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Green River pipeline proposal being revived

By DENNIS WEBB



Aaron Million

Special to the Sentinel

A Fort Collins man has revived a controversial proposal to pipe water from the Green River watershed hundreds of miles to Colorado's Front Range.

Aaron Million has filed for a water right with the state of Utah for the project, which would involve diverting about 55,000 acre-feet of water a year from the Green River near the Browns Park area close to the Colorado line. The water would be piped east in Wyoming and then south into Colorado.

The project differs from a previous version Million proposed years ago in that it involves about a fifth as much water, and the previous incarnation would have diverted water upstream, from Flaming Gorge Reservoir.

Both the past and present versions have a hydropower element to them. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in 2012 denied a preliminary permit application for the pipeline proposal.

"We're re-engineering the project and moving forward again," Million said Monday.

He's doing so through the company Water Horse Resources LLC, which Million said has a new board and project team compared to the company that pursued the prior project.

The previous proposal drew considerable opposition from conservation groups; Utah's Daggett County, which is home to part of Flaming Gorge Dam; and entities including the Colorado River District in Glenwood Springs, the city of Grand Junction and Mesa County. The new proposal is drawing early scrutiny from prior opponents.

Gary Wockner of the group Save the Colorado said in a news release, "Save The Colorado played a key role in helping to kill this project in 2012, and we will take another key position against it in 2018. Continuing to drain and divert the Colorado River (Basin) is insanity and this project joins a list of other projects that all would combine to nearly completely destroy the river."

One concern about a Green River diversion is that it could reduce the ability of states in the upper Colorado River Basin to deliver water to Lower Basin states under a 1922 interstate compact.

Million said the diversion, at 20 percent the size of the previous proposal, would entail a half a percent of Green River flows.

"We're recognizing that from the process standpoint you need to be judicious on any new water project," he said.

Rob Harris, senior staff attorney with the Western Resource Advocates conservation group, said 55,000 acre-feet is "still a heck of a lot of water," enough to serve the needs of a good-sized city. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

Harris said there's no evidence that Million has identified end users for the water, and speculation on water is illegal in Colorado, which raises the question of whether he's trying to get a water right in Utah to sidestep Colorado water courts.

Million said he had subscribed interest in more than 400,000 acre-feet of water for the previous project.

"That demand has not changed. It's actually gone up," he said. "And obviously the (regional) water supply itself has continued to tighten."

Harris said major water players on the growing Front Range have been pursuing other initiatives like conservation, agriculture/urban water sharing, and smaller-scale local projects.

"This sort of project just doesn't fit well into that conversation, frankly," he said.

Chris Treese, external affairs manager for the Colorado River District, said a Green River diversion to the Front Range would count against Colorado's percentage of Upper Colorado River Basin water use under a 1948 compact with other Upper Basin states. Colorado already uses a higher percentage than it's allocated under that compact, and if a water shortage kicks in under the basinwide 1922 compact and the Upper Basin has to deliver more water downstream, Colorado would have to contribute first to make up any deficit, Treese said.

He said there also are a lot of questions about what the route for the pipeline would be and whether anyone could use the water along the way.

"I think ... right now the first step is trying to ascertain how serious (the proposal) is," Treese said. "... It's early in a process of looking at a long and complicated application."

Million said the project's estimated cost is \$890 million to \$1 billion, down from the \$2.8 billion cost for the previous proposal.

He said a tripling in the cost of water on the Front Range has allowed for a much smaller project to be affordably built and still help some water-short areas.

He described the project as "a very simple plumbing project" that would be first and foremost about supplying renewable energy. He said it would include huge amounts of hydropower and pumped-storage hydropower. The latter involves pumping water at night when electricity is cheap into upper reservoirs and then sending the water through generators back to lower reservoirs to create higher-priced power during the day.

He said his company is looking at using a lot of solar and wind energy to power pump stations.

Million said that in bringing new water to the Front Range, the project would take pressure off some Front Range rivers, along with some Colorado River headwater streams now heavily taxed by diversions across the Continental Divide. That would boost water levels in the Colorado River mainstem, he said.

He also sees a benefit in tapping the Green River watershed in a year such as this one, when snowpack levels in that watershed are much higher than in the upper reaches of the Colorado River Basin.

He added, "All of the global warming models show the Green River system to be wetter than average in the future compared to the Colorado River mainstem."

Million said moving the diversion point downstream of Flaming Gorge Reservoir addresses concerns that have been raised about impacts the project could have had on reservoir levels.

"We looked at all the options. We're trying to be cognizant of the issues within the respective communities," he said.