



# The San Luis Valley has no water to spare

## February 23, 2022

- By Lauren Boebert

Water is more precious than gold. San Luis Valley farmers and ranchers have worked the same soil for generations. The San Luis Valley's 1,600 farms and ranches produce nearly a billion dollars annually and support 28.3% of local jobs. The Valley's agricultural success story is a miraculous testament to the grit and dedication of Colorado's farmers. Even though the valley is one of the largest, high-altitude deserts on earth and only receives seven inches of rain per year, its farmers are among the most productive and industrious I've ever met.

The San Luis Valley's agricultural way of life depends on sustainable groundwater supplies in its aquifers. The recent \$600-million proposal to pump 7 billion gallons of water per year from one of the San Luis Valley aquifers to the Denver suburbs while also drying up at least 22,667 irrigated acres in the Valley threatens the Valley's agricultural and economic foundation.

There are good people on both sides of this issue who genuinely think that what they are doing is in the best interest of their communities. Having said that, the 3rd Congressional District has fought similar proposals to send our water to the Front Range for decades. I stand with the bipartisan and diverse group of local community stakeholders in opposition to Renewable Water Resources' (RWR) proposal.

RWR's plan is a quasi-government scheme seeking \$20 million in "COVID relief funds" to front-load the purchase of \$68 million of the Valley's water rights at below-market value so 25 new groundwater wells can be tapped in one of the Valley's aquifers to transport nearly 22,000 acre-feet of water annually — and in perpetuity — to the Denver suburbs. This is not a winning

solution for the San Luis Valley. Even if you factor in the proposed community fund of \$50 million and \$3 million to \$4 million in annual interest on the fund, the overall estimated economic loss from taking a minimum of 22,667 irrigation acres out of production would total about \$53 million, meaning the community fund barely offsets the economic losses at best.

One of the biggest problems with RWR's proposal is there is no water in the San Luis Valley to spare. In 1900, Colorado courts found there were more claims to surface water rights than actual water available in the Valley. In 2006, Colorado courts also declared both of the San Luis Valley's aquifers over-appropriated, meaning that there is no room for additional water-rights claims. In January of 2022, the unconfined aquifer was at its lowest point ever for a January, despite reducing pumping by nearly 100,000 acre-feet in the last several years.

The San Luis Valley's aquifers are already in crisis, and the last thing the Valley needs is for this crisis to be exacerbated by exporting precious water resources to the Denver suburbs. There has not been enough precipitation for the last two decades to adequately recharge the Valley's aquifers. As a result, Colorado's state engineer issued rules requiring well users in the Valley to mitigate their impacts to streams and to find ways to collectively increase aquifer levels. If the agricultural community in the San Luis Valley cannot recharge these aquifers to sustainable levels, the state engineer will force them to cap their wells.

In addition to the logistical challenge of getting permits, authorizations and building a massive swath of new pipelines, the cities of Denver, Aurora and Colorado Springs have all come out and said they won't allow RWR to use their reservoirs as proposed. And there is currently no identified buyer for the transferred water, as 47 water providers indicated they are not interested in the project.

In Colorado, water is more precious than gold these days, and farmers and ranchers have responded to the drought crisis in earnest by reducing their usage and working to create sustainable practices so that the Valley's aquifers will be able to support future generations. The farmers I've spoken to are not only concerned about their ability to use the aquifers — they want them to be sustainable and available for their grandchildren to use.

Renewable Water Resources' proposal is flawed and is not a mutually beneficial proposal for impacted communities. I stand with the San Luis Valley's ranchers, farmers, water districts and everyday Coloradans in the 3rd District in opposition to this water grab.

***U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Silt, is serving her first term as the representative for Colorado's 3rd Congressional District. She serves on the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife.***