

Denver Water grapples with Fraser River

By Nathaniel Minor
Colorado Public Radio

CENTENNIAL» Colorado's economy depends on water: where it is, where the people who need it live and work, who has rights to it. Fights over those needs are a core part of the state's history, and they tend to follow a pattern.

So in some ways, the fight over the Fraser River in Colorado's Grand County is familiar.

Denver Water holds unused water rights on the river, which starts in the shadow of Berthoud Pass and courses down the western side of the Continental Divide past Winter Park, Fraser and Tabernash to join the Colorado River out-side of Granby.

The agency, looking at the booming population and economy in Denver, now wants to exercise those rights. That means taking

more water from the river, piping it under the Indian Peaks and sending it into Gross Reservoir, near Boulder.

Some conservationists and environmental groups are crying foul, saying that the river has been over-taxed (about 60 percent of its existing flow is diverted to slake Denver's growing thirst) and it's time to let the river alone.

But the fight's pattern is taking some unfamiliar twists and turns. Influential groups such as Trout Unlimited and American Rivers, which historically have fought diversion projects, support this one. In exchange, Denver Water says it will help protect and enhance what's left of the Fraser River.

That compromise has fractured traditional lines in Colorado's conservation and environmental advocacy community and fostered

new alliances. While these organizations more or less agree on their ultimate goal — to protect and restore the environment — the strategies they use are very different. The big question that divides them: When to compromise?

Decades ago, environmentalists were not at the top of the list of Denver Water's concerns when it would try to build dams and add capacity. In the 1980s, environmental groups pushed back on a huge proposed dam called Two Forks.

"(Denver Water) told us in so many words: 'We're the experts. You're little environmentalists. Get out of the way,'" Dan Luecke, then head of the Environmental Defense Fund's Rocky Mountain office, told the High Country News in 2000.

Then, in 1990, an EPA veto torpedoed the project at the last minute.

"That was really a turning point for our organization," said Kevin Urie, a scientist who has worked for Denver Water for nearly 30 years. "I think we realized with the veto of Two Forks that we needed to think about things differently."

He believes that although Denver Water has long taken environmental impacts into consideration with its plans, it didn't engage with local stakeholders — such as conservation and environmental groups and Western Slope governments — until after the Two Forks project died.

There's a demographic change underway as well: Many of the Denver area's new residents also want to play in Western Slope rivers on the weekends. That has pushed Denver Water leadership to put a larger emphasis on environmental stewardship, Urie said.

But all those new resi-

dents still need water.

Denver Water delivers water to about 1.4 million people across the metro area, about double what it did 60 years ago. Conservation efforts have kept overall demand relatively low in recent years. But with more people moving to Denver every day, Denver Water expects its demand to rise 37 percent by 2032 from 2002 levels.

The Fraser River is key to Denver Water's plan to head off a shortfall in the relatively near future. The agency wants to divert half of the remaining flows from the Fraser and its tributaries through the Moffat Tunnel to Gross Reservoir near Boulder. It would be treated at the agency's plant in Lakewood and delivered to customers across the metro area.

The agency expects to have all of its necessary permits by 2018, and construction could begin in 2019 or

2020. But to get those permits, Denver Water has agreed to be part of a group that includes Grand County officials and environmentalists called "Learning by Doing." These different players are often at odds when it comes to water issues.

Urie said Denver Water's participation shows its desire to do right by the environment and local stakeholders. It has helped fund an ambitious project that will engineer the Fraser River's flow on a nearly mile-long stretch between Fraser and Tabernash, squeezing it to make it narrower, deeper and colder — and thus healthier.

But is that what's best for the river? Urie thought about that question for a minute, and then chose his words carefully. "Clearly the system would be better if we weren't using the water resources for other uses. But that's not the scenario we are dealing with," Urie said.