

NEWS

JUL **Thirsty Cities, Dry Farms: Part 1 - Buy and Dry**
WED27 by Megan Verlee

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Everytime someone in a Front Range city turns on the tap, the water flowing out has a history. Much of it used to go to irrigate thriving farms and support communities on the Eastern Plains. As cities flourish, parts of rural Colorado are drying up. Colorado Public Radio's Megan Verlee has the first of two stories on how people are trying to change that story.

Here's a transcript of Megan Verlee's report:

ORVILLE TOMKY: "Hell, boy, you ought to have seen the beautiful crops we had here. Oh you never saw such beautiful alfalfa grew up here."

REPORTER MEGAN VERLEE: It's hard to imagine the landscape Orville Tomky is describing as we drive along back roads near his home in Crowley county. The alfalfa is long gone. So are the sugarbeets and melons Tomky's neighbors used to plant. Instead acre after acre of dry grass stretches outside the car windows. And those are the good parts. Many of the old fields are just stubble and bare dirt.

TOMKY: "...But look that the way them late weeds have come up. God dang it... See they grazed that and ain't no grass hardly in there. It's just that kosha weeds."

REPORTER: Tomky remembers when things here changed. In the 1970s a run of dry years and the closure of the sugar processing plant had a lot of farmers in a financial squeeze. And that's when a group of cities came to Crowley looking for water.

TOMKY: "They said, 'we'll give you thirty days. And if you don't sign up in thirty days, we'll never buy your water, we won't even talk to you.' Everybody just went crazy to get the money, you know. Things were tough and a lot of them owed money and a lot of them had poor farms."

REPORTER: It's called 'buy-and-dry.' The farmers keep their land, but their water goes to the city. That first water deal was followed by several more and a few decades Crowley county changed completely. This is semi-arid land; rainfall alone isn't nearly enough to grow crops.

TOMKY: "Before the water sold, there was over a thousand farms, on 80 acres, 100 acres, 40 acres. And now there's only 11 of us. It ruined the county."

REPORTER: And Tomky says Crowley didn't just lose its farms. When those farmers stopped buying tractors and hiring laborers, the towns dried up too.

TOMKY: "Now Olney Springs, when I came there, they had two filling stations, a hardware store, bar, and two garages. Now the only thing that's left is a cafe and it changes hands about every other year."

REPORTER: Tomky still mourns the changes to his county. But John Stulp, the governor's water advisor, and a farmer himself, says it would be a mistake to see the farmers as victims in this story; for many, being able to sell their water rights is a godsend.

JOHN STULP: "If you do not have sons or daughters who are willing to come back to the farming operation, oftentimes a farmer's irrigated water rights become their 401K, their retirement fund."

REPORTER: We're talking about some big money here. Rights to the most desirable agricultural water can go for more than \$10,000 dollars an acre-foot, and farmers often own hundreds of those. Cities are always looking to buy. It's hard to pin down exactly how much of the state has gone back to grass, or is on its way, because of urban water buys. But best guesses put the number at hundreds of square miles. State Supreme Court Justice Gregory Hobbs is an expert in Colorado water law. He says what happened in places like Crowley county made Colorado officials more cautious about water deals between cities and farmers.

HOBBS: "People realized that the tax base was being affected by these transfers. So the legislature basically adopted what I'm going to call mitigation."

REPORTER: Now the cities can't just buy the water and walk away, they've got a lot to do before they ever see a drop of it.

HOBBS: "The legislature has provided there must be re-vegetation when water is permanently removed. There are in lieu taxes that must be paid to support the local library and fire district and town, for thirty years."

REPORTER: New water deals often come with even stricter mitigation requirements than that. The change is on full display not too far south of Crowley county, around the town of Rocky Ford. This area is famous for its melons but there are a lot fewer of them growing today than there used to be. Starting in the 1980s the city of Aurora bought water rights to dozens of farms here. And it's still working to return those fields to native grass. Range worker Rick Kienitz shows off his efforts.

RICK KIENITZ: "This right here is blue gramma, we've got side oats out here, buffalo grass..."

REPORTER: Kienitz says re-vegetation isn't as simple as throwing some grass seeds on a bare field. It's a tricky process; the city's spent years, and a lot of water, to establish thriving grasslands.

