

# The Pueblo Chieftain

## Urban water transfer alternatives gain steam

State water board OKs \$1.2 million in studies aimed at reducing dry-up of farmland.

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DENVER — A state board striving to find alternatives to drying up thousands more acres of farmland to satisfy future urban water needs Tuesday approved funding for \$1.2 million in studies of alternative transfer methods.

“These are not a silver bullet. They would serve for dry-year supplies; that’s how I see them,” staffer Todd Doherty told the Colorado Water Conservation Board. “None of these are a big chunk of water.”

Doherty used the agreement between Aurora and the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch as an example of the type of transfer that would provide urban areas water in times of need without permanently drying up farm ground.

The CWCB approved \$1.5 million in grants following 2008 legislation aimed at meeting the needs of the Front Range. The new grants approved on Tuesday — part of a 2009 allocation of an additional \$1.5 million — opened up new avenues for sharing water on the Western Slope as well.

The state is studying alternatives as one way to prevent the dry-up of 500,000 acres of farmland to meet the needs of cities if the state’s population doubles to about 10 million by 2050, as currently projected.

Doherty said the second round of grants was delayed in order to determine the first group of studies was progressing. In some cases, the grants Tuesday enhance efforts already under way.

Only one of the grants approved Tuesday will affect the Super Ditch, a \$31,000 grant to the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District to develop a farm financial planning tool that allows farmers to determine if selling water through lease agreements is a good idea.

A similar tool was developed during the first round of studies, but it was too specific to the South Platte basin, Doherty told the board.

A second proposal for \$250,000 by the Lower Ark district that would look at Super Ditch engineering was kicked back to the Arkansas Basin Roundtable and will be considered by the CWCB through a different funding process in March.

The board also approved a \$180,000 grant for the Colorado River Conservation District that would study the establishment of a water bank of per-1922 water rights that could be used to stave off a call on the Colorado River by downstream states.

That idea dovetails with a proposal by the Gunnison and Arkansas basin roundtables to establish an account in Blue Mesa Reservoir as insurance against a call on the river by California, Arizona and Nevada under the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

Most of the water that is brought across the Continental Divide would be subject to curtailment if there were a call. That water represents about one fourth of the flows in the Arkansas River above Pueblo, about half of Pueblo's water supply and 80 percent of Colorado Springs' water supply.

The CWCB also told The Nature Conservancy to come back later this year with a \$214,000 proposal to reduce irrigation in mountain hay meadows in the Yampa River basin as a way of increasing stream flows. While the idea would have little impact on meeting the municipal gap, it would increase the flows of small streams for the benefit of wildlife.

For the South Platte River basin, proposals are looking at several innovations, including:

Lake Canal Demonstration Project — A \$135,000 grant would look at improving flows in the Cache la Poudre River with methods like deficit irrigation and rotational fallowing. Environmental groups support the project, while irrigators on the Lake Canal would receive money for bypassing water in an area already heavily targeted by municipal purchases.

East Cherry Creek Water and Sanitation District — A \$111,000 grant looks at maintaining productivity on land through partial irrigation or conversion to dry-land crops after water purchases.

Parker Water and Sanitation — A \$320,000 grant completes a project to determine measurement of consumptive use by irrigating crops at levels lower than the historic use of water for corn. Parker's study, with the cooperation of Colorado State University, attempts to show how part of the historic consumptive use could be sold to cities, while allowing irrigation to continue.

Lower South Platte Water Conservancy District — A \$300,000 grant looks at numerous ways to improve efficiency in how water is used and returned to the river.

Colorado Corn Growers Association, Aurora and Ducks Unlimited — A \$250,000 grant will attempt to quantify historic consumptive use on major ditch companies from Denver to Greeley in order to develop a model on how part of the consumptive use could be sold to cities needing water.

State Engineer Dick Wolfe, who is increasingly in the middle of water rights allocation squabbles, made a point of supporting the alternatives.

"We think these kinds of projects are important, and it is necessary that they go forward," Wolfe said.