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conserving resources

## Ideas to do more in Colorado with less water include technology

By Bruce Finley  
The Denver Post

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HUDSON — Pressure to do more with less water has reached the point where frontline control over agricultural waterways — the job of ditchriders for 150 years — now may be done by machines that keep track of every drop diverted from Colorado rivers.

Installation of a \$220,000 system of measuring stations and computer-controlled gates by the Henrylyn Irrigation District is slated to start this spring in the South Platte basin. Financed in part by the federal government, the automation is designed to save 4,000 acre-feet of water a year.

That's enough to sustain a small suburb. If similar systems were deployed statewide, the water savings could be huge. Farming consumes 85 percent of the water diverted from Colorado's

rivers.

Federal water managers say they'll fund scores of similar water-saving projects across the arid west half of the nation. The idea is to give farm irrigators the same capacity for precise accounting and instant flow-control used in cities.

"What's in it for us?" asked Rod Baumgartner, manager of Henrylyn's network of 140 miles of canals and ditches, which irrigate 33,000 acres northeast of Denver. "If we can be more efficient, it means we'll have that much more water for the farmers we serve."

This is happening at an anxious moment. State demographers say Colorado's population of 5 million will double by 2050.

A state water assessment released last week warns of major shortages of as much as 1 million acre-feet a year in the same period. The assessment projects the loss of 500,000 to 700,000 agricultural acres as farmers' senior water rights are sold off to meet urban demands.

Yet many of Colorado's leading water authorities, assembled last week at a Colorado Water Congress forum, indicated they aren't comfortable with that buy-up and dry-up scenario.

Former Gov. Bill Ritter "was always concerned about the loss of agricultural lands, and Gov. (John) Hickenlooper is concerned about the loss of agricultural lands," said Alex Davis, the state's

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assistant director of natural resources. "Do the energy companies end up buying most of the water? Do the municipalities end up competing with the energy companies for water? Could we have a South Platte River without agricultural production? The population is growing. Demands will increase and there's not enough water to meet all the demands. There will be trade-offs."

## Farmers displeased

Farmers bristled as city water authorities mobilized.

"We're losing the ability to produce food in this country," Family Farm Alliance president Pat O'Toole said at a water congress session aimed at exploring options for water sharing.

Environmental advocacy groups point out that recreation and tourism-related activities, which in 2009 injected \$8.6 billion into Colorado's economy, require healthy rivers and natural beauty, not new diversions for farming or cities.

Hickenlooper has hired John Stulp, a former rancher and agriculture commissioner, to serve as a special water adviser, charged with ensuring collaboration.

Starting his work, Stulp faced intense inquiries and offered what he could on "how we make the most of this very precious resource in a very arid environment."

Construct new reservoirs to store more mountain snowmelt? Water storage projects will be "part of

the tool box," Stulp said, suggesting that expansion of existing reservoirs is most feasible.

But first, Stulp said, cities must do all they can to get by on less water.

State lawmakers, meanwhile, are preparing legislation to lower transaction costs for farmers and cities trying to negotiate temporary water exchanges. Rep. Randy Fischer, D-Fort Collins, proposed having state administrators supervise deals, instead of having water courts do it.

Other states, too, are counting on water that starts in Colorado. Federal Bureau of Reclamation water managers say the water squeeze is intensifying around the western United States.

"Our role is to help stretch water resources and help avoid conflicts," Bureau of Reclamation policy and program manager Avra Morgan said at the bureau's office in Denver.

The 17-state, \$62 million conservation initiative Morgan oversees granted \$94,794 toward Henrylyn's automation of agricultural ditches and \$300,000 for a similar system on Ute tribal lands in southwestern Colorado. Other grants helped launch a "market" in Oregon for trading water rights and an effort to coordinate river diversions in Utah.

By the end of next year, the federal funding should enable conservation of 350,000 acre-feet of water a year, Morgan said.

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"But what happens with saved water," she said, "is mostly up to the states."

## What to do with saved water

Nobody in Colorado has been able to re-market saved agricultural water to cities. And at Henrylyn, Baumgartner said that while such an exchange might appeal, farming along the South Platte must at least maintain current production. "We've got to eat," he said.

Water savings will result, he said, from the ability to adjust ditch headgates in a way that releases the optimal amounts of water to cultivate pinto beans, sugar beets and other crops.

Under the current system, run by ditchriders who patrol waterways in pickups, water releases lack precision. "Sometimes we turn on a little too much, sometimes not enough," Baumgartner said.

The legal requirement that irrigators ensure "return flows" of irrigation water to the South Platte River, so that downriver users aren't hurt, is enforced by state water managers.

For ditchriders, the prospect of computer-controlled gates means change.

The six who patrol Henrylyn ditches currently spend about \$42,000 a year on gas as they patrol in their pickups looking for obstructions.

Instead they'll spend more time actually cutting

out and clearing fallen tree branches and "fighting with the weeds" that clog ditches in spring, ditchrider Patricio Martinez, 27, said while working this past week.

And then there's the matter of keeping content the farmers who count on the water. Shovel fights — and occasionally shooting — traditionally have been dealt with deftly by ditchriders who know local landscapes in detail.

"Sometimes farmers will think they can get more water, and sometimes they have no water," Martinez said.

"I'll tell them: 'Give me a couple hours' " to deal with obstructions, he said. "Or maybe I tell them I will have to deliver the next day."

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## Water squeeze

**16 million:** Number of acre-feet of water that Colorado's rivers, on average, generate each year. Colorado is obligated, under various legal compacts and decrees, to let about two-thirds of that flow out of the state.

## Where the water comes from

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**Colorado:** 4.5 million acre-feet

**Rio Grande:** 320,000 acre-feet

**Yampa:** 530,000 acre-feet

## **Demand separate from supply**

About 80 percent of Colorado's river water flows on the western side of the state, where about 20 percent of the people live. About 20 percent of the water flows on the eastern side of the state, where 80 percent of the people live. The Western Slope contains 562,000 people and about 918,000 acres of irrigated agricultural land, where food is produced. The eastern half of the state contains 4.5 million people and about 2.5 million irrigated agricultural acres.

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