KIENITZ: "We want it to be sustainable. We don't want it to look like a dirt patch, we don't want it to look like a weed patch. It's not going to produce melons ever again, it's not going to produce corn, but it's going to produce feed, and it'll produce good grass-fed beef."

REPORTER: Aurora's commitment won't end when the cows start grazing. The city is responsible for keeping these grasslands in Otero county healthy for the next three decades. At the same time, it'll be sending the county money to make up for lost taxes. That's the new reality of transferring agricultural water to urban use: a lot of the cost comes after the city inks its deal with the farmer. And Kienitz says water transfers keep getting more expensive.

KIENITZ: "It's a harder process, given the political climate and the stipulations that are put on you now. It is harder to move water out. Lot more expensive to move water from farm land now than it used to be."

REPORTER: Urban water customers might be surprised to realize how much of their monthly utility bill goes to parts of the state far from where they live, to pay for things that don't sound like water projects.

KIENITZ: "It is interesting to talk to someone in Aurora and tell them that we work for the city down here in Rocky Ford, three hours away, yeah."

REPORTER: While the practice of buy and dry has evolved, there's no way to change its inevitable outcome. Despite all the new requirements on cities, the end result is still the same: year by year the plains are turning back into prairie.

Arkansas valley farmer John Schweizer has watched the process happen around him for decades. Losing the water is heartbreaking to him.

SCHWEIZER: "Once the cities have bought it and taken it, you're not going to get it back, because them people aren't going to move out of the city and they need it. Once it's gone, it's gone, it's gone forever, and that's the sad part."

REPORTER: Schweizer is working on an alternative to buy and dry. Along with most of the Valley's remaining farmers, he's part of a new project that aims to keep crops growing here, and cities growing on the Front Range. It's called the Super Ditch, and tomorrow we'll explain how it works, and what the challenges are.

Megan Verlee, Colorado Public Radio News

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THU28 **Thirsty Cities, Dry Farms: Part 2 - Super Ditch**
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John Schweizer on his farm near Rocky Ford



For more than fifty years, Colorado's farmland has been drying up; not from drought, but to meet the thirst of growing cities. Now farmers in one of the most threatened basins are trying a new approach, one that keeps most of their lands growing crops but also supplies urban needs. Colorado Public Radio's Megan Verlee has the second of two stories on the movement of water from farms to cities.

[Find the first story in the series here.](#)

The following is a transcript of Megan Verlee's report:

REPORTER MEGAN VERLEE: If you like green, then John Schweizer's farm looks like a little bit of paradise: fields of corn and fragrant alfalfa rustling in the sun fifty miles east of Pueblo. Irrigation water bubbles along cement ditches where short lengths of pipe siphon it out onto Schweizer's fields. It's technology that changed much in a hundred years. Each pipe has to be set by hand every time the field is irrigated.

JOHN SCHWEIZER: "Yesterday evening when he set this water, he set every row. You have to get the water in there..."

REPORTER: It's hard, tedious work, but the difference it makes is tremendous. To understand what this water means to Schweizer and his neighbors, you have to see what the land looks like without it. So we set out for a quick tour of the valley. Along the way Schweizer shares a bit of his philosophy of farming.

SCHWEIZER: "I always got tickled at my mother. She didn't think you should ever gamble. But she and my father farmed all their married life, and if that's not a gamble, I don't know what is."

REPORTER: It's not farming's perpetual gamble but its potential one-time payout that has Schweizer worried these days. Over the past few decades, a lot of his neighbors have cashed in their water rights, selling to cities and retiring, along with their farms. We're not on the road long before we see the effects of that transfer. The land changes from green to brown, weedy fields crisscrossed with the remains of old irrigation systems.

SCHWEIZER: "See, there's an irrigation canal right there, that indentation."

REPORTER: Schweizer doesn't want to see any more farmland dry up around here, so he and other farmers here are working on a different way to meet cities' water

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needs. He's president of what's called the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch.

SCHWEIZER: "The Superditch is a not a ditch at all. It's just a combination of the ditches in the valley. I just like the idea of it: leasing part of your water and continuing to own it."

