

State water leaders wary of pipeline plan

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A proposal to take water from the Arkansas River to Elbert County skirted the basin roundtable process the state initiated in 2005 to work out conflicts caused by interbasin water transfers.

“Because of our free enterprise system, there’s nothing preventing anyone from doing a water project,” said John Stulp, who chairs the Interbasin Compact Committee. “Still, I think the people who have been involved in this project should have taken it to the roundtables.”

The IBCC is fed by nine basin roundtables under a 2005 law. The groups have looked at dozens of projects, but not the Lamar-Elbert pipeline proposal.

A plan by the Elbert and Highway 86 Commercial Metro District would build a 150-mile pipeline from Lamar. Karl Nyquist, the district’s manager, is part of a group that owns water rights on the Lamar Canal. Elbert County commissioners will consider approval of expansion of the 9-year-old district at its Aug. 24 meeting.

“There have always been discussions about a pipeline coming from that part of the region,” said Stulp, who ranches south of Lamar and is a former Prowers County commissioner. Stulp served as commissioner of agriculture under Gov. Bill Ritter and is Gov. John Hickenlooper’s top water adviser. “Colorado Interstate Gas looked at the possibility of putting water in a pipeline back in the 1990s. The devil is always in the details, however, and there’s a lot more we need to hear.”

The Colorado Water Conservation Board last year completed a study looking at various transbasin proposals. It found the costs of moving water from the Lower Arkansas Valley were high because of water quality and the pumping costs because of the increase in elevation.

However, the CWCB has not studied this particular proposal.

“It was a surprise to me,” said Alan Hamel, CWCB member and executive director of the Pueblo Board of Water Works. “My personal hope, as a CWCB member from the Arkansas Basin, is that they will share the project with the roundtables, so issues can be identified and everyone better understands what’s being proposed.”

He opposes using the pipeline to dry up farms and take water out of the valley.

Elbert County Commissioner Kurt Schlegel said the county has not been concerned with the roundtable process.

“I don’t believe so,” he said when asked whether the county had appointed representatives on the Arkansas or South Platte basins, which the county straddles. “We have no renewable water, and rely on groundwater.”

“That’s the whole reason for the roundtables,” Hamel said. “They were formed to have a dialogue with all affected entities in the basin.”

In 2008, at a roundtable presentation, the population of Elbert County was expected to triple in the next 30 years. However, its water needs originally identified in the Statewide Water Supply Initiative were removed, at least from the Arkansas Basin needs assessment.

The pipeline, rather than being advanced in secrecy, should be evaluated both for the potential benefits and harm, Hamel said.

“The negative impacts of this project are entirely to our basin,” he said.