop water for the entire state of Colorado and the entire state of Wyoming, so I don't think we're out of bounds in investigating it," Jaeger said.

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No one can agree how much water is left to Colorado under the compact. In the worst-case estimates of long-term droughts or a warmer climate, Colorado already is using all of the water it legally owns. The state government is working on a model to get a better answer to the question.

Leaders at the Western Slope's largest water district have no problem with Front Range utilities doing a study, but they hope it takes into account climate change and drought, said Jim Pokrandt, spokesman for the Colorado River Water Conservation District.

"It doesn't matter who's looking at the project, the same issues stand. We need to get further into the Colorado River Water Availability Study to see how much water is left to develop," Pokrandt said.

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