

Historic water pact signed between Colorado's East, West Slope interests

Denver Business Journal

Decades of court battles over the diversion of Colorado River water to the Front Range could be ending with the signing Tuesday of what is being termed “an historic agreement” between Western slope cities and counties, Denver Water and other interests in the state.

The agreement, signed near the headwaters of the Colorado River in Hot Sulphur Springs, will govern future water project construction and management of Colorado River Basin water and establishes a new process for dealing with long-standing disputes between east and west slope interests.

“The collaborative spirit is alive and well in Colorado,” said Gov. John Hickenlooper. “This is a state where we get things done. From farmers and families to businesses and wildlife, this agreement will help protect Colorado’s water and is a testament to how collaboration can overcome even long-standing differences in managing this vital resource.”

The agreement specifies that any new water project by Denver Water in the Colorado River Basin will be developed only in cooperation with those entities impacted by the development. Other provisions of the agreement:

- Additional water for towns, districts and ski areas in Grand and Summit counties to serve the needs of residents and to improve the health of rivers and streams.
- An agreement to operate key Denver Water facilities, such as Dillon Reservoir in Summit County, and Williams Fork Reservoir and the Moffat Collection System in Grand County, in a way that better addresses the needs and concerns of neighboring communities and enhances the river environment.
- Greater certainty for Denver Water to develop future water resources for its customers by resolving long-standing disputes over its service territory, its ability to use West Slope water, its ability to develop future water supplies in the Colorado River Basin, and other legal issues.
- Additional water and enhanced system reliability for customers of Denver Water, representing nearly 25 percent of the state’s population, by moving forward the Moffat Collection System Project.
- Agreement by all partners to not oppose Denver’s storage of its Blue River and Moffat Project water on the Front Range.
- Reinforcement of the priority and increased conservation and reuse within Denver Water’s service area.

- Improves the health of Colorado’s rivers and streams by dedicating funds to pay for watershed, water treatment and aquatic habitat improvements in the Colorado River Basin.
- Changes in water management associated with the Shoshone Power Plant in Glenwood Canyon that preserves historic flows in the middle and lower Colorado River.

“The agreement we sign today marks the beginning of a new era of inter-regional cooperation with one broad goal: a brighter and more sustainable future for Colorado,” said Penfield Tate, vice president of the Denver Board of Water Commissioners. “Today, we are saying there is a better way — a way that will make the Colorado River and its tributaries healthier, ensure a more reliable water supply for our customers, and that will develop and use water in a way that protects and improves the environment and benefits all users from the West Slope to the Front Range.”

U.S. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., commended officials with Denver Water, Grand and Summit counties and others for striking the agreement.

“Water is the lifeblood of Colorado. Our ability to sustainably use it to fuel economic growth and preserve our Colorado heritage is critical for the state,” Udall said. “This cooperative agreement between Western Slope water users and Denver Water embodies the kind of solution we should strive for in response to our water challenges. This agreement — and the process that shaped it — is a high water mark for cooperation on water issues and should be a model for the entire state to follow. A key part of the agreement allows Denver Water to move ahead with the Moffat Collection System Project to address shortages like the one that occurred in the drought of 2002, when the north end of the system nearly ran dry.

“It is critical to the Denver region that this project moves forward,” said U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Denver. “I applaud Denver Water and all of the signatories for their dedication to settling old conflicts and coming together to the benefit of our quality of life and economy.”

The agreement involves more than 40 Front Range and Western Slope interests.