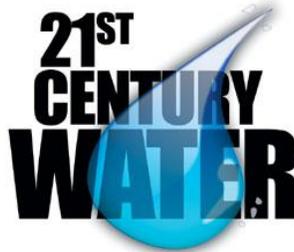


The Pueblo Chieftain

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More bang for the buck on Bessemer?



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/FILE -- The Bessemer Ditch flows through Pueblo on its way to the St. Charles Mesa. New uses for the water on farms could help Pueblo and the agriculture economy.



Mike Bartolo

The water itself could mean economic development for Pueblo, a ditch shareholder says.

By CHRIS WOODKA
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

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A Bessemer Ditch shareholder is trying to get a better handle on what agriculture will look like in Pueblo County now that the largest water rights owner on the ditch is the Pueblo Board of Water Works.

“I want to make sure the outcomes are good for everyone, and for the people of Pueblo to understand the value of the asset for them,” said Mike Bartolo, a small farmer on the Bessemer Ditch, who happens to be the director of the Colorado State University Arkansas Valley Agricultural Research Center at Rocky Ford.

“There needs to be strong incentives to preserve agriculture,” Bartolo said.

That could mean new crops, new ways of sharing water or new uses for crops, such

as biofuels, he said.

Bartolo opposed last year's purchase of about 27 percent of the water rights on the Bessemer Ditch because of the impact it would have on the agricultural lifestyle on St. Charles Mesa. He tried to promote an alternative plan that would preserve the water for use by the Pueblo Water Board in conservation easements.

The water board was not interested in the idea, preferring the security of owning the water, which it purchased for use in the future — 20-30 years from now. Nearly all of the contracts signed by the water board allow farmers who sold their water rights to continue farming for the next 20 years.

Subsequently, Bartolo was the first Bessemer shareholder to join the Super Ditch board of directors as a way to give irrigators another option rather than selling.

But the Super Ditch, a program that allows farmers to market water while retaining their water rights, isn't the only option that should be available for farmers, Bartolo said.

In fact, on Friday he was exploring new ideas with experts from the University of Colorado and Natural Resources Conservation Service, using computer models developed by David Yates of the National Center for Atmospheric Research at Boulder that help water users cope with changing climate conditions .

Using the models, which broadly project effects under uncertain scenarios, Bartolo wants to find out if the crop mix on the Bessemer Ditch could be changed in the future to benefit Pueblo.

"We're looking at what happens when you change the crop mix. For instance, growing canola to make biodiesel for the Pueblo transportation system," Bartolo said. "We've got to have alternatives to prevent buy-and-dry, and look at new partnerships. The city could look at the ag industry as getting a new Vestas plant. It could have that kind of economic impact."

In other words, the water would not only aid industrial growth, but could be its own kind of growth.

There also is the issue of producing food locally.

“Really, we could buy a lot more food from the valley more easily, rather than trucking everything in from 2,000 miles away,” Bartolo said.

Bartolo isn't sure where the research will lead yet, but he's hoping to develop some information about alternatives that could help shape future decisions on how to use the water in the next few months.

The Pueblo water board is receptive to the idea of new uses for Bessemer Ditch water, said Alan Hamel, executive director.

“I think we're always hoping and looking to different options in the future,” Hamel said. “We're open to looking at other ideas.”

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