Community Needs Trump Diversions for Oil Shale

BOULDER, CO (June 11, 2014) — Western Resource Advocates and local landowners resolved a multi-year court case with the Yellow Jacket Water Conservancy District (“District”) over a massive proposed water diversion project in the White River valley above Meeker, Colorado. Reservoirs associated with this project would have stored roughly the same amount of water that Denver Water provides to its 1.3 million customers annually. According to planning documents from the District, most of the project’s water would have supported oil shale development in western Colorado.

“At stake in this challenge was our western heritage – rural, agricultural communities, clean air and clean water – and community values central to diverse economies,” said Rob Harris, Staff Attorney for Western Resource Advocates.

After nearly four years of litigation, the District recently entered into agreements that dramatically reduce the size of the proposed project and its impacts on the White River and surrounding residents. Although these agreements do not resolve all of the potential environmental questions surrounding development, they mark a significant step towards a balanced approach to water use planning in the White River basin.

“In our view, these agreements represent a win-win solution that will help secure a healthier future for local communities that rely on the White River,” said Rob Harris.

The District’s plan was just one of many significant undeveloped water projects for oil shale identified in Western Resource Advocates’ 2009 report, Water on the Rocks. In a groundbreaking study, Western Resource Advocates catalogued all the water rights that have been acquired by oil shale interests, or could be used by them, to develop oil shale on a commercial scale. Despite these agreements in the White River basin, the volume of the water rights for oil shale remains enormous.