



Colorado
Legislative
Council
Staff

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MEMORANDUM

December 24, 2009

TO: Interested Persons

FROM: David Beaujon, Senior Analyst, 303-866-4781

SUBJECT: Regulation of Transbasin Diversions and Large Water Transfers

This memorandum:

- identifies the 39 transbasin diversions in Colorado;
- summarizes how transbasin diversions are regulated under Colorado's water law and certain federal laws;
- summarizes the major provisions of the *Water for the 21st Century Act* that addresses interbasin water supply issues;
- describes a study commissioned by the General Assembly in 2007 to determine the availability of water in the Colorado River Basin; and
- describes recent legislation to form conservation districts to address water supply challenges in the south metro area.

Transbasin Diversions in Colorado

Approximately 80 percent of the rain and snow that falls in the state falls west of the Continental Divide; however, most of the state's population and irrigated agriculture is on the eastern side. Consequently, water users have been diverting water from west of the continental divide to the eastern plains — called a transbasin or transmountain diversion — since the 1880s. According to the Division of Water Resources, there are 39 transbasin diversions in Colorado including 25 diversions that move water from the Colorado River Basin to eastern plains of Colorado. The attached map identifies the 39 transbasin diversions in Colorado. The largest transbasin diversion — the Adams Tunnel — is authorized to divert up to 231,060 acre-feet of water annually from the Upper Colorado River Basin to the South Platte River Basin for use by cities and irrigators. This tunnel is part of the Colorado-Big Thompson Project that is operated by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. Most transbasin diversions move water from the wetter Colorado River Basin to the drier South Platte and Arkansas River basins. However, nine transbasin diversions move water between tributaries of the Colorado River and eight transbasin diversions move water from the Colorado River Basin to the Rio Grande Basin.