

Task force funded to study controversial water diversion pipeline project

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GRAND JUNCTION, Colo. — Environmental groups unveiled three billboards along I-70 earlier this week to show the cost of a proposed, controversial pipeline that would divert water from Wyoming's Flaming Gorge reservoir and the Western Slope's Green River to the Front Range.

The billboards claim the cost of building the pipeline would be \$9 billion. A photo depicts an already dry Colorado River delta due to dams and diversions by all seven Colorado River basin states. The river has not reached the Pacific Ocean for years.

The proposed "Flaming Gorge" pipeline would pump water from the Green River, 560 miles across Wyoming, and over the Continental Divide to Colorado's Front Range. The Green River is a major tributary to the Colorado River.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board, a state policy-making body, voted unanimously Wednesday to approve funding of a special task force to consider construction of the Flaming Gorge pipeline. Board members voted to spend \$70,000, and another \$170,000 if the first study shows the project to be promising.

A coalition of environmental groups that include Western Resource Advocates, the Colorado Environmental Coalition and Save the Colorado, object to spending taxpayer money to study the feasibility of the trans-mountain diversion of water.

"Our concern is that it adds credibility to the project," CEC water coordinator Becky Long said.

Ken Neubecker is director of Western Rivers Institute, past president of Trout Unlimited, and a member of the task force. The state legislature set aside money for projects like the task force study to look at what needs to be done regarding water supply and Colorado's future, Neubecker said.

The state's population is expected to double by 2050, and water shortages for Front Range municipalities are predicted.

"It's time to take a hard look at (the Flaming Gorge pipeline) from a feasibility standpoint," Neubecker said.

The task force, comprised of representatives from several basin roundtables across Colorado, needs to look at potential environmental impacts, water availability, economic aspects, and Colorado Basin Compact implications, Neubecker said.

The task force does not include stakeholders from Wyoming or Utah, states that would also be affected by a trans-mountain diversion of water to the Front Range, Long said.

"Any significant reduction from the Green River could potentially affect all users in the basin," said Hannah Holm, coordinator of the Water Center at Colorado Mesa University. The Water Center's purpose is to "help communities in the upper Colorado River Basin understand how to be smart about water, do more with less to meet the needs going forward due to scarcity and tightened competition," Holm said.

Additional water for projected shortages could come from purchase of agricultural rights, increased conservation, and alternative agricultural rights purchases — temporary arrangements with farmers so water could be obtained "without

drying up the land forever,” Holm said.

The environmental coalition released a statement Wednesday protesting the vote: “While smaller, the proposal would still spend thousands of dollars in state funds to investigate a controversial and environmentally damaging project which thousands of Colorado citizens believe should not be funded at all.”

The statement also refers to a meeting earlier this week where members of the Joint Budget Committee expressed concerns that the study would duplicate efforts of the Interbasin Compact Committee, a group that facilitates conversations among Colorado's river basins to address statewide water issues.

Task force members are not necessarily in favor of building the pipeline but trans-mountain diversions are part of the discussion the roundtables were established to have, Neubecker said.

“There are alternatives we need to explore before we do something extreme like (building the Flaming Gorge pipeline),” Neubecker said. “It doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about it.

“A lot of folks, especially on the Front Range, see this as supplying their water in the future. Some see the Flaming Gorge project as the silver bullet we need.”

Carlyle Currier is a fourth-generation rancher near Collbran who wants to see a solution to future water shortages other than buying up agricultural rights.

“Only by studying what is available can we look for solutions,” Currier said. “If the project is not feasible it will encourage us to look at other options to meet water needs on the Front Range.”

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