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Entrepreneur revives proposed pipeline to carry Green River water from Utah to Colorado

Aaron Million's scaled-down version would move 55,000 acre-feet, generate hydropower along 375-mile route.



[By Brian Maffly](#)

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The “zombie pipeline” is back.

A plan to pipe Green River water from two spots on Flaming Gorge in Utah to Colorado’s thirsty and fast-growing Front Range was filed last month with the Utah State Engineer.

The proposal is a scaled-down version of Colorado resident Aaron Million’s controversial plan that the [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission rejected](#) in 2012. Under a new

company name of [Water Horse Resources LLC](#), the would-be water developer and Fort Collins-based entrepreneur filed the application Jan. 12, seeking permission to export 55,000 acre-feet of water, but with no specific use or destination offered.

His latest proposal, called Green River Pipeline or Flaming Gorge Project, would move 18 billion gallons a year — at a rate of 76 cubic feet per second — 375 miles across Wyoming, then south to Denver. Million estimates the project would cost \$800 million to \$1 billion, covered by private investors.

“We spent the last several years re-engineering the project and brought in a North American team and a new board of directors. Collectively they have \$100 billion in net revenues,” said Million, who has also been working on his doctorate in natural-resource policy at Colorado State University.

His new vision of the project calls for powering the pipeline with wind and solar power, then recouping that energy with a series of inline hydro turbines on the downhill part of the line in

Wyoming, taking advantage of the pipeline's net elevation drop.

“At the end of the day, this is a renewable energy project,” Million said, noting the line would descend 3,800 vertical feet after cresting the Continental Divide. “That’s why we brought in the Canadians [[SNC-Lavalin](#), headquartered in Montreal]. They are the world’s best in hydropower.”

He said the pipeline is being rebranded as Green River Sun Storage Hydropower Project, which will have a memorable acronym that resembles “grasshopper.”

The project began as Million’s master’s thesis. But from the beginning in 2006, his quest to tap the Green was ridiculed for its potentially astronomical costs, the lack of interest of water on the receiving end and subsequent denials from various permitting agencies. Because the proposal keeps rising from the dead, critics have dubbed it the “zombie pipeline.”

One environmentalist called the latest bid “a speculative application.”

“There is no indication that he is standing in the shoes of real users in Colorado, or Wyoming or anywhere,” said Rob Harris of [Western Resource Advocates](#), a public-interest law firm that contested Million’s earlier proposals. “Water is a public resource in Utah and Colorado. As such, in both our states you need a real use to have standing to claim a water right like this.”

Million’s previous proposal called for moving four times more water over 500 miles, all the way to Pueblo, necessary to meet projected water needs in Colorado’s fast-growing urban corridor along the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains. And in that prior version, the water was to be drawn directly from Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Wyoming.

Now Million proposes drawing the water from two points in Utah’s Daggett County, several miles downstream from the dam and just upstream from Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge. The pipeline alignment still tracks along Interstate 80 across Wyoming but it drops south only as far as Denver.

Million’s vision is similar to Utah’s proposed

Lake Powell pipeline, but would carry water over a much longer distance. One key difference is that the Lake Powell pipeline is sought by a water district with heavy state backing.

Applying the per-mile economics of the Lake Powell pipeline to the Water Horse project, however, would put costs of the pipeline to Colorado probably closer to at least \$3.5 billion — and Zach Frankel of the [Utah Rivers Council](#) suspects it would cost closer to \$10 billion.

“The project’s economics are so ridiculous,” Frankel said. “How could anyone think this would pencil out financially?”

But [Water Horse’s web site](#) cites Colorado’s 2015 Water Plan, which projects a water supply gap of 560,000 acre-feet by 2030. Million contends his project will deliver between \$18 billion and \$30 billion of value to Colorado.

“This project’s alternative transfer methods and reuse will provide several hundred thousand acre-feet of new Front Range water supply to address this gap,” the state’s water plan states.

Under Million's application, the appropriated water would be used in a variety of ways, including municipal, industrial, commercial, irrigation, livestock and mining. It would move in a buried pipeline through inline hydroelectric turbines in Wyoming, which would allow the project to capture some of the power it would use to lift the water over the Continental Divide.

Nor does the application identify any specific destination. It is accompanied by a hand-drawn map showing the pipeline alignment and a Y-shaped "place of use" in northern Colorado outlined in red, covering 47 townships. Maps of these townships are also attached to the application.

"All those crazy maps reinforce the illegality of this application," said Harris, of Western Resource Partners.

Among the partners Water Horse lists on its web site is [Central Colorado Water Conservancy District](#), based in Greeley, which provides augmentation water to around 600 farms in the South Platte River Valley. The district is under

contract to provide 85,000 acre-feet, but its ability to meet these obligations has been “curtailed” by half, according to executive director Randy Ray.

“Therefore our request to Aaron and project proponents is for delivery up to 40,000 acre-feet. We sent Aaron a letter to that effect sometime a year ago,” he said.

[Daggett County opposed](#) Million’s pipeline project the last time around. County Commission chairman Jack Lytle said he was not familiar enough with the new proposal to provide comment on Monday.

Conservation groups oppose the diversion because of its potential impact on habitat for both sport fish and endangered native species, such as the [Colorado pikeminnow](#), bonytail, humpback chub and razorback sucker.

The natives depend on occasional chaotic high flows that rearrange the stream channel, but have been widely depleted by dam operations.

“The river system is so overtaxed and these fish

so overstressed, any more removal of water would jeopardize the existence of these four fish,” said Michael Saul of the [Center for Biological Diversity](#). “Taking another 55,000 acre-feet out of the Green is a ridiculous idea in light of the fact that these fish are not recovering under the recovery plans now. This depletion is so huge, it is not covered by current biological opinions.”

For its part, Trout Unlimited has invested in programs that compensate water-rights holders for allowing more water to remain in the Colorado River system to support healthy fish habitat. A proposed diversion as big as the one Million is pursuing would defeat those efforts, according to Jordan Nielson, coordinator for Trout Unlimited’s Western Water and Habitat Program.

“We are still evaluating the details of the proposal, but it was a bad idea the last time he tried, and it remains a bad idea,” Nielson said. “The pipeline would be outrageously expensive and pose serious impacts to river health and wildlife habitat along the route.”