

New study outlines economic impacts of water diversion

“Water and its Relationship to the Economies of the Headwaters Counties”

To see the report online:

www.nwccog.org/index.php/programs/water-qualityquantity-committee/

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The economic impacts of water diversions from the West Slope affect the entire state, with the bulk of the impact on the Front Range, according to a report prepared for the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments Water Quality and Quantity Division.

The Front Range benefits from spending associated with the fishing industry, for example, by as much as 57 percent, even though fishing takes place largely in the streams, rivers, lakes and reservoirs of the headwater counties.

The economic impact of fishing in the Colorado River Drainage headwaters counties — Routt, Grand, Eagle, Pitkin and Gunnison counties — equates to about 14 percent of the overall fishing expenditures. The remainder is attributed to other parts of Colorado.

And it's important to note, the sport of fishing like other river recreation that attracts tourism to the state has minimal consumptive water use (water taken from rivers and never returned), the study emphasizes.

Snow-making for skiing, for example, has about 20 percent consumptive water use; transmountain water diversions are 100 percent consumptive.

“Colorado is continuing to look to the headwaters for growth; our message is you cannot dry up your headwater counties,” said Grand County Commissioner James Newberry, who is the chair of the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments Water Quality and Quantity Committee and the vice chair of the Colorado River Water Conservation District.

“A conversation started coming up about drying out agriculture on the Eastern Plains,” Newberry said. “All we're trying to do is say look, it's about balance.”

The study shows that the amount of agricultural land in the headwaters counties has decreased by 9 percent while statewide agriculture has increased by 6 percent and by 23 percent on the 15 Eastern Plain counties.

Agriculture is a component of the state's tourism, as well as a vital source of return flows that sustain late season streamflows for fisheries. But agriculture in the headwaters counties does not benefit from “the relatively inexpensive water that is delivered through the Bureau of Reclamation projects that serve the Eastern Plain,” the study reads.

“Visitors value agriculture,” the document entitled “Water and its Relationship to the Economies of the Headwaters Counties” continues. “A survey in Gunnison County conducted by CSU found that 54 percent of the winter visitors would reconsider a return visit to Gunnison if only 25 percent of the ranch land were converted to another use.”

Fragile jobs

Newberry hopes the report sends the message in a concrete way that protecting water at headwaters counties is about jobs at a time when the economy is fragile. “It's about people's livelihoods,” he said.

About 48 percent of jobs in headwaters counties rely on tourism, compared to 8 percent of jobs statewide.

Grand County already sees about 307,500 acre-feet per year leave headwaters sources to serve populations on the Front Range, the most of any other headwater county by far, according to the study.

“The economies of the headwaters counties are directly linked with the rest of the state,” Newberry said. “We provide

the world-caliber recreation that attracts high-skilled workers and their employers to the Front Range and attracts high-expenditure visitors. Further reductions in our water supply could cause us to lose our 'world-caliber' status. This would have a ripple effect throughout the state.”

“This has never been done before,” said Jean Coley Townsend, president of Coley Forrest and author of the report. “The report provides an important counter-balance to earlier studies that show economic impacts of losing water from the Eastern Plains.”

Newberry was among presenters of the report at last week's Water Congress, an annual convention that covers water issues in the state and typically draws about 500 attendees, including legislators, water lawyers, educators, scientists and host of agency administrators from federal through local government.

“I think it was very-well received,” said Shanna Koenig Camuso, co-director of the NWCOGG Water Quality and Quantity Committee. The 100-page report, which cost \$27,000 in a private grant plus in-kind donations, serves to compile data in one place, focusing on the economic impacts of diversions. “We're hoping to continue to get it out into the public and in front of our decision-makers,” she said.

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