



For Immediate Release: December 9, 2003

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SMART WATER: First-ever Study Maps Water Efficiency Potential, Achievements, Shortfalls, for Southwest

Report finds great untapped potential for stretching water supplies

Denver, CO—A report released today by Western Resource Advocates provides a first-ever snapshot of urban water use efficiency throughout the Southwest—from El Paso to Tucson to Las Vegas to Colorado's Front Range. **Smart Water: A Comparative Study of Urban Water Use Efficiency Across the Southwest** fills a critical gap in the debate about the water future of the nation's most arid region. It gives southwestern towns and cities a means of measuring their water efficiency against others in the region, inventories cutting-edge efficiency practices, and shows how they can be implemented.

"The stakes couldn't be higher," said Bruce Driver, Executive Director for Western Resource Advocates. "Our western rivers can scarcely spare another drop, yet urban growth is bound to press upon them for more water to divert to our cities. While this will probably be inescapable in a few cases, it should be avoided whenever possible. Colorado's Gunnison, New Mexico's Rio Grande, Arizona's Salt and Verde Rivers, Utah's Bear River, and the Colorado River mainstem are already just ghosts of their former selves. Yet, our rivers are essential to our quality of life and to our economies."

"Everybody's looking for a better way to get water for thirsty cities without destroying more rivers," said Bart Miller, Water Program Director for Western Resource Advocates. "It is urban growth that will tax our river systems the most. As SMART WATER demonstrates, water use efficiency is a fast, inexpensive, and better option for securing more water supplies. Most cities have room to improve drastically the way they use water."

Miller noted that water efficiency has received more notice in recent years, primarily due to drought pressure. However, he said that this discussion has yet to translate into widespread policy. This is partly because of lack of comparative information about how southwestern cities are doing. There's also been a real need for a clearinghouse for information about efficiency measures—who's doing what and how it is working. "This report makes exciting contributions in those areas," Miller said. "We really hope it will advance efficiency beyond debate and into policy and set the tone for a regional approach to these issues. We are definitely no longer in the dark about the state-of-the-art in water efficiency."

The report drew on data supplied by more than a dozen water providers from all of the region's major metropolitan areas, according to Don Wojcik, a water policy analyst for Western Resource Advocates.

“We developed a new efficiency metric, and we believe we’re offering the best apples-to-apples comparison of water use from city to city,” he said. “The report shows a huge variation in per-capita water consumption among the cities, even when you screen for climate. This suggests that our urban centers have much to learn from one another.”

Among the report’s key findings:

- Variations in regional climate do not account for variations in metropolitan water use.
- Cities with the lowest consumption rates tend to use an aggressively tiered water rate structure, where large water users bear a proportionate amount of the costs they inflict on providers.
- Indoor water use can be significantly reduced without affecting quality of life. Each *person* represents a potential savings of 24 gallons per year.
- Outdoor use is the area of greatest potential savings; landscaping design and plant types are the most critical factors—switching to 50 percent native landscaping in Denver’s yards could offset new water demand by as much as 80,000 acre-feet each year by 2045. An acre-foot, or a football field of water one foot deep, is usually enough to supply a household of four people for a year.
- Over 118,000 acre-feet is unaccounted for in water systems region-wide, through leaks, improper metering, or other factors.
- In addition to improved conservation, there is a great deal of additional water available through efficient supply alternatives. For example, farmers and cities could arrange for temporary leases during drought years that transfer agricultural water rights to cities, in return for enough money to tide the farmer through what would anyway be a bad growing year.
- Better auditing programs would help consumers understand the impacts of their water choices.

The report offers detailed recommendations and how-tos for addressing efficiency shortfalls, as well as providing substantial city-by-city data. For more information, or to obtain a copy, please visit www.westernresourceadvocates.org or email Don Wojcik at don@westernresources.org.

About Western Resource Advocates

Western Resource Advocates uses law, economics, and policy analysis to protect land and water resources and assure that energy demands are met in environmentally sound and sustainable ways. It collaborates with environmental and community groups to protect the natural environment of the Interior West, taking into account the economic and cultural framework of the region.

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