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Latest version of Colorado Water Plan released



The Colorado Water Conservation Board released its second draft of the Colorado Water Plan, which calls for more funding for more water-supply projects. This spring, east of Aspen, there appeared to be plenty of water, but the state is grappling with a 15-year-long drought.



During June, the Cascades at the Grottos was tumbling with whitewater after May's steady rains. Such highwater flows are vital for stream health, biologists say, and the statewide Colorado Water Plan includes a section about the environmental needs of the state's streams and rivers.



The second draft of the Colorado Water Plan was posted online Tuesday, and it calls for new sources of public and private funds to build new water supply projects — yet to be determined.

“Financing long-term sustainable water supplies and infrastructure projects requires a collaborative effort involving water users and providers, as well as federal, state and local entities,” the plan states.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board is drafting the statewide water plan to submit to Gov. Hickenlooper in December. The CWCB board of directors is poised to discuss this latest iteration of the plan at a meeting on July 15 in Ignacio. The public has until Sept. 17 to comment on it.

The latest draft of the statewide plan also calls for more efficient permitting of water projects, including new storage facilities, increasing the efficiency of water use on agricultural land and developing stream management plans to protect environmental and recreational values.

The now 497-page plan includes a new “critical action plan” in chapter 10, and generating more money to pay for the projects put forward in eight regional plans submitted in April by “basin roundtables” is a high priority.

Not all of the projects in all of the basin plans have cost estimates yet, but the latest draft puts the preliminary cost of the projects at \$904 million.

And that’s without estimates for potentially significant projects put forward by the South Platte and Metro area roundtables in their joint “basin implementation plan.”

That plan, submitted in April, lists conceptual transmountain diversion or water pumpback projects on the Green, Gunnison, Yampa, Colorado, Blue and Eagle rivers.

Water providers in the South Platte River basin now import 400,000 acre-feet of water from the Colorado River basin and another 100,000 acre-feet from the Arkansas, North Platte and Laramie river basins.

And Front Range water providers see the need for another 195,000 acre-feet of water for growing cities and 260,000 acre-feet more for irrigation.

The South Platte plan also points to conceptual dam projects on the main stem of the Colorado River west of Rifle at Webster Hill, and an off-channel reservoir at Wolcott, just off of I-70 near Vail, to hold water pumped up from the Eagle River.

The dry-up of “hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land” is “the default option if decision makers do not exercise the political will to preserve and promote opportunities to develop Colorado River Basin supply for use along the urban Front Range,” says the South Platte plan, which has helped shape the Colorado Water Plan.

The \$903 million worth of projects called for so far in the various basin plans is just a sliver of an earlier estimate in the “Statewide Water Supply Initiative” that the state actually needs to invest \$20 billion to meet its long-term water supply needs.

But which projects will be endorsed by the state, and built, is still to be decided.

“Further refinement and identification of water infrastructure financial needs through the basin implementation plan process will be required as we move forward,” the statewide plan says. “The CWCB will review the results of these efforts to develop a list of project priorities.

“The criteria for a priority project include funding, if it is multiple-purpose, if it has multiple partners or if it provides multiple benefits, and is regional in nature,” the plan says. “The CWCB will identify projects that have the potential to move forward quickly, have cross-basin and statewide benefits and have a possible funding plan.”

The statewide plan does not identify specific water projects, but it does mention the possibility of a “new transmountain diversion,” albeit in some fairly complex language.

“To support innovative water projects, such as multi-use, alternative agricultural transfers, or a new transmountain diversion ... consensus and additional state funds may be necessary,” the plan states.

The latest draft of the statewide plan also estimates it will cost \$2 billion to \$3 billion for river restoration in order meet the state’s environmental and recreational needs, including \$18 million to develop stream management plans for many of the state’s streams and rivers.

To raise necessary funding, the plan suggests a long list of potential methods, including selling “green bonds” to sources of private capital, and looking at a variety of public sources of funding, such as a container fee, a Front Range property tax or a statewide sales tax.

The plan suggests a beverage container fee would generate \$100 million a year and that a mill levy, or property tax, in the most developed Front Range counties would generate \$215 million to \$340 million per year.

The statewide water plan also discusses the possibility of posing a statewide water-funding question to Colorado voters.

It notes that in 2003 voters rejected the idea of the CWCB borrowing \$2 billion to fund new water projects, and did so 67 to 33 percent.

“Though Referendum A was initiated to resolve long-term water challenges in the state, it was not accompanied by a comprehensive plan outlining how to address that challenge, a quantification of the magnitude of financial need or where and how the money would be spent,” the statewide plan notes.

But now it says the various basin implementation plans put forth by the roundtables, “with prioritization and refinement, could provide the necessary framework to attach to state referendum funding.”

The plan says such a proposal “could generate hundreds of millions of dollars per year, phased over a defined period, generated from sale tax revenues, income tax, etc.”

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