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Colorado Water Conservation Board votes to study Wyoming pipeline plan

By Bruce Finley
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Colorado water authorities trying to prevent projected shortages have resolved to look further into a proposed multibillion-dollar pipeline to import water from Wyoming.

Meanwhile, the private developer who proposed the 570-mile pipeline — to move water from the upper Colorado River Basin to expanding Front Range suburbs — has applied to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for a license to build the pipeline.

A new poll finds Wyoming residents heavily oppose the pipeline.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board voted unanimously Wednesday to spend \$72,000 on a six-month study exploring legal, cost and environmental aspects of the Flaming Gorge Pipeline concept — and \$100,000 more if the first study finds the project to be promising.

A previous conservation board study estimated the pipeline would cost as much as \$9 billion — making water it would deliver the most expensive in Colorado history.

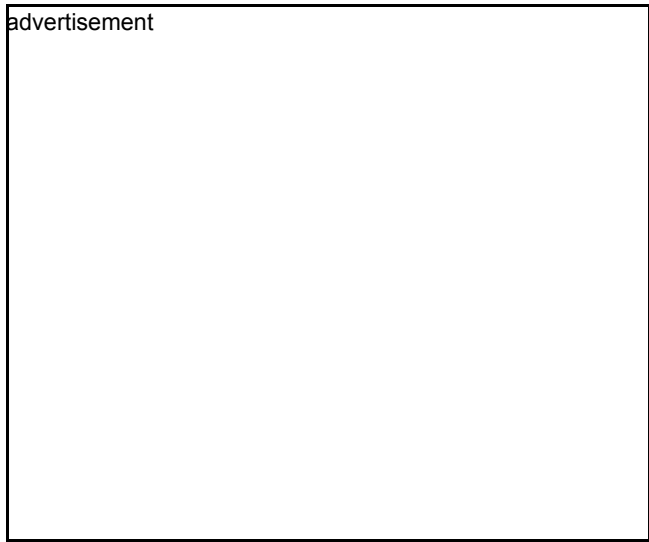
The 10 board members acted despite concerns raised by environmental groups and a Monday letter from state lawmakers, Joint Budget Committee members Sen. Pat Steadman and Rep. Mark Ferrandino. They cited "tremendous budget challenges this year. . . . Funding a task force to discuss the merits of a financially infeasible project seems imprudent."

Conservation board director Jennifer Gimbel issued a statement emphasizing "this vote was not an affirmation of the project itself, or any aspect of it, but the approval of a process to encourage roundtable discussion of issues surrounding any project."

The board is charged with protecting and developing water resources for the state.

A poll commissioned by the conservation group Trout Unlimited found that 79 percent of Wyoming residents oppose piping Wyoming water to Colorado because they're concerned about availability of water to meet their own needs.

The Colorado Springs-based Pikes Peak Water Authority had requested state funding and will hire a firm to conduct the study for a state task force. Like suburbs south of Denver, suburbs of Colorado Springs depend on finite underground



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water pumped from aquifers and seek new surface-water supplies to sustain population growth.

Fort Collins entrepreneur Aaron Million and, separately, a coalition of south metro water providers each have proposed to divert water from near Wyoming's Flaming Gorge Reservoir, which traps the Green River, through a pipeline across the Continental Divide to the Front Range.

State scrutiny "will be nothing but helpful to move this project forward," Million said, adding that engineering firms estimate the project would cost \$3 billion.

Federal energy officials who received his application this month will review environmental impacts and the potential to generate at least 70 megawatts of hydropower, Million said.

"A new water supply is needed to alleviate environmental issues on our rivers and protect our agricultural base, and, otherwise, we would be letting California and Arizona benefit because the (Colorado River) system has been over-delivering to those lower basin states," he said. "This isn't about Colorado against Wyoming. This is about the upper basin states — Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico — versus California and Arizona. We need to use the water resources we've been allocated under the interstate compact."

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