

Environmentalists, feds and Utahns agree: Don't send Green River water to Colorado

If there is one issue that could unite environmentalists, rural Utah counties, power companies and federal agencies, it would be a proposal to funnel 55,000 acre-feet of water from the Beehive State across the Continental Divide to feed a neighboring state's urban growth.

Such an array of disparate interests crowded a Salt Lake City hearing room Wednesday to implore the [Utah Board of Water Resources](#) to reject a petition by Colorado businessman Aaron Million to [divert this water from the Green River](#) below Flaming Gorge Dam to Colorado's Front Range.

“Such an export, if approved, would have cascading ramifications for Utah water users, public recreation and natural stream environment of the Green River and could potentially impair Utah's ability to meet current and future demands,” warned Assistant Utah Attorney General Greg Hansen.

With Utah roots extending four generations back into Green River's melon patch, Million has been pushing this pipeline plan for a decade, arguing Colorado is legally entitled to the water and that demand is growing in cities between Fort Collins and Pueblo.

But now it's unfolding with the specter of drought-induced shortages to likely be declared downstream for Arizona, Nevada and California. Some fear the [proposal would exacerbate interstate tensions](#) over how the Colorado River water is shared.

Million's latest, scaled-down proposal envisions a 375-mile underground pipeline, 38 to 42 inches in diameter, running from Browns Park in eastern Utah's Daggett County north into Wyoming, then east along Interstate 80

before turning south toward Denver on the other side of the Rockies. It would generate hydropower along its 3,800-foot descent from the Continental Divide to the Front Range.

Under the new corporate name [Water Horse Resources](#), Million contends he is merely seeking to fulfill Colorado's right to the Colorado River's flow, to which the Green contributes a hefty share and is experiencing robust flows.

“There's a surplus water supply in a protected river system. There's a huge demand. Utah is faced with similar issues at Lake Powell,” Million said, referring to Utah's own plans to divert 84,000 acre-feet there. “We hope the project benefits agriculture, environmental needs, alleviates municipal supply-demand imbalance. It's becoming as much a renewable-energy project as water supply.”

Water moving through the Colorado and its tributaries is governed by a 1922 agreement dividing the resource between seven Western states grouped in the Colorado's Upper and Lower basins. Upper Basin neighbors Utah and Colorado have yet to tap their full allocations and have projects, such as Utah's Lake Powell Pipeline, geared toward developing their share.

“The Upper Basin states have historically worked together,” Million said. “These things are not without controversy, but we think it's a really good project, as do others.”

But plenty of others insist the project is a bad idea. Joining Utah in protesting the water-right application are eight Utah water districts and another two in Colorado; the U.S. Department of Interior and some of its reclamation agencies; and Living Rivers, Utah Rivers Council and several other environmental groups.

Million's proposal does not enjoy Colorado's stamp of approval either, raising fears that his 55,000 acre-foot diversion would come from Utah's share of the Colorado River.

“It could place Utah in the complicated and tenuous position of administering a Utah water right for a Colorado share of their allocation, but doing so without Colorado’s approval or support,” said Hansen, who insisted Colorado should first analyze the need for the project before Utah decides on the water right.

Critics said Million’s application was so devoid of detail that there was no way for Utah’s state engineer to determine whether the project could even be built, how it would be financed or the water put to “beneficial use.”

Million estimated the cost at \$1.1 billion, but a lawyer for the federal Bureau of Reclamation said a more realistic figure would be \$8 billion to \$10 billion.

One party did appear at Wednesday’s hearing to voice support: the Pipeliners Local Union 798.

“The project can be done with no harm to the environment and Utah. I ask you to grant this water right and expedite this project, so our guys can get to work and put food on the table for their families,” said Chad Gilbert, a union representative from Mancos, Colo. “This will employ people along the route, and we are willing to do the training. That’s what America needs, jobs with good solid wages.”