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Energy lines eyed for Green River project

By DENNIS WEBB

A Fort Collins man proposing to pipe water from the Green River in Utah to Colorado's Front Range is considering repurposing oil and gas pipeline infrastructure for the job.

"There's existing pipeline infrastructure we're currently looking at. It's basically a turnkey plumbing system," said Aaron Million, whose company, Water Horse Resources LLC, is hoping to divert 55,000 acre-feet a year of water east to Wyoming and then south to Colorado.

The possibility of using existing pipelines rather than having to build new ones entirely is one tack Million is taking in arguing in favor of the economic feasibility of his idea.

Financial viability is one of the issues that Utah State Engineer Kent Jones is pressing Million on as Million pursues a Utah water right for the project.

Jones heads the Utah Division of Water Rights, which last month heard from Million and numerous project opponents before deciding that it needed more information from Million.

On Dec. 10, Jones wrote to Million, asking for a detailed engineering cost-estimate for conveying the water to the Front Range that demonstrates the cost would be physically and economically feasible.

Million said Monday that he can't speak in details about possible use of existing infrastructure due to a nondisclosure agreement, but said several pipelines cross the Green River at his proposed diversion point, and an existing pipeline goes to north of Greeley.

Million said there has been significant reuse of natural gas lines for other purposes, and to a lesser degree, oil pipelines. Lines are either cleaned or bored out before reuse, he said.

He said his company also has done financial modeling for building a pipeline instead. However the project is developed, he believes its cost would amount to a small percentage of what Front Range water projects costs.

"We've done our homework. We've costed this deal out, inside and out," he said.

In his letter, Jones also asks Million for information on why Jones should believe there is water available, physically and under interstate Colorado River compacts, for diversion. Jones pointed to existing downstream water rights and approved applications to appropriate water, endangered-fish needs, and potential federal reserved water rights for Indian tribes and for national parks, monuments and recreation areas.

"This information is being requested since the state engineer has already established by policies adopted for this area a belief that the amount of water proposed under the application is not available for beneficial use as your application proposes," Jones wrote to Million.

Million said a recent federal environmental review found a surplus of water beyond environmental, recreation and other needs in the stretch of the Green River where he proposes his diversion, upstream of where it is replenished by the Yampa River.

Million said his understanding is that Utah is concerned that a proposed pipeline project from Lake Powell would use some of its remaining compact allocation.

But he said that doesn't mean there isn't a surplus available for other states, and his project would count against Colorado's allocation.

In his letter, Jones asks for documentation from Million that the state of Colorado agrees with this assertion.

Million contends that there are several other examples of Colorado River water diverted from one state counting against the allocation of the state where it's used, and Jones can't legally deny Million's permit application based on a lack of a letter of assent from Colorado.

Entities including the Utah Board of Water Resources, Colorado River District and several federal agencies and conservation groups all are voicing concerns about Million's proposal, including some of the same concerns raised in Jones' letter.

Gary Wockner with the group Save the Colorado said the questions posed by Jones are "good and strong."

"In my mind Utah has thrown down the gauntlet here and it appears that they are going to put this application through every hoop possible," he said.