REPORTER: So instead of individual farmers selling off water rights, irrigators in the valley band together to lease up to a quarter of their total water to cities. The farmers take turns leaving some of their fields bare for a few years, but they all get to stay in business. Schweizer says it might even make it easier for people like his son to continue the family farm.

SCHWEIZER: "If the water's sold, it's impossible to ever pursue and fulfil that dream. And with the Superditch concept, and if it becomes a reality, then most of the water stays on the land and they continue to do what they've dreamed about doing for generations to come."

REPORTER: Leasing water isn't a new idea. In the past, water courts have approved short term leases to cities during droughts. But what's proposed here takes things to a new scale. More than eighty percent of the farmers in the lower Arkansas Valley say they're interested in the project. That represents hundreds of millions of dollars worth of water. Jay Winner, head of the Lower Arkansas Water Conservancy District, has worked on the Super Ditch idea for the past decade. He says until now farmers and cities have generally seen each other as competitors for water.

WINNER: "It's taken us years to get farmers comfortable with each other, years to do that. It's taken us years to get the cities to say they would like to play."

REPORTER: Those years of effort may be about to pay off. The Super Ditch company is currently selecting farmers to participate in its first small scale test lease.

WINNER: "I think this pilot program will be where we start working out the issues. Where we start seeing what there is legislatively that will legally let you move the water. So most of the questions are in front of us."

REPORTER: There are likely to be plenty of legal tweaks needed before large scale leasing is really practical, including getting the idea through water court. But even if the Super Ditch company can get those details worked out, the big question is, will cities sign on the dotted line? For a municipal water manager, security is the single most important thing. When a new homeowner turns on the tap for the first time the city must keep that water flowing as long as the house stands. Supreme Court Justice Gregory Hobbs echoes the skepticism many water managers have about Super Ditch.

HOBBS: "Do municipalities really want this leased water? No, I would say instinctively they want the permanent water rights and they want to lease it back."

REPORTER: That lets cities stay in control. Right now cities buy up lots of water to prepare for future growth and lease it back to farmers until they need it. It means hundreds of thousands of acres are being irrigated on borrowed time; one day they will go dry. There are some water managers though, like Curtis Mitchell in Fountain, who are willing to give leasing a shot.

MITCHELL: "It makes a lot of sense. It provides sustainability for us as a city and it provides sustainability for agriculture. For me it's a win-win."

REPORTER: Fountain is the Super Ditch's first customer. This small city south of Colorado Springs will be leasing water from farmers in the pilot program.

MITCHELL: "From a city's perspective, certainly my job is to make sure that we keep the pipes full going into the future and we meet the future needs of our customers, the ones we have now and the ones that will be coming to this city. But when you look at the bigger picture of sustainability, our city has other needs beyond that of water, and our state has other needs beyond that."

REPORTER: For people who believe that farms are important to Colorado's future, the hope is that helping farmers to lease their water will provide some much-needed steady income. That might make farmers less vulnerable to financial troubles in bad years, the kind of troubles that often lead them to cash in on their water rights. At least, that's what Super Ditch board member Bert Heckman hopes.

HECKMAN: "I have been contacted by people that were ready to retire, were thinking about selling, asking me this question: how soon? So I think this is given some hope to some of those people that are right on the tipping point, deciding, 'well, we can wait a couple more years.'"

REPORTER: Super Ditch's backers hope that by then, they'll have the full-scale

leasing program up and running. Back in Otero county, Super Ditch president John Schweizer says it's not a perfect idea, but it's the best one he's heard of yet to keep irrigated farming in his valley.

SCHWEIZER: "All we're saying is at the present time, it's the best there is. If there's a better solution, I hope somebody would come and tell us."

REPORTER: As we return from our tour of the desolate former farms in Crowley county, Schweizer stops at the top of a small rise. In front of us, his lush corn fields spread across the valley floor. Next to the truck is a dry patch of earth some neighbor has left bare.

SCHWEIZER: "That's no water, and that's irrigated. It's all the difference in the world. This is my valley, but if anybody can sit here and look at that, and say that's not worth saving..."

REPORTER: Schweizer asks me to turn off the tape recorder as he gets his emotions under control. It's clear that it's not just green fields he's hoping the Super Ditch can save here in the Arkansas Valley, it's an entire way of life.

Megan Verlee, Colorado Public Radio News

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