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The Range Blog

Billion dollar baby: Why the Flaming Gorge pipeline is bad for the West

Red Lodge | Sep 13, 2011 01:41 PM



By Heather Hansen, Red Lodge Clearing House

A series of billboards were unveiled in western Colorado yesterday, opposing a proposed water pipeline. Overlaying the image of a desiccated river bed is the phrase, “This’ll only cost you \$9 billion.”

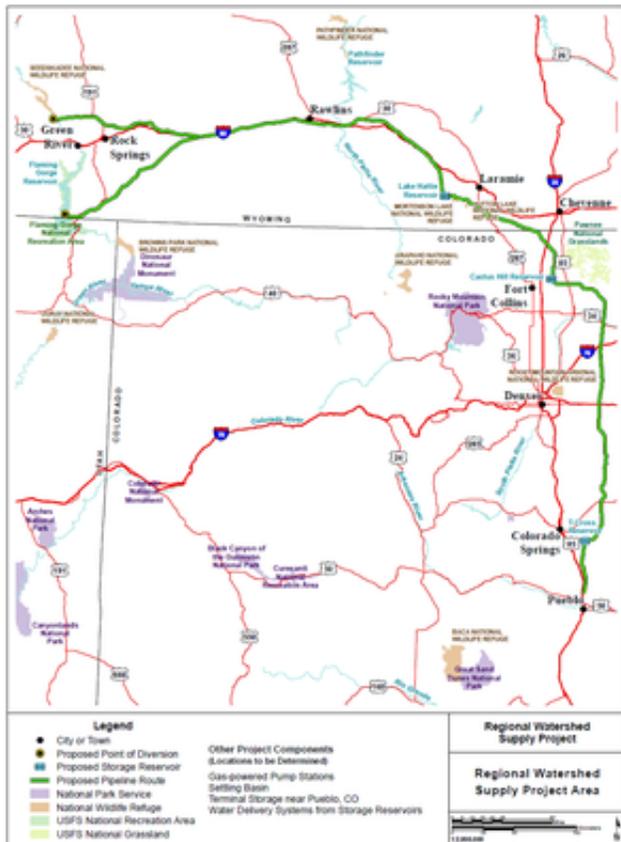


The placards were funded by some non-profits that are fighting the “Regional Watershed Supply Project,” which would pump 81 billion gallons of water per year from the Green River and the Flaming Gorge Reservoir in southwest Wyoming. The pipeline’s planned route runs over 500 miles across Wyoming, and up over the Continental Divide, before turning south into Colorado and terminating outside Pueblo.

The project’s mastermind, Fort Collins entrepreneur Aaron Million, says the scheme will bring much-needed water and electrical power to southern Wyoming and to Colorado’s Front Range. Opponents are challenging its cost, environmental impacts and water rights implications.

Earlier this month, Million applied for a permit for the project from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

(FERC). The Army Corp of Engineers had been studying the pipeline's possible environmental impacts for the past two years, but dropped that review last July when Million shifted the primary purpose of the pipeline from water supply to hydropower.



The application to FERC shows a planned five conventional hydropower developments and two pumped storage hydroelectric developments along the route. The conventional, or in-line, sources are expected to generate 70 megawatts (MW), and the pumped storage another 500 to 1,000 MW. (That's enough power for a half million to a million average American homes.) Why the range of possible power produced is so wide is unclear, but may be because accessing "pumped storage" hydropower is, in itself, highly energy-intensive.

Pumping water up and over the Continental Divide is not a magical process either; that means additional energy use and considerable carbon emissions.

Among the other environmental pitfalls of the so-called Flaming Gorge pipeline are its potential effects on the aquatic and riparian habitats along the Green and Colorado rivers. (The project would divert at least 25 percent of the Green.) The recreation industry is worried about fluctuating reservoir and river levels, which would affect marinas, a world-class trout fishery, commercial fishing operations and rafting through areas including Dinosaur National Monument. This has knock-on effects for many other businesses reliant on that water-based tourism, including restaurants, hotels and gift shops.

A report by the state of Colorado estimates that, depending on whether the project is publicly- or privately-funded, Million's pipeline could cost \$7 billion to \$9 billion to construct. In its comparison of the Flaming Gorge pipeline to other proposed schemes to supply more water to the Front Range, Western Resource Advocates says the Flaming Gorge project would "deliver the most expensive water in Colorado's history." It could cost as much as 10 times more than any of the other proposals currently being floated.

Perhaps most significant is the likelihood that taking this water for use on the Front Range will fuel water clashes in

the West.

This water is hardly a “new” source for Front Range cities and farmers; it’s already spoken for. Under the Colorado River Compact of 1922, the Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming are required to deliver 7.5 million acre-feet (AF) per year to the Lower Basin states of Arizona, California and Nevada. Since the Green River and Flaming Gorge Reservoir are both part of the Colorado River basin, that 250,000 AF per year that the Million pipeline would divert may be needed to satisfy the Lower Basin allocation in the near future. Over the past several years, the threat of a “Compact call,” or a Compact-driven curtailment of Upper Basin water, in order to deliver the Lower Basins states their full share, has become real. Population growth and climate change are predicted to further exacerbate supply and demand.

Today the Colorado Water Conservation Board will consider a \$150,000 grant request to create a special state-funded task force to study the feasibility of the Flaming Gorge pipeline. They should say no to this scheme, a pipe dream of one individual. We don’t need anymore monuments to ego in the West; we need to focus on real-world solutions.

Essays in the Range blog are not written by High Country News. The authors are solely responsible for the content.

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Billboard image courtesy stopflaminggorgepipeline.org. Map of the proposed route courtesy: Wyco Power and Water, Inc.



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