Colorado's Leading Conservation Voices React to Draft State Water Plan

*Draft plan recognizes value of efficient water use and healthy rivers, but needs more specific directions for how to achieve robust conservation and river protection*

DENVER, Colo., Dec. 10, 2014 – Colorado’s leading conservation and recreation organizations including American Rivers, Audubon, Conservation Colorado, Environmental Defense Fund, San Juan Citizens Alliance and Western Resource Advocates congratulate the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) for completing the draft of the state’s first water plan, and call on Governor Hickenlooper to further strengthen the plan.

Together, these groups express optimism that the water plan recognizes the crucial role healthy, flowing rivers play in Colorado’s environment and varied eco-systems, as well as to the state’s economy, including the robust recreation and tourism industries. But the groups maintain the plan falls short of providing real, actionable steps that protect Colorado’s natural resources, and prioritize solutions that avoid the need for new large, trans-mountain diversions of water from the Western Slope to the Front Range.

The groups call upon the CWCB to insert into the plan a statewide goal of reducing water use by 20 percent by 2030 – an achievable target for Colorado, which it is also in line with other Western states. In addition, the groups strongly recommend that the plan itemize the right incentives, tools and funding to maximize efficient water use in cities, farms, ranches and industry settings.

“This plan needs common sense solutions; not more expensive water diversions. Conservation, reuse, and increased sharing opportunities are flexible and cost effective measures already available that can meet the vast majority of new water demands,” said Theresa Conley, water advocate at Conservation Colorado. “An overwhelming majority of Coloradans supports water conservation, so it needs to be a priority in the water plan.”

Of concern, the plan leaves open the possibility of draining more water from the Western Slope and piping it to growing Front Range cities. Experts agree the new, large trans-mountain diversions would be costly, controversial, and irreversibly devastating to the environmental, recreational, and economic values of the Colorado River and its tributaries. There are less expensive, less controversial alternatives to these unnecessary proposals, including water re-use, conservation and efficiency.

“We know Coloradans value their rivers and gold-medal fishing streams. The benefits recreation provides to local communities tops $9 billion in economic activity including 80,000 jobs on the West Slope,” said Matt Rice, director of Colorado River Basin Programs for American Rivers. “The final water plan must help river basins assess river
health and dedicate funding and other resources to protect our rivers for present and future generations."

Conservationists emphasize the birds, wildlife and communities that depend upon healthy rivers need the final plan to provide actionable steps for basins to address their environmental and recreational gaps.

The groups also point to the fact that Colorado voters across the state resoundingly support water conservation efforts and healthy rivers:

- 78 percent prefer water conservation and recycling instead of diverting water from the Western Slope
- 90 percent agree a priority for the water plan should be keeping rivers healthy and flowing
- 78 percent support research and investment in finding new ways to use current water supply more wisely
- 88 percent support a goal of a 10 percent water reduction in Colorado's cities and towns by 2020.

Citizens from all around the state value water and have expressed their interest by submitting over 18,000 comments on the draft Plan this year.

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