ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS SATURDAY 7/28/07

Aquifer storage eyed for Platte

Underground sites could sub for surface lakes

By Jerd Smith
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Massive underground reservoir sites along the South Platte River could add much-needed water storage for the heavily populated region, to the benefit of fast-growing cities and farms.

Storing water under ground — instead of above ground — is one of several ideas being explored by a special task force charged with finding ways to better manage the battle-weary river.

Though many regions don't have good underground storage sites, several areas along the South Platte have the potential to easily store millions of gallons of water, according to a new study.

"We have a pretty good bucket already," said Gordon McCurry, a consulting engineer who helped conduct the study.

McCurry's comments came Friday during a meeting of the South Platte River Basin Task Force at the state Capitol. The group was appointed by Gov. Bill Ritter in June.

Subterranean storage is often cheaper and less environmentally damaging than building above-ground reservoirs, and less water is lost to evaporation, McCurry said.

But finding any extra water to store in these reservoirs is a tough question the task force must still address.

Since 2002, when a severe drought struck, strict new laws, dry weather, and competition for water by thirsty cities have turned the river into a war zone.

Thousands of irrigation wells have been ordered to stop pumping altogether or have had to sharply limit the water they take from the ground. Thousands of acres of land have been dried up and millions of dollars have been spent in water court to comply with the new laws.

Use of these powerful wells, once seen as a way to drought-proof farms in the region, can harm other river users if they pull too much water from the ground because that draws down the aquifer that helps supply the river.

Under some circumstances, though, the wells might be used in ways that help the river, for instance, by pumping during the winter to help supply reservoirs that typically rely on the river's surface flows to fill.

Another idea being considered is whether the state engineer — the top water regulator in the state — can be given more flexibility to manage the waterway.

Such flexibility existed for decades, but fell apart after the 2002 drought began and low flows wiped out the liquid buffer zone that helped keep the peace.

Arnie Good, a well user and task force member, said such flexibility would help make the river's supplies stretch farther.

"We would like the state engineer to have that kind of flexibility," Good said.

But others, worried that the state engineer hasn't done enough to protect those with surface water rights, said such flexibility could be dangerous, especially in dry years.

The task force has until September to make recommendations to a special legislative committee. It's next meeting is scheduled for Aug. 13 at the Capitol.

For more information go to: dnr.state.co.us.

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Added Note: Recharge of Colorado's excessively depleted aquifer reserves has been a statewide planning oversight for many years. Unfortunately, the extra new water and storage needed to slowly recharge Colorado's Denver, South Platte, Arkansas, Ogallala, and San Luis aquifers during long wet cycles has never been developed. Colorado has been losing a large portion its Colorado River Compact and nearly all of its Aspinall Pool entitlements to thirsty down river states since the 1960's. In fact, Colorado is the only Western state that does not have an integrated statewide planning process to guide local, state, and federal cooperation for successful water development. Colorado can quickly recover from its water development hiatus with emergency development of its Central Colorado Project (CCP). CCP is a paradigm intellectual and scientific breakthrough for Colorado and other headwater states. CCP can multiply the reliability, productivity, and quality of finite renewable energy and water resources throughout five Southwestern river basins, including aquifer recharge during wet cycles. CCP's resource multipliers are essential to enhance Colorado's cities, farms, and environments during unpredictable droughts and climate changes. Dave Miller, Water Planner, (719) 481-2003.