

Coalition embarks on Blue River efficiency project

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Efforts continue throughout Colorado with implementation of the one-year-old state water plan (<http://www.summitdaily.com/news/summit-county-coalition-embarks-on-blue-river-efficiency-project/www.summitdaily.com/news/colorado-water-plan-faces-new-hurdles-on-one-year-anniversary/>), and Summit County is trying to do its part.

A countywide push led by the town of Frisco and the High County Conservation Center (HC3) recently garnered a \$94,000 grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) to move forward with a comprehensive Blue River watershed efficiency-planning project. The regional venture, scheduled to start in January 2017, has a total budget of \$162,500, and matching cash and in-kind labor contributions from each of the county's major municipal water providers make up the difference.

The Blue River, a tributary of the Colorado River basin, covers all of Summit, as well as parts of Grand and Lake counties. This headwater basin as a whole annually supplies water to more than 30 million people in the Southwest, so locating ways to make every drop count is crucial as the territory's populace swells and drought conditions persist (<http://www.summitdaily.com/news/summit-county-coalition-embarks-on-blue-river-efficiency-project/www.summitdaily.com/news/local/summit-county-could-face-strain-from-colorados-new-water-plan/>).

According to the Statewide Water Supply Initiative, a study funded by the CWCB, the water supply gap for new demand on the Colorado River is about 40 percent. The Blue River itself acts as a source for drinking water and agricultural irrigation to Summit's 29,000 year-round population, not to mention the countless visitors who spend time on the water body each year for recreation. Projections suggest the local population will increase by at least 5 percent over the next decade, meaning the need to conserve and discover additional efficiencies is one of the more painless ways to get ready for the additional ask.

"Water doesn't recognize geopolitical boundaries, so it's important we work as a watershed to accomplish some really good water conservation goals," said Frisco Councilwoman Jessica Burley, who is also HC3's community programs manager. "The state has set some interesting water goals, and it's our job to go forth and conquer from a regional perspective. With these initiatives and this plan, hopefully we will make an impact on the Colorado River basin."

To prepare for population growth that's expected to double over the next 35 years, Colorado released its first-ever water plan last November after several years of development. If the state is truly going to reach more than 10.5 million people in that 35-year span, buckling down to stretch this vital — and limited — resource further is key.

The statewide plan calls for 400,000 acre-feet of new storage and that same total in conservation from urban areas. An acre-foot is the U.S. standard measurement for water bodies and equates to about 326,000 gallons. Sharing 50,000 acre-feet of water possessed by agriculture based on senior rights through alternative methods is another facet of the state plan.

Thus far, the execution of much of the lofty benchmarks has been sluggish, in part due to a lack of funding. It's why obtaining dollars from the state for such municipal projects is so important. Not only does it provide capital at present while the research is done, but the initial approval also offers eligibility for future grants and loans. Without an CWCB-endorsed efficiency plan in place, funds are otherwise not available.

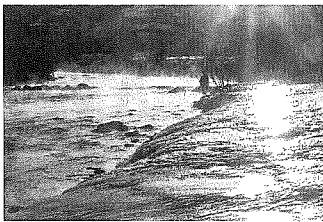
Mimicking a model previously created by the Roaring Fork Valley, Summit's Blue River planning enterprise is backed by Breckenridge, Frisco, Copper Mountain Metro, Dillon, Silverthorne, as well as Summit County government — "So we all have a little skin in the game, so to speak," said Burley — with the primary objective of reducing water consumption by a measurable amount (<http://www.summitdaily.com/news/summit-county-coalition-embarks-on-blue-river-efficiency-project/www.summitdaily.com/news/summit-county-experts-pitch-water-conservation-at-state-of-the-river>) in the next few years. The consortium anticipates a 14-month investigation and review process, followed by some potential actionable items, such as leak detection and repairs, education and outdoor watering mandates, as soon as a year after that.

"This is the first step into bringing the Colorado Water Plan to fruition," explained Jim Pokrandt of the Colorado River District, a public policy agency in charge of protecting the named basin. "Part of being more water efficient is finding those leaks and stopping them. That's efficiency at a systematic level, then it drills down to the retail level with things like lawn irrigation, efficient appliances and efficient spigots and showerheads."

If it's to be successful, putting the ambitious state plan into practice will ultimately fall more on the shoulders of each local community and watershed, he added, rather than through commands dictated at the state level. And that's a summons Summit County leadership recognizes and is attempting to embrace one year later.

"People are fighting over (water), and there's a lot of finger pointing," said Burley. "It's really important as a headwater community to set a good example. That way when we do as much as we can do here, it provides more leverage when we challenge our neighbors to do the same. They will say, 'Oh, they've already done this, they've already implemented this,' and they'll look to us for how we did it."

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