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GUNNISON WATER NOT A SOLUTION FOR FRONT RANGE THIRST, WATER EXPERTS SAY

Tapping Basin's water is costly and unjustified, report finds

Denver, CO—While some have proposed diverting water from the Gunnison Basin to meet the metro area's future water need, this is not a realistic solution, a new report shows. Gunnison Basin Water: No Panacea for the Front Range, released today, concludes that all the water that arises in the basin is already in use and that there is no extra Basin water available for the Front Range. It also finds that importing Basin water would be inequitable and legally questionable. Finally, it shows that the Front Range can meet all of its future water needs through less expensive conservation and efficiency measures.

"Given that the Gunnison Basin communities as well as downstream aquatic environments depend on that water for survival, diverting it to meet uncontrolled growth and sprawl in the metro area would be unconscionable," said Bruce Driver, Executive Director of the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies, which produced the report. Water Program Director Bart Miller agreed. "Our report spells out how the Front Range can improve its efficiency without taking water away from the people who really need it," Miller said. "Diverting water from the Gunnison would be excessively costly to taxpayers. And it may be illegal."

"Too often, metro area water providers have come to the Gunnison Basin looking for unused water, but we are using all that we have," noted Steve Glazer, a board member of the Upper Gunnison River Conservancy District and Water Program Director of the High Country Citizen's Alliance. "The Front Range needs to exhaust options in its own water basin to meet its needs, and this report shows how they can do it."

Ken Spann, an Almont, Colorado, rancher, called the report "a thorough, credible discussion of the dynamics and legal framework of the Gunnison River. A 'must-read' for those thinking the waters of the Gunnison are an easy fix to Front Range water needs. The report shows why the Front Range would be well-advised to find solutions to its water problems in its own back yard."

University of Colorado Law Professor David Getches agreed that there was no compelling reason for the Denver area to go looking for water on the other side of the mountains. "There are much better solutions closer at hand," he said. "Simply replacing half of the bluegrass turf in the Denver area with attractive, drought-resistant plants could net us enough water to meet growth through 2045. And there are other options, like leasing water from farmers during dry years, and improving existing reservoirs." Getches added that Denverites want to see wild landscapes when they visit the Western Slope. "When Coloradans visit the Gunnison basin, we love to

experience free-flowing streams, wild places, and a rural landscape. But diverting the river will rob the area of its character -- the wildness, the unspoiled landscapes, and the agricultural economy.”

The report looks at possible Gunnison water diversions from three angles:

1. It examines how Gunnison water is already being used in the basin. These uses include agriculture, municipal, hydropower, recreation/tourism, and downstream deliveries required by the Colorado River Compact. The report shows that existing and future water uses leave little or no water reliably available for export to the Front Range.
2. It examines the concept of “the marketable yield” from Blue Mesa Reservoir, believed by some to be available for Front Range use. The report shows that the fact that water is being stored in Blue Mesa does not mean that it can be tapped by those outside the Basin. All this stored water is already spoken for within the Basin for current and future uses. This means that virtually no water would be left over for export to the Front Range.
3. It examines other potential solutions to the projected shortfall in Front Range water supply, showing that efficiency measures like Xeriscaping, interruptible supply arrangements, conjunctive use of surface and groundwater and more coordination among water suppliers can meet water needs at least for the next 40 years or so and likely at substantially less cost than imports from the Gunnison.

The Land and Water Fund presented the report’s conclusions at a press conference at the Adams Mark Hotel today. Copies of the report are available by calling Claudia Putnam at 303 444 1188 x227, or can be downloaded from the Website:

The Land and Water Fund of the Rockies is a regional environmental law and policy center serving the Interior West. It uses law, economics, and policy analysis to protect land and water resources and assure that water and energy demands are met in an economically and environmentally sound manner.